

Brian Charette

Taking Success Into His Own Hands

Jazz Organist/Pianist, Composer Bandleader, Educator, Writer

Interview by Nora McCarthy

Visit Brian online at
<http://brian-charette.squarespace.com/>

JJ: Thank you Brian for giving our audience an opportunity to learn more about your work and your journey through the ever-changing musical landscape that is "Jazz." First of all I'd like to congratulate you on your recent release last month, *Square One* on the Posi-Tone label.

BC: Thank you very much for that. I've actually had a couple new ones out in the past month; I've had a Sextette release and a Trio release.

"If you're a publicist let's say, you can take four or five thousand dollars from a person and get them no reviews and the person can't do anything about it because there are no guarantees. Some of the publicists don't do it. But especially if you're hounding them to take you on their roster—sure they'll take your four thousand dollars to make a few phone calls and then that's it. That's why I'm doing everything myself basically."

JJ: Great. *Square One* is the Trio release, right? Are they both on Posi-Tone?

BC: They're not; the Sextette is on Steeple-Chase Records.

JJ: That's the *Music for Organ Sextette*, right?

BC: Right, but there's two Sextette records now, the first one was recorded in 2012.

JJ: Is *Square One* your seventh release?

BC: I'm not sure about the number but that sounds right, it's around there.

JJ: Tell me a little bit about the music and the group that you used on this CD and elaborate on bit on how you came together with Posi-Tone.

BC: I had been recording for Posi-Tone for a while on other artists' records. The first one I did was Mike DiRubbo's record with Rudy Royston called, *Chronos*. That was maybe four or five years ago and I became friendly with Mark Free who is one of the owners of the label. I actually hung out with him a lot and stayed at his loft in Los Angeles to play some concerts. He was very helpful with that and we became close friends during these trips. We had been talking about doing the record for some time; I was actually

just trying to get out of my last recording contract and wanting to record with Marc for a while. So, this was in the planning stages for quite awhile and we talked very much about the people who we wanted to have on the album. Yotam and Mark Ferber were our first choices. They also work very much with Marc on some of his other recording projects so we were all very close friends and I had worked with the two guys before and they learned my music very quickly. I wrote all of the music except for two songs for the session. We also used some unusual electronics called "circuit bent electronics" on the album which basically means synthesizers that misfire or don't operate correctly. So a lot of

the strange sounds on the album are these, "circuit bent" synthesizers, which are very random sounding and you have to be kind of lucky with them to control them, I think. But actually Marc Free, who is producing the record, is playing a lot of those circuit-bent instruments. It's very uncommon to have the circuit-bent instruments with an organ trio. That was our concept for the album.

JJ: Where do the circuit-bent synthesizers come from, is that an old technology?

BC: No. A lot of people would use toy synthesizers and they would pry the backs of them off and put in solder interrupting the normal circuit board which would make the synthesizer go crazy and people started to be into this kind of music. Also, people would do it very much with *Speak & Spell*, it became a more popular circuit than instruments because it would say crazy things. Now there are software equivalents. I was using the one called, Symptom, which is a software synthesizer I had on a lap top and if you press certain keystrokes you get the simulated electricity that would be going through a hardware synthesizer interrupted and it would make random, unusual and sometimes explosive synthesizer sounds.

JJ: I did notice how cool that was and some of it sounded like the human voice but distorted.

BC: These circuit-bent things are so crazy that depending on what the sound is that it is bending it can sound like many different kinds of things. I'm very interested in it. When I was a kid I would listen to a radio on a ship to shore station where you could hear all of the strange interference—that's what I was listening to. I loved it and I think it heavily influenced my use of these kinds of circuit-bent synthesizers.

JJ: This is totally modern stuff that you're doing and a little strange. [Laughter]

BC: Well, I'm a little strange, even for a jazz artist—I'm a little fringe in a way but I'm not really avant-garde; it's kind of a strange combination of things, I guess, that goes into my music.

JJ: I'm really interested in the way you conceptualize and how you approach composition, I think that's important to talk about because you're an artist and not just somebody who is out here trying to sell a record, because we all know they don't sell as much as we want them to, or maybe in your case they do.

BC: I would say no, to that, someday maybe. [laughter]

JJ: Well, I hope the lost art of buying CDs comes back soon.

BC: Me too.

JJ: Tell me about the musicians you used on *Square One*.

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directions.

BC: Yes, a lot of it is conducted.

JJ: I love that – the mayhem, the craziness that jumps up off the stage.

BC: That's what I love about it. Jazz music can sometimes be so serious sometimes to me and I love serious complicated jazz but it can be too much for me, too heavy sometimes. This is very light—we're still approaching the same subject matter as complicated rhythm and harmony but it's with a wink. It's not so serious somehow.

JJ: Are they reading when they're on the stage?

BC: Yes.

JJ: Yet there is flexibility for there to be moments of freedom?

BC: Yes.

JJ: So you are dabbling in the avant-garde, in a way.

BC: I guess so, I always have been.

JJ: You play the piano and the bass. Do you play electric or upright bass?

BC: I play electric bass. When I first started to work, I played electric bass.

JJ: You started off classically, where did the jazz enter into your musical life? What is your educational background and have you studied composition and orchestration?

BC: I studied all of those things when I was in school. I was actually in the Harford area twenty-two years ago and it was a great time for jazz music and there were lots of jazz gigs. I became friendly with an agent from the Hartford area and he put me on gigs with Lou Donaldson and Houston Person. I was in a popular group in the area—it just happened very organically. When I was around seventeen, I was playing a lot of jazz gigs. I was studying jazz in school as well but I was also studying classical music. I was just playing lots of gigs from an early age and scary ones too; ones that I would be very out of my depth in so it was a baptism by fire for me to get better.

JJ: Were you playing both the bass and the piano?

BC: No, when I first started to play bass was years before I started to play jazz piano around the age of sixteen. I was playing in a terrible wedding band that wore Hawaiian shirts. I played a Steinberger bass with no headstock on it and would play Patrick Swayze songs or whatever was popular at that time.

JJ: Do you still play bass?

BC: Sometimes. I don't really play any instruments seriously other than the piano or the organ now. I don't really practice. I play a little bit of flute. I was playing a lot of guitar ten years ago. I was playing in some bands where I played guitar and keyboards. No, now I'm only playing piano and organ.

JJ: When you say you don't really practice, where did you get all those chop? You must be doing something at this stage of the game to continue to be as fluid on your instrument as you are.

BC: I'm not a virtuoso: I'm kind of sloppy. I've just done it for thousands and thousands and thousands of hours. Especially when I'm playing music that I know or that I'm comfortable with, it's not hard to be good at it after so long.

JJ: You really do *play* the organ though and I know that it is not an easy instrument to play.

BC: It's physically difficult, but when I play music I don't feel like it's hard. It feels easier to me to play music than to do most things which I struggle with.

JJ: You also have a piano trio performance

coming up; do you have any CDs with the piano trio?

BC: I do not. I have one very old CD as a leader playing piano but I haven't had one since then and that was when I was around twenty-six years old. You can get them in Japan because they sell there for some reason. It has a very strange cover—I have lots of hair on the cover that I don't have any more. So for collectors it may be a good one to get. But since then, I've been playing all organ as a leader on my recordings.

JJ: So what's up with the piano trio gig coming up?

BC: In Europe, I play more piano. I play on a lot of records here (Prague) where I play with a very popular saxophonist. We have a record that came out last year that was very popular; I play piano on it. I play piano with a few groups here; I played piano just last night. I almost feel like I play more piano here than in New York. I definitely do. So, I still play piano sometimes. I'm

"Ultimate success is not directly related to early success, if you consider that many successful people did not give clear evidence of such promise in youth."

-Robert Fritz, *The Path Of Least Resistance*

playing piano at the club I'm playing at this weekend. I did play organ there before but they have a piano, so I thought I'd do that—I love to play piano too.

JJ: What instrument do you think you're more known for, the organ?

BC: Definitely yes.

JJ: When I think of organists, I think of Eddie Baccus from Cleveland, where I'm from, he's great, in fact there were several really great organists from Cleveland, I remember Bill Doggett playing there. Speaking of Cleveland, how was your gig at Nighttown?

BC: Oh, I love Cleveland, the gig was awesome. There was a total blizzard snowstorm when I played there last so we didn't get as large

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a crowd as the first time but we've had a great time both times we played there.

JJ: I'd like to ask you about your solo work, how often do you get a chance to perform in that format?

BC: I would say not very much. Are you referring to the solo record I made, *Borderline*? That was kind of a whim of Nils, who is the owner of Steeple Chase. He just had the idea to do that record while he was in town making a bunch of other records. I had just recorded the Sextette record a month before. He was back in New York and he asked me if I wanted to do a solo organ record and I agreed. I went there with two days notice. I play Madonna songs on there. But, I've never had a gig playing solo organ. That may have been the one time in my life that I've done it. I play in church for church services but beside that I usually don't play solo organ. But that record, it's funny, it became a big hit with baseball organists. I'm friends with the guy who

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BC: Yotam Silberstein is the guitarist from Israel, he's excellent and I've been playing with him for the last three or four years in Tribeca with Jordan Young; he has a Monday and Wednesday night gig there. Mark Ferber, the drummer, I met from playing with John Ellis who is a great saxophonist. Those two guys are considered incredible, reliable side men to have with you when you're doing any kind of music—they're just consummate professionals. I really like the way they played. I knew that they were going to do the session before I wrote the music. Especially on the song called, "A Fantasy," I wrote specifically with Yotam and Marc in mind. Yotam I wanted to play melismatic guitar lines on the A section and Marc, I wanted to play his style of drum soloing over the B part of the song and that's basically what it is and the music is just there to see those guys working against each other.

JJ: So did you compose specifically for the musicians that you used?

BC: I didn't compose every piece of music only thinking of that, but I did for "A Fantasy," and a few of the other ones. I do this for the Sextette too. I'm very much thinking about the person who will play the part and my favorite things about them and I try write to that.

JJ: How long did it take you to pull it all together before you actually went in and recorded?

"a very big function of music is that people do something so much that it becomes very easy for them to do it. There's not a lot of magic involved ... If you listen to Charlie Parker for instance, he did it for thousands and thousands and thousands of hours and you're like, 'Oh, my God, how is this person doing it?' To them it feels like they are tying their shoes."

BC: I write the music very quickly. I sit down in a couple days and write all the new songs. But they're not like overly complicated songs, they have an element of minimalism to them so they don't need to take a long time – it's not like four symphonic movements. I guess orchestrating the music took a little while longer and figuring out the sounds. I think figuring out the sounds took longer than writing the music, I would say. We rehearsed for one day, maybe not even, maybe two or three hours then we just recorded. We've played the music more now since we recorded it than we did before we recorded it.

JJ: How do you feel when you are playing this music from the recording—do you see it expanding, are you building on it?

BC: It's always different. That's the amazing thing about jazz music, it's always completely

different. So I would say yes to that.

JJ: I really liked this CD and found each piece to be a work unto itself while keeping a strong cohesive connection throughout. "Ten Bars For Eddie Harris" is a standout for its total infusion of modern elements coming out of a burning swing tempo. Was it arranged?

BC: It was completely not arranged.

JJ: Nature's great isn't it? I really liked that tune.

BC: Yeah. That's the wild one.

JJ: What about *Square One* is different from your previous CDs?

BC: To be honest, I feel like first of all it looks and it sounds a little better than my other CDs. I really like the way they're packaged; I like the way the mix is done. I think it's a really professional product. Some of my records in the past had some mixed problems at times—things that I thought could have been a little bit better. But this seems like the kind of statement I want to make about myself, the way it's presented. The guys at Posi-Tone are very good—they're good at graphics, very hands on with deciding how it looks and they're very responsible for getting it to radio people—so I feel like it's a very big step up for me than what was happening before.

JJ: It seems to combine a lot of the elements from your whole musical experience, from Day One, especially the eclectic treatment of each and every piece.

BC: I couldn't use electronics on my other records. It wasn't something that they wanted to take a chance with. Not to pooh-pooh Steeple-Chase because the records I made with them put me on the map, but I couldn't use any of the electronics which I so wanted to add to the organ trio and I think that's why it sounds so unusual. It's an unusual group already but sometimes organ trios can sound a very specific way and I wanted to go a very different way with this, almost the opposite way even though I love that kind of music. I'm really looking for *my* voice on that instrument.

JJ: I do think you have found your voice on that instrument.

BC: Well, I'm trying to, it's definitely my main motivation, it's why I find this music so interesting because that's kind of what the most impor-

tant thing is. It's just a metaphor for what I'm trying to do in my life. I'm trying to find my voice and I feel like with jazz music and especially living in New York City 2014, I feel like it's a great opportunity to explore that for me.

JJ: In terms of you finding your voice, may I assume that this is a direction that you're going to continue to pursue and that this is like the first offering, if you will.....

BC: I'm not really sure, I have a couple ideas of what I might want to do; I might do another Sextette record, I may do another Trio record. I'm just trying to write music now because I'm playing in a trio format with electronics or a sextet when I'm leading a group, so I'm very interested in doing both of those groups. The next recording might be a sextet with no electronics or with electronics. I'm not really sure yet, I'm just writing the new music now.

JJ: The *Music For Organ Sextette* (2012) is exceptional. It is an extremely well conceived CD and the sound vis a vis the orchestrations, instrumentation is very open yet streamlined, rhythmically and stylistically diverse, I loved the sound the organ got against the horn lines. Talk about this CD and was it the one that was nominated for a Grammy?

BC: It's kind of in the middle of a big band and a small band, it is very streamlined and it's all reeds like a wind ensemble. That sound was very influential for me when I was playing piano still, playing classical music. A lot of the Sextette had to do with the fact that I was playing sometimes with John Ellis and his group, Double Wide, where I fell in love with the bass clarinet. I always loved the flute; I actually play a little flute. I write the Sextette music on flute and computer basically sitting with my laptop and the flute. I knew I wanted bass clarinet and the two saxophones seemed like a very sensible addition to that group and then the drums and the organ rhythm section. It was that fast coming up with what it was going to be about. I like that band because it's a bunch of gun-hot saxophonists who are wild and I'm sitting back there yelling at them all night, it's very entertaining to watch. Sometimes I tell them to do strange improvised things in the middle of songs; it's almost like performance art. I really love to play with that group. When I travel to in Prague or London for instance, each of these cities has their own version of the Sextette because I can't pay to fly all of the guys all over the place. I'll play with a London version of the Sextette on Thursday and next month, a Czech version and the music takes on a different flavor depending on what city I'm in. It's also wild because then we don't also speak the same language sometimes so it's very unusual to me to go to a jazz show and see this kind of fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approach—it's kind of my favorite thing about it. You usually don't go to see music where people are really going crazy and taking chances.

JJ: Is any of this music conducted because you are indicating that you spontaneously give out

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plays for the Atlanta Braves and he loves that record and he plays this song for the Atlanta Braves games. So the next time you're in Atlanta watching the Braves and it's the seventh inning stretch.....[Laughter]

JJ: You've worked with Chaka Kahn, Joni Mitchell and others are there any plans in the future for making a CD with a singer?

BC: I made a couple CDs with my prior girlfriend, Martina Fiserova. But, I don't really work with a lot of singers actually. For singers, especially jazz singers, they are usually looking for a very specific kind of accompaniment, and I'm pretty wild so it may be too much for some singers.

JJ: Do you ever dabble in the avant-garde, just straight out, flat out free, in and outside the form?

BC: I would say I did that more when I was younger. I'm actually very into form in music, so I would say that I'm not leaving form but I would also say that Ornette Coleman has a lot of form in his music. I wouldn't even call him avant-garde really because there is so much form in his music. In general, I'm not the biggest fan of completely free music. I like for music to have form; I like for it to sound pretty. If it's very dissonant and too cacophonous for me, I lose interest in it. I really like free music that is very minimal, but I think that that is very rare to find in free music; it's very cacophonous to me and doesn't have a lot of space sometimes. That's what makes me more interested in music with form. I'm from the East Village. I would play with Dennis Charles, who was Cecil Taylor's drummer for years—he had a lot of form in his playing. With many of those guys, I hear a lot of form but I don't hear that so much in some newer freer music, it just sounds like everybody is going crazy.

JJ: It was explained to me that that kind of playing is about destruction. It's about building up to an immense force that self destructs. I don't question it; I understand the destruction of it, the shredding. What about any deconstructions of stuff, or any kinds of conceptual approaches to improvisations.

BC: I remember being in a deconstruction of the "Duke of Prunes," which is a Frank Zappa song at the old Knitting Factory on Leonard Street. I was dressed as a piece of cheese ripping a prune off of my friend and roommate Leon Gruenbaum....so I have been a part of one deconstruction.

JJ: What inspires you the most creatively?

BC: Trying to be the best human I can be; trying to search for new things in myself. I don't know really where it comes from. I'm so busy

doing it that I can never even ask that question. It feels good for me to play music and to be with my friends. I think it's really a cool place to live. I think a lot of people speak about music as being a really hard life, and it is difficult, but it is really enjoyable and there's amazing freedom to do what you want to do. I'm in Prague right now because I want to be. I really love that about this kind of life. You're off the grid to a degree but you're still respected as being an artist. That lifestyle inspires me and I like when my friends like music that I write or they have fun playing music with me, that's a great validation.

JJ: Can you name one artist out there now whose work you admire and why?

BC: Many, Many...I really like a pianist named Tigran Hamasyan from Armenia. He had a record on Verve called *a Fable*. He has very melismatic beautiful lines and technically precise piano playing; I listen to him a lot. I listen to Vijay Iyer's piano playing a lot. The people that

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I am most interested in are my contemporaries. On the organ: Jared Gold and Sam Yahel. I have all their new records and I'm listening to them all very much to see how I want to go to my next thing. I'm really into all the new popular jazz artists—Ari Hoenig's record, I study out of his books—everybody.

JJ: Let's get into the new Sextette record that also just came out, *The Question That Drives Us* – great title what's it about and who did you use on this?

BC: This is the same line-up as the first Sextette record, the only substitution is Jay Collins who was on tour with Greg Alman; he is replaced by Itai Kriss on the new record. It's kind of the model of the first record. I write crazy songs and yell at the people how to do it. There's one on there that I really like which is called, "Denge Merenge." It was written when I was in Indonesia and afraid to get denge fever so I sprayed myself with a room fogger instead of regular mosquito spray in a five star hotel and my skin started to burn—I didn't know what was going on. I was in a hotel and I had read about denge fever and I thought, "Oh my God, I don't want to get denge fever!" I know that mosquitoes love to bite me. So, when we landed in Indonesia, I immediately started to get bitten by mosquitoes. I was staying in a huge hotel and I called down to the desk and asked that they send up some bug spray because I'm freaking out about getting denge fever. So they sent me up a room fogger

which I didn't realize at the time. I was just so excited to spray myself that I sprayed myself all over my body with a room fogger. I sat down very pleased because I thought I was not going to have any problems with mosquitoes when I started to feel a little itchy and weird. I figured out that I had sprayed myself with a room fogger and had to take a long shower to wash it off. That's the story of "Denge Merenge."

JJ: You are referred to as a leading voice in modern jazz, a rising star in the *2012 Critics Poll*, and you've been nominated for a Grammy, what do these accomplishments and acknowledgements mean to you on a deeper more visceral level as an artist and how do you measure, or do you measure, yourself in terms of the creative struggle within versus success?

BC: Accolades are a great form of validation and it makes you feel that somebody is noticing the things you do. I will say that in the last few years things have happened to me that I have

wanted to happen for many, many years and I was shocked that they meant less than they would. I don't mean it in a bad way. When you get a great review or a great accolade it's great for about five minutes and then it's back to the grindstone. I feel like I've definitely done something in jazz music and that makes me feel very proud and very happy. Before I had music when I was a very small person, I didn't really have anything. I wasn't super proficient at sports—I was a good student but I wasn't the best student. It gave me something I could shine in a little bit, and I'm grateful for that. It makes me feel good about myself. To the second part of your question, creatively, I feel zero struggle; the struggle is from trying to make a living by playing music. I said before I don't really practice, that is because I'm spending time trying to organize where I'm going to play and doing the publicity for a show that's coming up. A lot of the work I do is not sitting somewhere trying to be inspired, it's very nuts and bolts office work; a lot of it is not very glamorous.

JJ: With all of the many avenues you walk down in your career, as an independent artist, performing artist, teaching artist, and writer, how do you keep yourself organized? Do you get help with any of it? Do you have a manager, agent, publicist or are you a one-man operation?

BC: I've had people do everything but I'm the one who gets most of the things, still. Almost to the degree now where it doesn't even matter to

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me if anybody else helps anymore. I've learned more about those areas than I have about music in the last few years. I get help from Posi-Tone. They're very good with radio and with press. This was actually the first recording I've had where I wasn't in complete charge of trying to get press and the record played which was an incredible weight lifted off me. But, I'm still working so hard on all of these things all of the time.

JJ: Does the label expect you to do that in order to stay with them, is that part of the arrangement as it is with a lot of labels?

BC: We're friends so we really don't have an arrangement like that but getting the gig is my job because they have artists on their record label besides me. I will get a small time for publicity when my record is released and then the next artist gets their time. It's all up to me with the gigs and stuff. They're very good about getting the record on the radio and in the press. I've

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never had anybody do so much of that for me before.

JJ: What about the money? Are they fair with what they pay the artist?

BC: I would say yes. It used to be years ago, I remember getting thousands of dollars to make recordings. That's just not happening anymore. If you are a leader, you're getting paid five to eight hundred dollars for the recording session most of the time. With the small labels I would say, it's a lot less. You have to pay for your records, there's also a very, very small number of records selling compared to the records that used to sell. But, the thing now is having a great live performance where you can have your records. My SteepleChase records were so expensive that I could never even have them. This is the first time in the last six years that I ever even had my records. I don't own any copies of my records, they're gone.

JJ: You have all the rights don't you, you own

your masters?

BC: No, not at all. For some of them I do but for most of them I do not own anything. But neither does anybody else at this point. You own it if you make it and press it yourself. The good thing about the labels is that they pay for making it, they make it look good and they have to invest quite a bit of money into doing it. For a small record label that's not selling like five thousand to ten thousand units every record, well, they are basically only losing money. So, it's really changed what *everybody* is really doing. I think it's important for artists to realize that too because it's very common for artists to think that record companies are taking advantage of them and that may be true to some extent but it's also true that everything costs a lot of money. If you have a good record and you made four thousand copies of it and it's got a great looking cover and a great looking sleeve—that costs a lot of money to make that. That's just the economics of the situation now. That being said, I feel very fine about where music is at. As I go along and I get a couple accomplishments every year, I find it easier to book myself in places that I could have only dreamed of being in before—it never goes backwards. I'm very encouraged

about the next little while for music and for me playing music. I don't think music is going anywhere. I don't think music will end; I don't think people will stop liking it. I think actually just the opposite. I think it is going to become more important because there is nothing like it.

JJ: In terms of the portion of your time spent during your day in finding and securing work for yourself, how much time do you spend and how did you develop that skill. Was it something that you were naturally good at?

BC: It takes up most of my day and no, I'm terrible at it naturally but I've forced myself to get good at it. I couldn't even really do it until I was thirty-five years old. I didn't have the confidence to even speak to somebody where they could be uninterested or say something hurtful to me. I couldn't even do it until six or so years ago. You really have to have thick skin to put yourself out there like that and it's embarrassing. I've gotten a great gig because I sold the person on myself, did tons of publicity and showed up

but the gig was, for some reason, not as successful as someone might have thought or expected and that's pretty embarrassing and a very big blow to your ego. So, I've just gotten better at not taking it so hard when it doesn't work out. I take a lot of risks with everything. With gigs, I fly all over the place. Sometimes it pays off and sometimes I'm taking a big risk financially. But it doesn't stop me; I'm not discouraged.

JJ: Why is that?

BC: Because I see it all moving in a positive direction for me. I see my life getting closer to my ideal of my life.

JJ: Do you know you're making it happen?

BC: I don't. It looks like it is, I don't really know anything. I'm surely doing something and I'm moving in a direction. I've also figured out something recently that it's too late to turn back.

JJ: Coming from a perspective of having been in the business for several decades, how have you adapted to the many changes that have taken place overall in the music business with regard to clubs, the scene, the opportunities both in NYC and globally as well as the ease at which we can experience and share music today? How do all these factors affect the independent musician especially financially and where do you see jazz in particular going? Some believe it is a shrinking niche market.

BC: I'm a lucky guy, I play Hammond organ and that's a thing that there is a lot less of than other instruments. But I think anybody can do anything now. You can come from nothing and have the biggest hit record. It's all up to us and constantly reworking our images of our self. It is very important to take into account, technology and what other people are doing. I've always tried to follow the trends, to be on the cutting edge of whatever is happening in music; technology, what have you. When computer software stuff came out I was a recording engineer for Pro Tools; that's where my Grammy nomination came from, from working on a Grammy nominated album as an engineer not as an organist or pianist. So for quite a few years I wasn't even playing music at all. I was only using technology and programming drum beats for hip hop music doing all sorts of unusual things that I don't do now. I've come back to playing a real instrument in a club because that is the most direct way to get paid now and I like it. There's not a lot of thinking, there's not a lot of set up, and there's not a lot of technical problems usually that can go wrong. I show up with an instrument, I play some music for people and they put money in my hand at the end of the night. I'm starting to really appreciate the directness of that. That's why I think music is going to be fine because that for me is what it's going back to. I just show up like the minstrel in the village, I do my little dance and they give me dinner and a little bit extra, I really like the directness of it. I don't have to calculate the mechanical royalties, I don't have to have a very complicated contract, I don't have to worry about how many cents are

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downloaded from that—it's simple.

JJ: How important do you feel ethics and integrity are in keeping honesty in the music?

BC: I think it's hard to say. I think there are some people who are not ethical, who are amazing musical artists. I also think some of the people I know with the greatest integrity are some of the least compelling artists. I'm not sure that there is a direct correlation with those things. I myself try to live a very moralistic life. I have very strict rules for myself. And, while I think I'm kind of an easy going guy, I have limits for myself and lines that I never cross. I think maybe too much. I'm much more risky with my music than I am with my personal life. I think it's possible that that's not quite the right way to do it either. Not that I condone taking any personal risks, but I'm not so sure that those two things are related. We hear stories about the jazz people who are our heroes: they were killing people, they were terrible drug addicts; they, I would say, had a lot more unseemliness in their lives than we do now. I think it's much more antiseptic now and maybe that's why some jazz music sounds antiseptic. A lot of the jazz musicians that I know are some of the most boring people I ever met and that's an unusual thing. So, I think integrity is important, really important, but I think there are all sorts of things that go into making music. I don't know that there is a formula that if you get your integrity together that your music is going to be great. I think a very big function of music is that people do something so much that it becomes very easy for them to do it. There's not a lot of magic involved actually. If you listen to Charlie Parker for instance, he did it for thousands and thousands and thousands of hours and it was really easy for him to do that. I don't think people really talk about it too much. For a lot of musicians, when you're listening to them play and you're like, "Oh, my God, how is this person doing it?" To them it feels like they are tying their shoes. It's not like some kind of magic.

JJ: What about the spirit in the music. While it might have been easy or easier for Charlie Parker to facilitate his instrument after countless hours shedding to get his ideas out there how much did his tragic life and addictions contribute to the spirit of his music or did they?

BC: For him I'm sure it did. I just know that for myself, looking at my music and my life as I go through it, I didn't have any hard times comparable to Charlie Parker. But notwithstanding the little bumps I have had in my own life, sometimes I will be in a happy mood and my playing will sound very tragic or I will be in a tragic mood and my playing will sound very happy. It's kind of a fleeting thing and I'm not sure where it comes from or where it goes. I'm not sure. I really understand very little about it I think.

JJ: Please talk about two other areas of your creative life: the teaching and the writing.

BC: I'm going to do a book for Hal Leonard about Hammond Organ. I write instructional articles for *Keyboard Magazine*. I've been writing some reviews this year. I write for a Czech music magazine as well named, *Muzikus*. I write some liner notes—it kind of just happened over the last few years; I started to write about music. I never would have thought that I would do that. It started with *Keyboard Magazine*. I'm friendly with the editor of *Keyboard* and I just started to write a lot of articles for that magazine which led me quite naturally into these other magazines that I ended up writing for. We're going to do this book called, *101 B3 Tips*, which is part of a series that Hal Leonard does. I also have an instructional video on Hammond organ through mymusicmasterclass.com. I also teach in a school here in Prague, Czech Summer Jazz Workshop at Jesek Conservatory.

JJ: That's a whole other business.

BC: It is. Both of my parents were school teachers so it's not super foreign to me.

JJ: What about e-books? Do you have any of those out?

BC: I don't have any e-books out now. The book for Hal Leonard is the first book I'm going to do so I guess that will be an e-book because they have very big distribution.

JJ: Where do you live? Are you in Prague now?

BC: I've been in Prague for the last few years. I'm probably going to be a little bit more in New York next year, but I travel a lot. I go to Spain a lot. I'm on the west coast quite a bit. I'm on tour. I go to Canada, Cleveland, and Detroit, so I'm all over the place a little bit.

JJ: When did you move to Europe for the first time and why?

BC: I can't remember if I went to Holland or Czech Republic first but one of those places was the first place I came to. When I came to the Czech Republic I fell in love with the girls here and the lifestyle; it's a very beautiful city. It's like a medieval city from 1500 years ago. I was playing with a very popular trumpet player. We played huge concerts. I played for the last two Czech presidents. I do very well here. I book a lot of concerts. I'm teaching in the school. I get to play with lots of different groups. There's a big interest in having an American jazz musician staying here. I feel very welcome here.

JJ: What prompted you to leave New York City the first time and go to Europe?

BC: The first time I went to Europe I was not even living in New York City. I came to live in New York because of this first trip I took to the Czech Republic. I have a roommate in New York because it's so expensive. We've known each other for twenty years and he was a pianist

with this group, the Tour, before I was playing with them. I was in Germany with this Czech guy and I was watching a video of my roommate playing piano. I asked who he was and found out he lived in New York and I decided right then that I wanted to live in New York. I had just graduated from college. When we got back to the states he gave me his number and that is the place I'm living in to this day. Coming to Europe came first before going to New York; I was in Prague before I was in New York.

JJ: How do you compare it with NYC with regard to the musicians, the scene, the vibe, the opportunities to play and the overall general feeling, support and appreciation for the music?

BC: I think both places are great. I think they both have a very thriving music scene. Prague for a city of one million people has ten working jazz clubs which is kind of a lot. When I come here, I'm working very often; I'm very busy.

JJ: Do they pay well?

BC: They pay less than they pay in New York but everything is a lot cheaper here. I definitely make the most money for playing music in New York City I find. But the quality of life is higher here. I'm staying on the second floor of a beautiful house; I could never live this well in New York; I could never see the sky as easily as I do and it's for a fraction of the cost.

JJ: What about the players?

BC: Everybody is very, very good, everywhere. I think gone are the days where this guy comes from this place and they really know how to play jazz. There's a definite edge to New York City jazz players though. Do I think New York City jazz players in general are the best in the world? I would say yes to that. But, I would also say that some of my favorite records that I've ever made have been here. Because there is so much more time spent on the recordings even the covers. The records take two days to be made. I've never made a record in two days in the United States, it's just not possible. Also bands play together more here. For instance if there is a quartet chances are that you are going to see those guys three different times and it's going to have the same people in the group which is very unlike New York. I never have the same people in my group. They're on tour; it just doesn't work that way. So, there are great things about both places. I like to be in a lot of different places too. I think it's really interesting. I have such an unusual and fresh perspective wherever I am because I'm usually coming from some place that's so different so I can see things kind of like for the first time in some instances.

JJ: Please talk about upcoming performances and in particular the Soul Mates Tour.

BC: Soul Mates is a Czech organ trio, we've known each other for a couple of years. We record for a record label called the New Port Line, Peter Merrick manages that label and we will go

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on tour in the Czech Republic. On April 23, the Sextette will be playing in London at the Pizza Express, when I come back I'm going to start doing the Soul Mates Tour for a couple of weeks. It's very hard for us to get our working papers but Pizza Express is one of the few clubs in London that actually does the papers. I had to cancel a tour a couple years ago because of problems with Immigration; it is very difficult in the UK especially for US Citizens. This is a couple years in the coming, this concert, so it's a pretty big deal for me.

JJ: You hold a black sash in White Crane Kung Fu? How long have you been practicing and what about this martial art form attracted you?

BC: There is no real belt system in Chinese martial arts, that's kind of more from Japanese and Korean martial arts. In the old days when you studied Kung Fu with a master you studied with him until you were considered a master yourself but it is very hard to know with my master. Some days I would be a very high level master and the next day I would not. I'm technically called a "Black Sash" which is the highest level student before you are a master but I'm not really sure how it works to be honest with you. I studied a lot of different martial arts for many years. I was actually kind of obsessed with it. I do it a little bit less now. For a time I was doing it to the exclusion of music. I don't really teach it to anybody. I will say that I think it's the thing that really made me play music the way I wanted to because of the body awareness and the balance that I got from studying it.

JJ: How long have you been practicing?

BC: When I was a young guy I was doing Washin-ryū Karate which I think is called Shōrin-ryū now. But then I wasn't doing anything for many years and I was actually very out-of-shape. I was kind of heavy and when I turned thirty-one eleven years ago, I decided that I wanted to get very physical and in very good shape. I was investigating different areas of exercise that I could get into and I came across a Bruce Lee movie for some reason and I started to get very interested in Kung-Fu, especially the old temple animal styles of which White Crane is one of the five original animal styles. I started to study this. There was a master living one street away from me in the East Village and I started to study it for hours a day—I became pretty obsessed with it. I learned many old forms in the style of White Crane and that's the story of Kung-Fu.

JJ: Is that how you stay centered? I know the training and the whole change in thinking that comes as a benefit from practicing these types of martial art forms changes how you deal on a day-to-day.

BC: I'm not that centered all the time, I may be

centered a small percentage of the time, I would say truthfully.

JJ: It does help though.

BC: I don't take it so bad when I'm not centered any more either. That was another thing, I thought when I did it for many, many years, two things: first that I was going to feel powerful and invincible—which I don't feel, and I thought that I was going to be really enlightened-feeling and that didn't really happen either.

JJ: Yet.

BC: Yet—it may happen. I think what I come away with, especially with studying music, Kung Fu or whatever, is that we are just flesh and

"I'm very encouraged about the next little while for music and for me playing music. I don't think music is going anywhere. I don't think music will end; I don't think people will stop liking it. I think actually just the opposite. I think it is going to become more important because there is nothing like it."

blood people and it's just stuff in one telling of the story. I think it's not meant to have this super heavy emphasis that we put on it, maybe. That's what I come away with thinking.

JJ: Sounds like enlightenment to me.

BC: Maybe—maybe not—I don't know; I certainly don't exhibit the behaviors of an enlightened human being. I think I have a ways to go. Living the life that I do and all of these things that I've done: studying Kung-Fu or flying to all of these different places, I can look at things from many different angles. I can look at myself as I function in all these different environments which are very different and which teach me things about myself. I'm so interested in that process that I don't care if I'm enlightened anymore. I used to really care about it. Now I don't care anymore.

JJ: What's next for Brian Charette after the tour? Where do you see yourself in five years?

BC: After I tour I will go back to New York City in June, I have some cool concerts there. I, in five years, see myself working very, very little and just going here or there to play some concerts but not putting a lot of efforts into it. That is my dream for five years from now. To be trying less.

JJ: Really. But you want to be working a lot don't you?

BC: I certainly do but I want everybody to be calling me. I want to play more music doing less of the administrative work, yes. My friend said something amazing too. I was working with some agents and one actually let me go from

their roster. I was so bummed out wondering what I was going to do and my friend said, "Agents take calls they don't make calls." that really struck me. I never really thought about it that way before but it's true, you have to become the person that people pursue for the gigs, festivals, whatever it is. And, with the competition now, that's like the Holy Grail, a very difficult thing to be.

JJ: The agents are the middle man.

BC: They are but they're good too. Everybody in the music business gets a very bad rap. I've definitely felt badly about music industry people in the past but now looking back on it I can see that it's just that people want different things and what's important to me for my record releases

might be quite different from some other person who is involved with a different part of it. There are a lot of amazing artists who aren't working. So to have little old me thinking why didn't this person do this or that person do that instead I think I have a very long line of people in front of me who are more deserving than I am or older than I am or better than I am who are still struggling too.

JJ: But the deserving always don't get it either as you know and so you wonder why are the perceived "less deserving" getting it...is it their agent, is it the guy who is promoting them, what is the reason?

BC: A lot of it is money.

JJ: There it is but the one thing that you said before is that everybody wants to get something different out of it but don't you agree that the bottom line is everybody wants to get paid?

BC: Sure. But, some people are dreaming of being a star. If you're a publicist let's say, you can take four or five thousand dollars from a person and get them no reviews and the person can't do anything about it because there are no guarantees. Some of the publicists don't do it but especially if you're hounding them to take you on their roster—sure they'll take your four thousand dollars to make a few phone calls and then that's it. That's why I'm doing everything myself basically.

JJ: What has your life's journey taught you thus far?

BC: It's taught me that hard work pays off.

