



JONNY KING

BY DONALD ELFMAN

Jonny King is a busy man. He's a full-time lawyer, married and the father of two daughters and a jazz pianist and composer who performs in New York jazz clubs with some of the finest musicians. And, he notes, is writing tunes. Even as the meeting to source this article began, "I was finishing up another tune," says King. "And there are always many more in my head." King has made recordings as a leader and as a sideman and has had tunes recorded by a number of artists, including Billy Pierce, Tony Reedus and Billy Drummond. In some respects, he's under the radar in the jazz world, but there's a bigger story.

First, some background. King is a native New Yorker and his earliest memory of being drawn to music was seeing the film *The Sting* at age nine and coming home to try to pick out its ragtime melodies on his family's spinet piano. "My folks signed me up for lessons with a classical teacher but, within months, I was always frustrated with having to play music as it was written. In other words, I wanted to and started to improvise." So, abandoning the lessons, a jazz musician emerged and, with the help of a promoter friend of the family, King got to see Teddy Wilson, Earl Hines, Cannonball Adderley and more. And, in addition to listening to records, King soon started taking lessons with a "proper jazz teacher", Tony Aless, one of the pianists on Charlie Parker's *Bird with Strings*. Says King, "Tony instilled that reverence for the language of jazz—I got to appreciate the oral history of the music and find my voice."

Harvard Law School was King's next step yet he never gave up playing jazz, working with many of Boston's greats, including Pierce, Alan Dawson, John Lockwood and more. He returned to New York in 1993 and began to play at Bradley's, Sweet Basil, Knickerbocker Bar & Grill, Blue Note and more. He began work at his current law firm in 1994 but that fall was asked to go on tour with Joshua Redman and worked out a leave of absence arrangement to make that possible. So life has, since that time, been a kind of "juggling act" of family, law and music.

In 1994, King made his first recording as a leader for Criss Cross, *In From The Cold*. The players included a frontline of saxophonists Mark Turner and Vincent Herring with Ira Coleman and Billy Drummond in the rhythm section. The album introduces King's writing—seven originals with distinctly angular melodies and time signature changes (the title track shifts three times), which make for challenging listening. The players, however, are so comfortable with King and he with them that listeners can always sense the pulse and the group sensibility. "It's what makes jazz for me," says King, "that working together and being relaxed enough to try intriguing things, hearing what the other players are doing and still feel like we're working towards the same ends."

That ethos pervades his next two recordings, made for Germany's Enja Records after label founder Matthias Winckelmann heard King play in New York.

Notes from the Underground, from 1995, found the pianist in solid company with Drummond again and Peter Washington (bass), Joshua Redman (tenor saxophone) and Steve Nelson (vibraphone). Here were six more originals, including one, "Las Ramblas", which blends island rhythms, chord changes of "I Got Rhythm" and an unusual, but danceable melody. The covers are Herbie Hancock's "Blow Up" and the Fred E. Ahlert-Roy Turk standard "Mean to Me". On 1997's *The Meltdown*, Drummond is there yet again, this time in a larger group with David Sánchez (tenor), Steve Wilson (tenor and soprano), Steve Davis (trombone) and Larry Grenadier (bass). The musicians on these recordings are the ones with whom King finds his place of relaxed yet adventurous music-making.

Influences abound in King's music and playing. According to him, it's the early boogie-woogie players like Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons and Pete Johnson and then, later, Wynton Kelly, Sonny Clark, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett and McCoy Tyner. And, he says, "When I was starting to play professionally, there were so many great pianists I could see virtually every night, like Kenny Barron, John Hicks, Ronnie Mathews, Cedar Walton, Tommy Flanagan and others. And, on the younger side of the spectrum, Kenny Kirkland and Mulgrew Miller... Mulgrew ultimately became my teacher and mentor... he'd come to the house and we'd sit at the upright piano and take turns playing melodies and basslines." And it was never about technique, though King certainly has it. "I'm not schooled, not an academic. But a listener responds, really, to the music."

Lest we forget, King is a partner in a top New York firm. In fact, he had written a paper while in law school entitled "The Anatomy of a Jazz Recording", in which he discusses how a version of an old standard could include nine copyrightable elements. And speaking of writing, in 1997 King authored *What Jazz Is: An Insider's Guide to Understanding and Listening to Jazz* (Walker Books). In the introduction, he says, "... that breadth of emotional expressiveness is part of why jazz is such great music. With a little preliminary interest and willingness to listen, anyone can understand and respond to jazz." The book originally came with a compilation CD of music that King discussed within its pages.

King made his most recent recording in 2010, the stunning *Above All* (Sunnyside). The pianist is joined by bassist Ed Howard and drummer Victor Lewis, both of whom have joined King's special coterie. Now, he finds himself doing more trio gigs and pondering the challenges of recording and the future of same. "Since I write so much music, I'm opting, for new recordings, when they happen, for larger groups that could interpret that music," King reflects. In addition, he's working with his publisher, Don Sickler at Second Floor Music, in transcribing his music for educational purposes so that intimacy and sharing extends, one hopes, to new generations of players. ❖

For more information, visit jonnyking.com. King is at Mezzrow Apr. 20th-21st. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Eric Felten/Jimmy Knepper – *T-Bop* (Soul Note, 1991-92)
- Jonny King – *In From The Cold* (Criss Cross, 1994)
- Jonny King – *Notes From The Underground* (Enja, 1995)
- Jonny King – *The Meltdown* (Enja-Koch, 1997)
- Jonny King – *Above All* (Sunnyside, 2010)
- Anthony Branker & Ascent – *Together* (Origin, 2012)

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