

No Beethoven

No Beethoven

**An Autobiography & Chronicle of
Weather Report**

by Peter Erskine

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“I ain’t afraid of no Beethoven.”

— Joe Zawinul to Peter Erskine, circa 1979

About the Author

Peter Erskine has played the drums since age four and is known for his versatility and love of working in different musical contexts. He appears on 600 albums and film scores, and has won two Grammy Awards, plus an Honorary Doctorate from the Berklee School of Music.

Thirty albums have been released under his own name or as co-leader. He has played with the Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson Big Bands, Weather Report, Steps Ahead, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, Diana Krall, Kenny Wheeler, The Brecker Brothers, The Yellowjackets, Pat Metheny and Gary Burton, John Scofield, et al, and has appeared as a soloist with the London, Los Angeles, Chicago, Frankfurt Radio, Scottish Chamber, Royal Opera House, BBC Symphony and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras. Peter has been named 'Best Jazz Drummer of the Year' ten times by Modern Drummer magazine. Peter graduated from the Interlochen Arts Academy and studied at Indiana University under George Gaber. He is currently Professor of Practice and Director of Drumset Studies at USC. Peter is married with two children and lives in Santa Monica, California.

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Foreword

Why am *I* writing this?! After reading an advance draft of Mr. Erskine's latest memoirs — the book you now hold in your hands — I proffered the following advice to the author: “You should get a heavy hitter to write a foreword.” Of course, I was thinking of Wayne Shorter, given that this autobiography has the drummer's years with the influential band Weather Report as one central theme. Then again, having only recently met Mr. Shorter...well, lets just say that those who really know him might describe him as a man of few words — or at least one whose words are so carefully chosen as they may tend toward brevity, even come across as cryptic at times. Good enough. Well then, what about all the other high-level and well-known musicians that Mr. Erskine has supported and collaborated with over his long and storied career? We know that some of these folks are amazing writers! Walter Becker and Donald Fagen (aka Steely Dan), Joni Mitchell, Diana Krall, John Abercrombie, Eliane Elias, Marc Johnson, Bill Frisell, Alan Pasqua, Bob Mintzer, Russell Ferrante, Jimmy Haslip, Vince Mendoza, John Williams...shall I go on? [It's an impressive and long list of the who's who in the music industry...just check out the discography and filmography by way of Peter's website, www.petererskine.com !]

It comes down to this: I like Peter Erskine's drumming...a lot! His myriad recordings have been on my “playlist” for decades (long before iPods ever existed) and, it would seem that Peter Erskine likes my writing (as evidenced by his request for and acceptance of my liner notes for his latest trio recording, *Joy Luck*). Perhaps even more obvious in his response to my suggestion to find a celebrated writer: “I would be honored if *you* would write the foreword!” Hmm, so much for *my* idea!

So, now the circle is forming: I also like Peter Erskine's writing! In fact, I found this book to be a most engaging, informative, and at times brutally honest account of a rich and, in many ways, ground-breaking musical life. One that, if read with a modicum of compassion for the realities of life as a road warrior (touring musician) and acceptance of the “rough-around-the-edges” lifestyle that goes along with it (especially in the jazz world), will entertain and inform those who know the man, the musician, the friend. This book will also “fill in the blanks” for fans who have

followed the drummer's career or the many bands with whom he has been an integral part. I would also add, and of this I am most hopeful, that aspiring young musicians (even aspiring *old* musicians) will find enlightenment from the wisdom contained herein.

Peter Erskine's life story is still evolving and his musical contributions continue to define and explore the *other* side of drumming. Sure, he swings hard and continues to function as one of the premier big band drummers to carry the mantle from his early years with Stan Kenton's band through his years with Maynard Ferguson and into the present. (I heard him perform recently here in Boston with Berklee's Jazz Orchestra, as the Armand Zildjian Visiting Artist. What a treat to hear him navigate everything from more contemporary writers to the classic Sammy Nestico charts from Basie's band!) Still, the thing that separates Erskine from many of his drumming contemporaries is his willingness, actually his insistence, on getting the musical point across without unnecessary pyrotechnics — of which, he is clearly capable.

The evolution of this drumming style (sometimes referred to by Erskine as “3-D musical architecture”) relies, to a large degree, on close listening, massive amounts of preparation and the surrender of one's ego — well, not completely, but certainly in deference to the music. Speaking with Erskine on the subject, one hears an obvious reverence, accompanied by a reduction of volume in his delivery. He almost brings the conversation to a whisper, as if prefacing with “this is an important thing I'm going to say now, so pay close attention.” This describes Erskine's approach to drumset playing, as well. His manner of speaking and his playing are one. Rule #1: You must listen closely in order to truly hear what the music needs.

There is no way to stampede toward the kind of touch that Peter Erskine possesses on his instrument. Rule #2: do your homework! I have been teaching for a number of decades now and have witnessed the reluctance of so many young aspiring musicians to exact the discipline required to progress their craft. I've also seen the glowing results when practicing is seen as a daily routine and approached with joy rather than dread. I also understand that the grind of daily music making (for a living) can take its toll on practice time. In other words, get to it while you can...once your

dream comes true and you are in demand as a player...well, practice now or keep dreaming.

How can and why should one ensure that one is “out of the way of the music”? Rule #3: this is NOT about you, it is always about the music, yet you cannot disappear completely. OK, well now I’ve said it and, while this could take up an entire shelf full of books on self-help, let’s get to the point. Surrender is a large part of Erskine’s philosophy of playing music...so what is he talking about? There is a way of listening, of really hearing and becoming fully aware of one’s surroundings that is implied here. One that requires a diminishing of noise (critical commentary) and static (negative thought patterns) in order to get to the essence of “what comes next” in one’s playing. This is especially true for improvisers. This process of listening can also be viewed as one of editing and focusing one’s energy toward being very open. Openness to hearing others, openness to experiencing novelty, openness to sharing the space in which music exists, openness to flowing...

As you may surmise, I am sometimes blinded by a spirit of reverence for practitioners of the arts — in particular, musicians. More specifically, those players who have dedicated themselves to a lifelong pursuit of finding truth and beauty wherever and whenever, and who take the time to report back to the rest of humanity; they have long been my heroes. This past summer, I had the honor of working with Peter Erskine in the studio, recording my original compositions. This experience, especially after years of listening to his own trios, provided a culmination of many musical dreams and aspirations.

He played my music and, not only improved on my concept, but approached his own instrument in a way I’ve never heard before — he seems to constantly reinvent himself. He listens and adapts and plays inclusively. From my perspective, Peter Erskine is a masterful “compercussionist” (my term for a drummer who also plays melody, harmony and thinks like a composer when improvising). It makes perfect sense that he has continued the legacy we first encountered in the legendary pianist Bill Evans’ approach to the trio — the art of conversational playing.

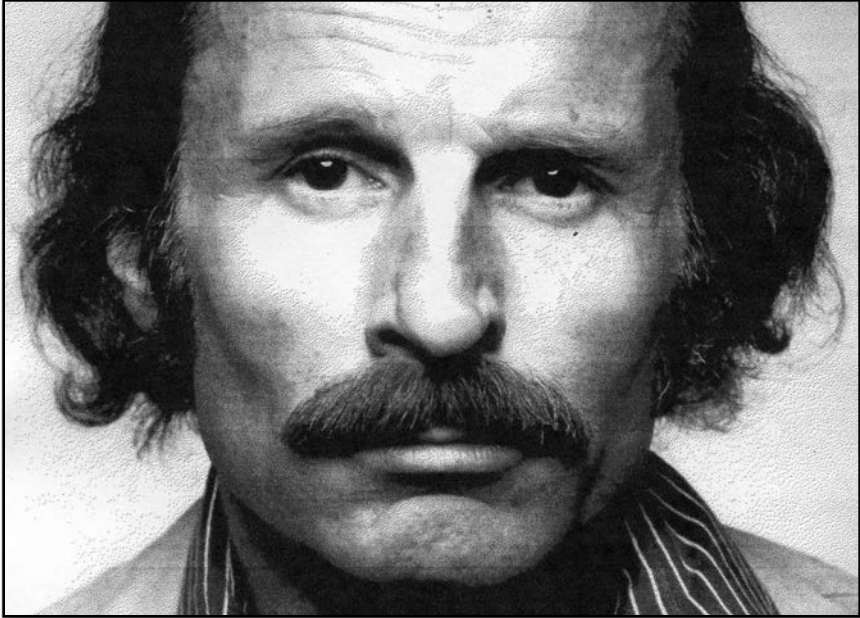
So you see, dear reader, one cannot help but be influenced by Peter Erskine's music, philosophy, or his writing; for there exists a deep commitment and long history of forging new paths that, for some, is both intriguing and inspirational. He crosses interdisciplinary boundaries with great aplomb, he expands the physical limits of the instrument with grace and economy of motion, and he consistently transcends the definition of his art form — his *oeuvre* speaks for itself.

I started writing about his book and ended up reflecting on his influence on my own path. Peter Erskine's numerous recordings have one central thing in common: regardless of genre, there is his quiet, yet solid presence and, yes, his enviable touch that makes each musical offering uniquely his own. He listens...like we all should listen. Any sensitive reader will hear it in this telling of his own musical life. This is really Volume 1 of a continuing story...find a quiet place and enjoy.

Mitch Haupers
January 14, 2013

1. Thus Spake Zawinul

“Sad motherfucker...”



Moments before, I had surrendered my headphones to Joe on Japan Airlines flight #61 as it cruised 35,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean. We were flying from LAX to Tokyo’s newly opened Narita Airport. It was Saturday, June 17, 1978, and Weather Report was about to tour Japan as a quartet with me as its new drummer. A lunch of beefsteak had been served with soba noodle starter. Seated alone on this pivotal journey and wearing a new set of clothes for the trip, I already managed to stain my shirt with soy sauce.

Too excited to sleep, and it was mid-afternoon to boot, I plugged headphones into my Panasonic cassette boom box and was listening to some pleasant music by a leading keyboard artist of the day — not bebop, more like late ’70s pop-smooth-jazz — and daydreaming about my girlfriend when I spotted Joe half a cabin ahead, walking aft.

Somehow, I knew he was headed straight for me, and I knew what was going to happen next. My Coltrane and Miles tapes were in the overhead baggage compartment, and there was no chance to grab one of them by the time he was upon me. He motioned for me to give up my headphones so he could hear what I was listening to. I smiled weakly and offered up my Koss headset, which he donned in brisk fashion. Zawinul stood in the aisle with a fist on each hip, similar to a football referee's indication of "offside," while looking forward and backwards and up and down the aisle with an expression I hadn't yet come to know or understand, but I could tell that he wasn't digging the music I was listening too very much.

He finally looked directly at me and yelled the way that people wearing headphones always shout, demanding I confirm the identity of the offending musician whose name he had just bellowed as a question. [Beat.] I kept smiling and nodded to convey, "Yep, that's who it is." [Another beat.] Joe took the headphones off and held them astride my ears as he simply said, "Sad motherfucker..." and then plopped the phones back onto my head and walked away.

Thus spake Zawinul.

I wondered how and if I was going to survive this macho jazz gauntlet.

Welcome to Weather Report.



photo: Shigeru Uchiyama

The road to this trans-oceanic journey begins 20 years earlier when, in my infancy, I'm playing along to my father's vinyl LP records on a makeshift drumset that he has put together for me in front of a large Klipsch monaural speaker cabinet in our family's living room. Being that young, I don't understand the concept of recordings; I think that there are little people inside this large speaker cabinet, and that putting a round piece of plastic into the machine wakes them up and they make music for me — His Majesty the Baby.

The music includes LPs by Tito Puente, Art Blakey, Martin Denny, Specs Powell, Esquivel, and Henry Mancini. The conga drum comes from Cuba and the small rivet cymbal from who-knows-where, and this setup functions not only as a thrown-together kit but also as a sort of compass. I'm four years old and I already know that I will be playing the drums for Weather Report. Well, I can't actually know that just yet, but I pretty much have already figured out that this is what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life.

First will come private lessons and summer music camps, always to the accompaniment of parental cheering and sibling support. Next will come conservatory training, followed by my first gigs...



2. Club Harlem

It was the summer of 1972 and I was returning to my position as house drummer for the band at the legendary Club Harlem in Atlantic City. The club was 38 years old at that point in time; I had just turned 18. The year before, when I first did the gig, my mom had to drop me off and pick me up in front of the club for a couple of weeks until I got my driver's license. The Club Harlem was located on Kentucky Avenue. Atlantic City has changed a lot since 1972, and while Kentucky Avenue is still there, the Club Harlem no longer exists. But it was home in its heyday to such legendary visiting black artists and entertainers as Sammy Davis, Jr., James Brown, Sam Cooke, Ella Fitzgerald, Stevie Wonder, Sarah Vaughan, Ray Charles, Redd Foxx, and many others. Acts would usually come there for a one-week stint. The Club Harlem had a show room in the back that could seat 900 people. It also had a bar in the front where organ trios would play in-between the shows in the main room. I got to hear such jazz greats as Lonnie Smith and Jimmy McGriff during my breaks.

The really fun part about the Club Harlem was that there was a breakfast show that started at 5 A.M. on Sundays. All of the celebrities appearing in Atlantic City on any given weekend would come to the Harlem's breakfast show after the other nightclubs closed for the evening. The club served scrambled eggs, Bloody Marys or Screwdrivers, and we played a final set. And then the organ band in the front of the club would play their last set. All the while, aromas from the various soul food eateries and the "head" and incense shops on the street mingled with the perfume of the nearby Atlantic Ocean.

So, it was the beginning of summer and I greeted bandleader Johnny Lynch — a lovely old man with a wig fashioned in the style of the day, a large Afro. The band consisted of Johnny on trumpet, two saxophone players, bass (the excellent Eddie Mathias), piano, and drums. Believe it or not, for the dance routine (two women with natural Afros and one male dancer, all of them dressed in leopard-skin fur) and resident vocalist, we had a conductor who wielded a big baton. His name was John Usry, Jr., and his sister, Soundra, was the singer. John went on to have some

success producing disco recordings, I believe. For fun, the pianist in the house band, Gary Gannaway, used to find Usry's baton just before show time and toss it into a hole in the wall backstage that led to a long-forgotten basement. Usry would panic and curse behind the red velvet curtain that was just to the right of the drumset. I learned some new and imaginative combinations of colorful language in 1972.

The Three Degrees was the first group I worked with that summer. I rehearsed their book with the house band on the day before they were scheduled to come to town. Some nice tunes, including one of their hits, "Everybody Gets to Go to the Moon" (the same song they sing during their cameo appearance in the 1974 film *The French Connection*), and a cool arrangement of Aretha Franklin's hit "Rock Steady."

The girls arrived for their first show, and I was informed that they had their own drummer, but I could play percussion during their set. Bummer, but okay. They also had their own conductor, a man named Richie Barrett, who discovered them, produced them, managed them, etc.

So, the first night of the Club Harlem summer season begins, and the house band plays a set for cocktails and dancing by those audience members who have gotten there too early, and then it's show time. Maestro Usry comes onstage through the thick velvet curtains on this small bandstand, takes a deep bow, and we play the book for his sister Soundra, the singer. I can't quite remember the sequence of events, but we also played music for the aforementioned dance trio as well as for a comedian. Then the Three Degrees were announced, and I moved over to my tambourine spot while their drummer sat down at my kit and played their show. He was good.

"This would be fun to do!" I thought. So, early on the second evening I went up to the Three Degrees' conductor/manager/producer, Richie Barrett, and I actually had the nerve to say, "Excuse me, may I ask you a question?" His reply: "Yeah, what?" "Well, I was just wondering if it might be possible for me to play one of the shows this week — you know, play drums on the show? After all, it's only fair, I DID play the rehearsal, and..." He interrupted me with an "Are you kidding?" and walked off. Oh well; nothing ventured, nothing gained.

It might have been later that night, or possibly the next evening, but between shows 1 and 2, the Three Degrees' traveling drummer came back from the break late and drunk. Apparently, this was not the first time that something like this had happened. And so, while we played some extra tunes out of the house-band book, I heard the following take place on the other side of that velvet curtain that was next to my drumset:

“THIS IS THE LAST TIME YOU PULL THIS SHIT!”

“AW, FUCK YOU, MAN.”

“OH YEAH? FUCK ME? WELL, FUCK *YOU*! YOU'RE FIRED!”

The band stops playing. Sounds of pushing and shoving, and probably a few more F words.

Suddenly, Richie Barrett charges through the velvet curtains and strides angrily across the stage to give the downbeat for the Three Degrees' first number. Halfway there, he stops, points HIS conductor's baton right at me and says loudly enough for everyone in the club to hear:

“OKAY, YOU GOT YOUR CHANCE, MOTHERFUCKER!”

I played that show and finished out the week. Looking back now, I realize that this was all part of the training. The last night of the engagement, I got a signed photo from the girls as well as a kiss on the cheek from each of them. Barrett never offered to pay me anything extra for playing their show, and it didn't even occur to me to ask.

The Three Degrees went on to have a couple of big hits, including “When Will I See You Again” as well as “TSOP” (the theme for *Soul Train*). Shortly thereafter, I began working with the Stan Kenton Orchestra, abruptly resigning my gig at the Club Harlem. Didn't get to play too much more soul music for a while...



THE THREE DEGREES

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RICHARD BARRETT

3. Weather Report is a Big Band



Pre-tour press conference in Tokyo with Weather Report, Monday, June 19, 1978. Several questions to Joe Zawinul, Wayne Shorter, and Jaco Pastorius. No one asks me anything, and I'm okay with that — still just trying to take all of this in. Finally, a journalist directs a question to the new drummer in the band. “Peter Erskine: You have played with the big bands of Stan Kenton and Maynard Ferguson. How does this qualify you to play with Weather Report?” Nice question, especially seeing how I have not yet played my first concert with the band. “Well... good music is good music...” — my first publicly spoken words as Weather Report's drummer — “and good music is...” Zawinul interrupts my brilliant answer with, “Weather Report is a small group and we are a big band, too. Next question.”

To be honest, I am confident that, had Joe or Wayne heard me with either Stan or Maynard, they never would have hired me. I suspect that it was the idea that I had played with Kenton that intrigued them, and I imagine that the Kenton in their heads was the band from the '50s. They simply liked the notion or the concept that I had played with a big band.

(Joe and Wayne both enjoyed their first “big” gig as part of Maynard Ferguson’s band.) Luckily for me, it was Jaco who heard me play with Maynard.

I owe the Weather Report gig to Maynard Ferguson bandmate and trumpeter Ron Tooley, who called Jaco up when the band was playing in Miami at the Airliner Motel in March of 1977. Ron was surprised that his phone call was answered because Jaco was usually in Los Angeles working with Weather Report, and he made the call intending to just leave a message. So they talked for a while, and when Ron asked Jaco if he would like to come and see the band that night, Jaco replied, “Thanks but no thanks; I heard you guys the last time.” “Well,” Ron said, “we got a new drummer; you might want to check him out.” “Okay, I’ll be there.”

Even though the epochal album *Heavy Weather* was just about to be released, drummer Alex Acuña was apparently already making plans to leave the band. So I met Jaco that night and we chitchatted for a while. At first I was staring at him because he looked so different in person compared to his solo album cover photograph — that stylized black-and-white photo that made him look European. Here was this guy with stringy long hair wearing a Phillies baseball cap, horn-rimmed glasses, and a striped shirt that was buttoned all the way up to the top.

Eventually the band break was over and I had to go back to the stage to play the second set. Jaco then said something to me no one else had ever said. As I was walking towards the stage I heard, “Hey, man!” and I turned around to look. Instead of saying something like, “Play well” or “Have a good set,” Jaco yelled, “HAVE FUN!” And I thought, “Wow, that’s a nice **idea**.” So I went up and had fun — smiling and laughing and enjoying myself, and that’s how I played. Jaco was that kind of person: He truly enjoyed bringing out something in people — most often bringing out their best. Sometimes, getting any type of reaction was good enough for him (even if it meant trouble to follow). One nickname he had for himself was “catalyst.”

After the Maynard gig was over that evening, Jaco and several of us sidemen stayed up all night listening over and over again to the cassette tape that Jaco had brought with him of *Heavy Weather*. I told him, “This is

the version of Weather Report I have been waiting for." He told me that he would be calling me one of these days.

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