

# Jean Michel Pilc

*Interview with Jean Michel Pilc*  
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Taken by: Jazz Improv

**JJ:** Tell us about the kinds of inspiring sounds, sights, people, situations, and opportunities that you experienced growing up in France that led you to pursue this creative path?

**JP:** When you're an artist, everything you experience in life brings you inspiration. Being in contact with beautiful things, works of art, nature, cities, people, emotions etc. It is a process, and for me, singling out this or that moment or situation is impossible. Pretty much everything feeds your art in a very subconscious hence mysterious way. Where and when it happens is not necessarily relevant because it is primarily what happens inside you that turns it into art and shapes your artistic voice. Which makes me often say: "my country is my music."

**JJ:** Could you discuss how your association with several influential musicians with whom you have played, and an experience with one or more of them that significantly impacted your artistry? Dave Liebman, Kenny Garrett, Lenny White, John Abercrombie, Michael Brecker.

**JP:** These were more encounters than real collaborations. My former trio with François Moutin & Ari Hoenig, and my present one with Thomas Bramerie and Mark Mondesir, have been essential to my musical inspiration and development these past few years. These 4 musicians, by their incredible talent and personality, have made me the greatest musical gift I can think of: they made me get out of myself and become part of something much bigger, the musical wave if I may say. Playing great music with these guys, you forget everything including who you are, and become part of this big wave of sound, of music, of emotions.

**JJ:** What prompted you to move to New York from native France? Tell us about some of the key experiences you have had in New York, since your relocation, and how those impacted your music and awareness?

Well, name a few American musicians known in France, then a few French musicians known in the US and you'll have part of your answer. This, which I would call the "no more borders" desire, meaning I wanted to have a full life as a musician and therefore play everywhere, not only in France. And also the urge to live something new, to start afresh, which I think is crucial for a musician. Routine kills art, and travels kill routine.

As for experiences, the simple fact that New York is like no other place else, which greatly impacts anyone who lives there. Such an impact, for an artist like me, was very beneficial because I need energy, challenge, surprise, questioning, and this is the place to experience all that.

And also, of course, all the great musicians I've played with since I got here. My encounter with Ari, or with Sam Newsome for example, have changed me because of the beauty and power of their playing. They are not players, they are other worlds and dimensions.



**JJ:** What is the foundational concept in your organization of your trio?

**JP:** No concept, never. I don't think about music. When I compose or play, music just goes through me, like a conduit. My only goal is to stand as little as possible in the way. Picasso used to say: "I don't paint, painting uses me". Stravinsky, when asked about how he wrote "Rite of Spring", said: "It just went through me." I couldn't put things better.

**JJ:** What challenges do you experience leading your own group?

**JP:** Well, what challenges me is everything non musical. Economics, publicity, bookings etc. You realize that being a leader, you have to be a good musician but also take care of many other things, and you soon discover that being a band-leader has a significant other side which involves politics, psychology, human relations... almost everything actually. That challenges me simply

because my gifts and patience for these other things are very limited. But I do the best I can because I want and I need to play.

**JJ:** What were some key lessons that you learned about human nature through successes and setbacks that you have experienced during your career as an artist?

**JP:** The key lesson is: success is the way people will remember you in 100, 200, 300 years, the way they will be affected by your art then. The rest is just instant gratification, which is nice when it happens, and OK when it doesn't. As an artist you can't be distracted by it or work for it, otherwise you become a politician of art, someone with an agenda.

**JJ:** How do you strive to develop and distinguish your own voice - given the impact of influential voices like Keith Jarrett, Bud Powell, Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner, and others—and the imprint they might have had upon your conscious or subconscious awareness?

**JP:** I wouldn't put it this way. With all due respect to the geniuses you are mentioning, I have always heard things my own way, and someone who listens to me might like it or not, which is totally fine (better be disliked for what you are than liked for what you are not), but has to acknowledge that I don't sound like any of these masters here above—or anybody else for that matter. First of all, the artists quoted here above are all jazz pianists of recent vintage (apart from Bud), whereas I've been influenced by tons of other things outside that sphere. Jelly Roll Morton, Charlie Parker, Miles, Vladimir Horowitz, Beethoven, Prokofiev, African music... the list goes on and on. Anyway I have always heard my own voice, as far as I remember, deep inside me, even as a very young child. The thing is: either you don't have a personal voice and you copy, or borrow, from people you choose in order to manufacture some kind of an expert playing, either you have your own voice and you just spend your lifetime developing it, stealing from what you hear and, this way, feeding your inner musical soul through the subconscious process you are alluding to. Of course you have periods when you copy, imitate, transcribe and I did my share of it. But then your voice reappears, just because it's always been there. You don't strive to distinguish it, it comes back to you whatever you do.

**JJ:** Discuss the temptation to focus on technique over music that some artists experience. How have you worked to balance the two?

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**JP:** Technique is only the ability to be able to forget the instrument, so that you become the instrument of music, and the instrument itself ceases to exist. Of course it is a long and tough process, and I practice daily, classical music mainly. The balance comes when you become able to hear yourself while you're playing, be an outside listener, kind of. When you have that "body double" experience, you know you are in the right zone because everything becomes immaterial, sound and feelings which go with it. When you start experiencing it playing trio, it means you are playing with the right guys and your technique is fine. When you experience it solo, well, you know your technique is definitely what it should be for your own purposes. On the other hand, when you feel great playing music but not so great listening to it later, you know something is wrong and you are not a good listener of yourself.

So I developed this listener ability and instant feedback, mainly by recording myself a lot. By listening to myself on recordings, many of them privately made at home with my home studio, I progressively learned how to hear myself, and therefore reach this balance you are talking about, which I would redefine as the "this is right" feeling. Technique at this point is only part of the picture, but an essential one. If you miss a note, you hear it.

**JJ:** What was involved and or what process occurred in your winning the Chamber Music America's New Works: Creation and Presentation Program, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the grant from Meet the Composer?

**JP:** I submitted a project for a Trio Sonata, and I believe the enthusiasm and energy I was willing to put into the project was apparent in my presentation text. Also, I sent recordings which they liked (the jury was mostly made of musicians, and blindfold tests were part of the selection process). This was the important part in getting the grant I guess.

Then writing the Sonata and developing it with the trio was tremendous fun, a very intense and unique experience. You can hear the result in my album "Cardinal Points", and I am very grateful to Chamber Music America for allowing this piece to come to life, and to François and Ari for transcending it.

**JJ:** Could you talk about your first significant jazz influence? What recording was it that sparked your interest, and what kind of energy did you experience upon hearing the music?

**JP:** I discovered jazz through Bix Beiderbecke. I thought it was the most beautiful music I had ever heard. I haven't changed my mind, everything which to me is important in art is present in Bix's music: unique voice and sound, emotion, clarity, honesty, directness, naturalness, mystery, greatness. Bix is music and his music is him. I never forgot that lesson. His only recorded solo (what a shame), "In A Mist", is an incredible gem, one of the greatest solos of all times. Listen-

ing to Bix when I was 8 totally changed me. All later changes are minor compared to that one. The magic wand touched me and I still can feel it like it was yesterday.

**JJ:** Compliments and criticism are, like perfume, better off inhaled than swallowed. Given that, and the consideration that those "critiquing" your music are not themselves artists and can never understand the depth of your creation—whether their comments are positive or negative—what impact do "critics" have on your artistry?

**JP:** None. I do respect critics. It is a tough job and some of them do it remarkably. First of all, artists can be terrible critics, and very bad listeners. If some music can only be appreciated by other artists, then it is bad music. On the other hand, good music goes to the heart of many people, most of them non-experts, and I believe, like the late Bill Evans, that they are the best listeners. Feelings go much further than references, and emotion much further than understanding, whatever that word means in art.

Being criticized or disagreeing with critics is no big deal. Actually I often disagree with positive reviews of my work! The point is, as an artist, you don't do what you want, you do what you can. It comes out of you, period. After that, it belongs to the listener. Like a reader creates his own inner image of a book, the listener creates his own emotions from your music. If these emotions are negative, then so be it, it wasn't meant to work between him and you at that moment or in this life.

What I don't like is overly intellectual critics, some of them mixing all kind of extra-musical nonsense with the appreciation of music. It generally comes with a dose of arrogance and, more often than not, a hidden agenda. To me, a critic should just share his feelings, positive or negative, with the reader, and not lecture him. That I don't like.

**JJ:** One of the ways artists in jazz have in large part, developed their own styles and reputations, has been to apprentice—to play in the groups lead by high-profile, established jazz artists for extended periods of time—to share and grow via the oral tradition. Since you have not apparently been involved in jazz in that way—by choice or destiny—could you comment on how this reality has helped or hindered your music, creativity, opportunity?

**JJ:** You are right, this is not exactly how my musical life has unfolded, and I couldn't possibly know how my music would be had I had a different life. What you don't experience, you don't really know.

First, I have been in contact with the greatest masters through the records, and I believe you can share as much, if not more emotion and feelings with an artist, by hearing fantastic stuff than by playing it. An example: I have learnt enormously listening to Bach, or to Duke Ellington. I could hardly have played with these guys for obvious reasons.

Being in my own sphere has, I think, helped me stay focused on what I had to say. Speaking of sphere, I'm in good company. Monk, and also Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Erroll Garner, Ahmad Jamal or Art Tatum have almost never (or very briefly) experienced the process you are describing, and see what they've come up with. Same with Glenn Gould, another (almost) self taught. The latter said that isolation is, at some degree, the best thing which an artist can experience in order to develop fully, and I don't entirely disagree. In jazz it is different of course but in the essence it comes down to exactly the same thing: something special to say, and the intense focus that comes with it.

To end on a critical note—but I can't help it—I hear on a daily basis, musicians who have played with masters for a long period of time, or over and over again, and they still sound pretty boring to me. So that's not exactly the way it works.

**JJ:** What pitfalls of the ego must we be vigilant about encountering or succumbing to in our lives as we pursue a life, career, and creativity in music?

**JP:** Like I said, music goes through you and you shouldn't stand in the way. Ego can be a wall between you and music, and lead you to some disastrous decision such as hire the wrong guys just to be the best in the band.

But I do have lots of ego and it is a very powerful tool, when used properly, to create and orient positive energy. It has to be canalized by two other essential tools though, which are intelligence and lucidity, otherwise it turns against you and becomes your worst enemy.

**JJ:** What words of wisdom have you received from a teacher or mentor, or is there a quotation or fragment of wisdom that has inspired you or that you abide by?

**JP:** There is this wonderful quote by a French lyricist named Michelle Senlis, who wrote songs for Edith Piaf and many others: "An innocence which, perpetuated, maintains a state of grace of the creation, where things are constantly reinvented." It conveys that great feeling that, when you are an artist, everyday has to be the first and last day of your life, same for every concert. I also like the great Stravinsky quote: "My music is understood best by children and animals". It says it all!

**Hear Jean-Michel Pilc at  
The Iridium, September 14-18**  
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212-582-2121 [www.iridiumjazzclub.com](http://www.iridiumjazzclub.com)

"Five percent of the people think. Ten percent of the people think they think, and 85% of the people would rather die than think."  
- Thomas Edison