

Eugene: [\(00:00\)](#)

And we're very fortunate to have Joel Ross on the line calling in. Hello, Joel, welcome to WVEW.

Joel: [\(00:08\)](#)

Thanks for having me

Eugene: [\(00:09\)](#)

All right. Your music is so different from the typical AABA song structures from the great American songbook era. So for me, it has taken more time and listening experiences to become acquainted with them. For example, some are episodic, some have interludes for blowing, others are through-composed, others have a totally different ending section, like KingMaker we just heard, or a different setting for melody like "Gato's Gift." Can you share a bit about your writing and the arranging process?

Joel: [\(00:46\)](#)

Yeah. I mean, it changes at this point. You know, when it comes to just writing these pieces, you know, I just try to let them, you know, come to me naturally and try not to dictate any terms for any of the music, but just to, I try to get all the ideas out first and then arrange it to what I like, but once I bring it to the band, once we get the initial information under our fingers, from there, we arrange it and figure out what works best for us in the way that we play it. So like, you know, with Kingmaker, when I wrote it, I saw it as this thing, this long type of musical narrative with these moments for improvisation. Whereas "Gatos" was, you know, a beautiful melody that I just felt like we can really just play the melody and then let it speak for itself. So it's really about how we play the music and what, what we might feel the music needs or might not need.

Eugene: [\(01:53\)](#)

Mm-hmm . So, it's a collaborative process. Is that what you're saying?

Joel: [\(01:59\)](#)

Certainly. Every time, every time we play.

Eugene: [\(02:04\)](#)

So that means that the arrangements might evolve each performance, that the arrangements might be different?

Joel: [\(02:11\)](#)

Yeah, because the goal is, is for us to know the music so well that we can improvise in our decisions of what we do with the music, whether that may be ending in a different spot every night, or opening up a section one night that we've never really opened up before, or, you know, we'll get to soundcheck and play something and try different ideas, just trying to just know the information well enough to manipulate in that manner so that we can always, you know, try new things.

Eugene: [\(02:43\)](#)

So does that mean that you guys are like rehearsing a lot? Do you have, I mean, you know the

music so well that it can change on a dime, even though it's very complicated music. So does that mean that you've been playing it together a lot or that you rehearse often?

Joel: [\(03:01\)](#)

We don't rehearse often at this point, the only time we run run things are when we have a gig and have a sound check. And, but that's usually what we'll do. We'll, I mean, we'll have a nice rehearsal maybe once a year, but outside of that, I'll send, I'll send some charts in a Dropbox and we'll read through things through sound check, and we may play it on the gig, we may not, but, you know, we'll keep playing things in sound check and just running through things and then we'll play them on gigs and we'll try them, and as we get more comfortable with them, then the more these, these new ideas can take form.

Eugene: [\(03:43\)](#)

In the Blue Note website where they're promoting, "Who Are You?", it describes the album as a narrative in two parts, but I couldn't find any other information about that. And I'm interested. Can you explain what they mean or what, what did you mean by having a narrative in two parts?

Joel: [\(04:06\)](#)

Just more of the aspect of, I feel like the first half of the album is heavily more focusing on like our interaction as an ensemble, especially improvisationally. Whereas the second half really focuses more on composition and arrangement and has more through-composed things and smaller ideas and things, things of that nature in that, in that regard.

Eugene: [\(04:36\)](#)

So where does the word narrative come in for that and having two different narratives?

Joel: [\(04:45\)](#)

Umm

Eugene: [\(04:45\)](#)

Is there a story?

Joel: [\(04:47\)](#)

I wouldn't say, I mean, I, you know, I, I imagine my music has a, has a narrative. I don't necessarily say this is the narrative and want people to feel like this is what the narrative is. You know, there is, there is a shape in my mind to how I shape the album from the beginning to the end and the emotional peaks and valleys that happen from piece to piece, and so, you know, I, that's how I think of my music in a way, but I wouldn't necessarily, I wouldn't go so as far to say, like, this is what the narrative is. I'd much rather leave music open to interpretation.

Eugene: [\(05:34\)](#)

Yeah. I remember one time I took a lesson with Kenny Barron and he said, tell a story with your solo

Joel: [\(05:41\)](#)

Mm-hmm

Eugene: (05:42)

And sometimes, you know, I was thinking, well, how can you tell a story? Because music is, it's not programmatic by nature. So...but since then, I've been thinking about that a lot.

Joel: (05:59)

Mm-hmm

Eugene: (06:00)

I can really feel that if you develop your solo in such a way that you are telling a story, is that the way that you're thinking, like you're telling a story as a group or individually?

Joel: (06:14)

Well, yeah. I mean, 'cause music is a language, right? So if you think of it like that, then you have this language that you have the ability to converse and communicate with others with. And from that you can formulate these ideas and these things happen in a way that we are able to communicate with each other. So, so from there, you know, to be able to manipulate the language in such a way that you can paint the story requires a specific amount of mastery of the language, right? The same as any language, whether it's an actual speaking language or the language of football or the language of the stock market, you know, you get, you're good at these things once you master them, right? So this idea of once you master this musical language, then you're able to manipulate that information to paint a story. And that's the goal is just to be able to use the music, to create this story for people to maybe follow and interpret, however they experience it. But just to have that amount of mastery over the music and the instrument, so that the music and the instrument doesn't get in the way, but it's just this, whatever this is that I'm trying to express with the music.

Eugene: (07:40)

Mm-hmm, is there anywhere that we can find Marquis Hill's liner notes? I was looking for them in the CD that I bought, but I couldn't find them.

Joel: (07:53)

They should be, they should be on the CD itself, I believe. I don't know if they're available by themselves online. I have to find out.

Eugene: (08:05)

Huh.

Joel: (08:06)

But they should be on the CD packaging.

Eugene: (08:08)

No, no, I'll show you mine when I see you on Saturday, but they're not there.

Joel: (08:13)

Yeah.

Eugene: [\(08:13\)](#)

Maybe they're on the LP

Joel: [\(08:16\)](#)

Maybe. Okay. Yeah. I'll find out.

Eugene: [\(08:18\)](#)

Yeah, that would be interesting. I really enjoyed a video of your performance of your composition, "Parables," at the Art Center at Duck Creek.

Joel: [\(08:30\)](#)

Uh-huh

Eugene: [\(08:30\)](#)

And you wrote for four horns and your writing was so intriguing. It seems to me that you use some short ideas in a very compelling way and stretch them out into a meditative setting and then features some very specific solos to bring out a certain mood. Can you tell us about that piece?

Joel: [\(08:51\)](#)

Yeah. Parables is actually the name of the ensemble.

Eugene: [\(08:57\)](#)

Uh-mmm

Joel: [\(08:57\)](#)

And we actually recorded that music this summer and that'll be my next release. Yeah, the idea was that the music comes from some improvisations from, uh, I was commissioned by Roulette Intermedium in Brooklyn to write some music. And so I wrote all that music, a suite of music, for that performance. So, and that was back in 2019. And yeah, the ensemble, it's rhythm section, vibes, and four horns, plus, plus more at this point. And the idea is, yeah, the music is based on improvisations from back in 2018, with a buddy of mine. And, I basically transcribed them and then not so much arranged them for all the horns, but the, the idea behind, especially that batch of music is that there's basically a melody or a single idea, and everybody has that information. And, you know, especially I want the horns to consider themselves almost like a choir, but just in general, as accompanying the same way, the reserve section would accompany and to accompany each other in that manner using however they see fit using notes or melodies or phrases. And the goal is for us to sound as unified as possible in the, I guess, melding of our ideas.

Eugene: [\(10:35\)](#)

So everybody has a lead sheet? Do they have any harmonies, other than chord symbols?

Joel: [\(10:40\)](#)

Just the, just the lead sheet for most of them, there may be one piece that has actual harmonies

written, but there, there are about seven, seven pieces in the whole suite of music and it's basically a lead sheet and everybody's improvising whatever they, however they choose to, to, uh, accompany.

Eugene: ([11:04](#))

Oh, so they might do a counterpoint line instead of a harmonized line.

Joel: ([11:10](#))

Yeah. But it'll be completely improvised based, on up to them. All they have are the harmony and whatever the melody is.

Eugene: ([11:17](#))

That's so cool. But of course you're, you're playing with amazing musicians, but you're taking a chance to do that so spontaneously

Joel: ([11:26](#))

Mm-hmm yeah. It's, it's keeping that mindset of if, you know, you know, you know, the music so well that we're able to do what to manipulate it so that we can do what we need to with the music.

Eugene: ([11:38](#))

Mm-hmm and then everybody got a, a certain spot where they were really featured. I remember the trombone solo in particular was just-

Joel: ([11:49](#))

Mm-hmm I, I mean, that's something I like to do in general, even in, in any ensembles to allow everybody to have a moment to express themselves by themselves to let something develop from that. So I always try to do that in any performance, really,

Eugene: ([12:06](#))

Very enjoyable. You and your brother are both drummers and can you relay the story about how you ended up on the vibes rather than having drums as your primary instrument?

Joel: ([12:22](#))

Yeah, uh, I mean, so we both started playing, we're twins, so we both started playing drums when we were about two or three years old. And we did that primarily in the church, in, in South Side Chicago. And when we got to 10th grade, we joined our schools elementary school band, where we joined the concert band. So my brother was playing more, snare drum, bass drum, and he had perfect pitch, so he started playing timpani and I started playing more mallet percussion, like xylophone and the orchestra bells. And that same year, in Chicago, we auditioned for Chicago's all city, all city ensembles. There was the concert band. So we respectively got in, he got in for snare, timpani, you know, that percussion, and I was playing more mallet percussion. And we also auditioned for that jazz band. And we both auditioned on drums, but, you know, he was the better drummer and they suggested I played the vibes, but at that time I had never played the vibes and I didn't really wanna play the vibes but my dad and the instructor strongly insisted, and so I'd been playing the vibes ever since then.

Eugene: ([13:32](#))

Wow. It sounds like a good, a good call. And did your, does your brother still play out?

Joel: ([13:37](#))

Certainly, yeah. He plays in Chicago. He has his own ensembles as well as he's starting his own non-profit or his own startup website. So he is, yeah, he's in Chicago playing and writing.

Eugene: ([13:51](#))

That's cool. How does being a drummer influence you as a composer and performer?

Joel: ([14:01](#))

Most, if not all of my writing is coming from a rhythmic mindset, as well as when I'm communicating musically, thinking rhythmically

Eugene: ([14:13](#))

Rather than melodically?

Joel: ([14:20](#))

Just not rather than, but, you know, the rhythm is most important, especially in this music. That's where this music comes from, comes from the drums. So it comes from the rhythm. So, uh, I feel like that matters most in, in this style of this black American music is, is how we, how we use and convey rhythm compositionally and improvisationally for our company. Just the way we utilize rhythm in the music that's and I feel like that's, that is what separates this music from other musics is the swing pattern, but just how we, how we syncopate and how we use utilize syncopate rhythms to converse with each other and improvise those rhythms, as well as harmonically and melodically, I think, but I think rhythm is rhythm is the most essential element of that.

Eugene: ([15:15](#))

I get it. And when you say the source, can you give a little bit more depth to that?

Joel: ([15:23](#))

Well, yeah. I mean, Readers Digest jazz, quote, unquote, jazz, is improvised music. I mean, it originates from, from when the slaves were able to congregate on Sundays and they could play drums and dance and, and, and celebrate and shout and praise. And that moves forward into history to the church and to the blues and, and, you know, those branch out into other black, black American musics, but jazz came out of that and, you know, came outta New Orleans as time went on. And all of it was still heavily rooted around coming from the drums, and it's all drums. It's all, all those different styles even are rooted from different rhythmic elements, but they're all the, the rhythm is the, is the key in how they, how they all relate. Yeah.

Eugene: ([16:20](#))

How, how does being a drummer influence your choice of drummers?

Joel: ([16:26](#))

, I'm looking for clarity, you know, clarity and I...I, I think clarity is the, the most important thing and, you know, obviously natural ability,

Eugene: ([16:39](#))
right .

Joel: ([16:39](#))
You always wanna work with the best, the best of the best, but even past that, just somebody who's able to articulate their ideas. As with any instrument, you know, clearly.

Eugene: ([16:51](#))
Well, Jeremy has been with you on the last two albums as a leader.

Joel: ([16:56](#))
Mm-hmm .

Eugene: ([16:56](#))
What is it about his drumming that you find so compelling?

Joel: ([17:01](#))
I mean, you know, he's clear, that he's articulate, but I mean, it's more than just the drumming. I've, he's been my friend and I've known him and been playing with him for years, so we have that trust on the bandstand. And so we are also that comfortable with each other on the bandstand and that, that, shows itself in the music, you know, it's, I, when I'm, when, when it comes to who I wanna make music with, they're all people who are, who I enjoy, you know, just as people first and not as, only as musicians and they're my friends. And I find that those are the moments where I make the best music with people who I enjoy being with in general.

Eugene: ([17:41](#))
Mm, nice. You talked earlier about how good vibes that you've been playing the music so frequently or not frequently, but that, you know, the music so well together as a group, that the arrangements are a little bit open-ended, and this tour you've got Immanuel Wilkins doing other things so that you've chosen Godwin Louis to replace him in a group.

Joel: ([18:11](#))
Uh-huh .

Eugene: ([18:11](#))
How, how does that kind of a transition work?

Joel: ([18:16](#))
Well, Godwin's another one of those people where I have been fortunate enough, I played his music and recorded his music with him, played a lot of gigs with him. He's played, he's played in and actually in that ensemble Parables before. So we've worked together in different iterations. So we are, I would say we're just as comfortable together. And I mean, we just played together last Friday in Denver and it, it, it came together great. I mean, he read through most of the music,

you know, that was his first time playing with the ensemble, but everything still felt natural and, and cohesive and that's, and that's what I expected. And that's, you know, why I considered him as part of the group, because I knew he would blend and everything would work out. And, and it feels just as natural as if I was playing with Immanuel or any anybody, you know. Because my goal is just, it doesn't matter who it is, just for us to sound great together and for the ensemble to sound as best as possible. So I'm just looking at some, looking for somebody who can, who can do that.

Eugene: ([19:16](#))

Well, he certainly can. I love both Immanuel's playing and Godwin's playing.

Joel: ([19:21](#))

Yeah.

Eugene: ([19:22](#))

One of the things that caught my attention in an interview you had with Immanuel and Christian Sands was a conversation about your record dropping during a time of racial strife, with the murder of George Floyd at the forefront, you said my, my whole thing about "who are you, who are, who am I", sorry, "is to present a different narrative that's not just about the horrors of everything." You said, "I prefer to present something that's soaked in beauty, soaked in love, something that's completely drenched in a narrative, in a different narrative than the horror of being black and police brutality. We're all different people. We all have different identities and experiences, and they're all relevant. As a person of color, as a black man, I wanna present another facet. I wanna present a different narrative. It's been a conscious decision to present a narrative that defeats stereotypes." So I, I thought that was a pretty deep thing to say. And I wanted to know if you wanted to illustrate that a little bit more or go into that?

Joel: ([20:38](#))

Yeah. I mean, I, I, you know, , I feel like that was, you know, I it's pretty clear, but right. You, I, I, I, I, I just, you know, it's all about perspectives and I just wanna show, I choose to show a different perspective through my art. Um...and a lot of it is me, it's, I focus on my faith that, that I that's where I'm coming from. That's how I grew up. That's how I came from. So that's what I put in my music and, and try to, you know, show that and live that sonically and as a person. And so I just try to be an example in that, in that way, in that manner.

Eugene: ([21:25](#))

Thank you. I saw you at the 2020 Winter Jazz Fest and you were everywhere.

Joel: ([21:32](#))

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Eugene: ([21:32](#))

I remember, especially when you played in Godwin's Global Ensemble, and it was mind blowing.

Joel: ([21:39](#))

Thank you.

Eugene: ([21:40](#))

Yeah. Every gig I saw you at, you didn't read the sheet music, but you were playing complicated lines, and I'm wondering if memorizing music is your superpower.

Joel: ([21:53](#))

Oh, no, I wish, I mean, you know, Milt Jackson who was, who was, you know, who's who I modeled my vibraphone playing after, I, I, he, he memorized everything. So once I learned that I always made it a goal to memorize everything, but also it's as far, you know, it's, it's hard to be looking at the vibrabaphone and trying to play it and going back and forth, looking at music. So I try, I do try to memorize everything. And then also to a point, I, you know, just we're playing forms that are repetitive. So, you know, once I know the form and once I know the melody, I'm constantly in my mind going through it. So at some point I, I, I internalized it enough to where I don't have to look at the sheet music. And I think all those, I only took all those gigs because they were gigs I didn't have to worry about too much because I had played, played with them enough to feel, feel comfortable with it, you know?

Eugene: ([22:45](#))

And the piece that you played with the Parable Ensemble that was like over an hour long performance, and you didn't have any sheet music in front of you there either.

Joel: ([22:59](#))

. Yeah. I mean, it's easier when I wrote all the music

Eugene: ([23:02](#))

I was wondering if you had any future plans that you can share with us.

Joel: ([23:11](#))

Yeah. We'll, we'll be releasing that album will be -that ensemble- will be releasing an album with Blue Note this spring. I believe this coming April. It'll be called "The Parable of the Poet." And it'll be playing that music from, from that, from that recording. And then the Vibes will be doing some touring, I think we're trying to figure out a CD release show for the record and some, some more dates coming up, different things, different projects.

Eugene: ([23:44](#))

Are you also writing more for Good Vibes?

Joel: ([23:48](#))

Oh yeah. I . I think at this point, this performance will be all, almost a bunch of new music. That's the thing, whenever we record an album, the next gigs I'm already looking at, looking at the next few albums. So we've got a bunch of new music we've already been playing for the last half a year. .

Eugene: ([24:08](#))

Oh, cool. So we're going to hear new material at the Vermont Jazz Center on Saturday.

Joel: [\(24:13\)](#)

Yeah. A mix of, at this point, a mix of new and olds.

Eugene: [\(24:17\)](#)

mm-hmm .

Joel: [\(24:18\)](#)

But, but we've been, I just bought, brought in three new tunes Friday,

Eugene: [\(24:25\)](#)

Joel: [\(24:25\)](#)

So we'll probably read through those and figure out if we can put, if we can play them yet. It's just, you know, we, we're keen to read through things and just try new music and add to it and be able to go in and out of all these different songs and pieces and just, try to internalize it and create, create these new, every concert is a new, new opportunity for some new sonic tapestries.

Eugene: [\(24:48\)](#)

Great. I was listening to the version of "KingMaker" that you have on SoundCloud

Joel: [\(24:55\)](#)

Oh boy

Eugene: [\(24:55\)](#)

and it's just so much more aggressive than the one that you have on the album. I loved it.

Joel: [\(25:01\)](#)

Yeah. I don't even remember that one. It was pro-- yeah, the live shows end up- that's another thing- the live shows end up so much different than the albums can be. And I try to capture that with the first half of "Who Are You?" a little bit, but it's, you know, it's, the studio is a different situation. And so it's always some different capture live

Eugene: [\(25:25\)](#)

Mm-hmm , I have a side question for you. You have mentioned that you like to present a casual image so that people feel relaxed. We had a bunch of photos that we were going to use for when you were going to play here in March of 2020. We had everything ready and they included a 2019 press shoot that were beautifully constructed photos, but in a very formal way, and for this concert, you asked us to use less formal press shots. I was wondering if you could tell us about this motivation.

Joel: [\(26:02\)](#)

I , it's just long. I've been a long time advocate of being comfortable in, in just expressing myself, being able to freely express myself and how I present myself musically, how that shouldn't affect anybody's, you know, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover that sort of thing. And I just, you

know, I, I like to be comfortable in what I wear and how I present myself and, and just, you know, and be myself.

Eugene: [\(26:32\)](#)

So does that extend to the, the photo shoots, too?

Joel: [\(26:36\)](#)

Yeah. Everything the way I dress, the way that I converse and talk to people, just, I try to be natural and respectful, but, you know, do my own thing.

Eugene: [\(26:49\)](#)

I get it. I, I love Chicago. I've only been there once, but I, I got to go to a jam session that was run by Pharez Whitted and

Joel: [\(27:01\)](#)

Yeah .

Eugene: [\(27:01\)](#)

Bobby Broom was there. It's just incredible

Joel: [\(27:03\)](#)

At Andy's?

Eugene: [\(27:05\)](#)

Yeah, exactly.

Joel: [\(27:06\)](#)

Yep. Yep.

Eugene: [\(27:07\)](#)

So obviously you've been there.

Joel: [\(27:10\)](#)

Yeah. , I've been on that session with Pharez before, I played piano for it.

Eugene: [\(27:16\)](#)

So you played piano, too. I didn't know that.

Joel: [\(27:20\)](#)

Oh yeah. Oh, I do. Yeah. I play a lot of, primarily most of my playing is at the piano and at the drum set. All of my composing and practicing at home is usually on the piano or the drums, or at this point, the, you know, my partner bought me a U-Bass for Christmas a couple years ago.

Eugene: [\(27:37\)](#)

Mm-hmm

Joel: [\(27:38\)](#)

uh, or the melodica just, you know, I do so much playing outside of the vibraphone. The vibraphone playing only really happens on the gig.

Eugene: [\(27:48\)](#)

Well, Chicago is such a strong city for music and, you know, from the early days, Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, and leading up to the AACM and the Chicago Art Ensemble. So I know that this is a big question, but if you could just say how, how it influenced you as, as a young man or a young person, because you were even in, in, middle school when it started.

Joel: [\(28:18\)](#)

Yeah

Eugene: [\(28:19\)](#)

What was that Chicago influence all about?

Joel: [\(28:22\)](#)

I would, I would say the Chicago influence I got was heavily in the church. That was primarily the music that I experienced live for all of my life, from when I was born up to when I was 18 years old and, and went away to college. But, and also, you know, my parents weren't musicians, but they were big music fans, listened to a lot of R&B, soul, and Motown, you know, a lot of, a lot of different musics like that. And you know, the blues, you know, what, whatever was on the radio, the blues, hip hop, pop, soul, you know, whatever. But my school, most of my, like in introduction to jazz was in the jazz education through high school and through, through different programs in the city. So I didn't get to experience the scene until I moved away and then came back and started to play more as an adult in, in Chicago. So in a way, I'm, I've been learning about Chicago away from it and coming back and being able to meet, meet the local cats and, and, and meet, I mean, I know, I know most everybody now, but, you know, I didn't have that when I was coming up. So I've been returning to it over the years as an adult in, in learning the scene that way.

Eugene: [\(29:45\)](#)

Do you also, did you have the opportunity to connect with anybody from the Art Ensemble?

Joel: [\(29:51\)](#)

Well, Nicole Mitchell was actually-Nicole Mitchell was actually my I went to a brand new public arts high school in Chicago. The first, it was the first public arts high school, ChiArts, Chicago High School for the Arts, and Nicole Mitchell was my first two years, I believe she was the head of jazz there. So she was, she was my first introduction to the Art Ensemble or to, to what is quote unquote, the Avant Garde in general, any, any, just a freer thinking in, in terms of music in general, she was an introduction to that. And then from there, I mean, my, I think my freshman year that's when I met Makaya McCraven, he was a substitute teacher, one class for, for a percussion class. And I, I don't think I saw him again until we were playing a gig together years later.

Eugene: [\(30:42\)](#)

So that's a great story. So I'll let you get going. I just wanted to, before you leave, tell if you could tell us a little bit about what you're thinking about performing, I know you already said you're going to do some new material and some old material, if you could just give us a little summary of what, what you're thinking about doing for the concert, this coming Saturday.

Joel: ([31:06](#))

Yeah. Yeah, it'll be a mix of some new and old things. I guess this, the music I've been exploring now is heavily blues and ballads based, but you know, just whatever our interpretation of that is and how that comes across. So, you know, dealing with dealing with those ideas with both new and old music and interpreting that and trying to play, play together the whole time as a, as a, as organized and as solidly a unit as possible. So, you know, that's what, that's what we'll be trying to do.

Eugene: ([31:47](#))

Sounds great. Well, thank you so much, Joel Ross, it's been a pleasure speaking with you. I really appreciate your taking the time to call us on WVEW. Thank you very much for your time, and we really look forward to hearing you next Saturday.

Joel: ([32:00](#))

Thank you. I'm looking forward to it.