

KPLU Radio Host Abe Beeson Sets the Tone for Evening Jazz

BY TODD MATTHEWS

The first thing that local radio host Abe Beeson wants you to know about his line of work is this: you're going to screw up. You will have moments of dead air. You will incorrectly announce song titles, mispronounce the names of artists, and confuse the personnel for specific albums and recordings.

"I remember some of the early shows where I would mispronounce a name," recalls Beeson, who hosts the Evening Jazz program on KPLU-FM 88.5, co-hosts the Audioasis program on KEXP-FM 90.3, and has worked in radio in the Pacific Northwest for more than 15 years. "Or I would tell listeners that an artist was still alive and just had a birthday when, in fact, they had died a few years earlier. These were just real humility lessons on the air. But there was no other way to learn. I tell this to everyone who wants to get into radio. Realize you are going to make mistakes almost every time you turn the microphone on. Just realize that and go with it."

After awhile, says Beeson, mistakes will drop off, and the on-air comfort level will increase. "I feel like radio is kind of like flying a plane," he adds. "You just need to get in a lot of hours before you're really good at it."

If that's true, then Beeson has earned his stripes. For jazz audiences in the Pacific Northwest (and worldwide on the Internet) who tune into KPLU weekdays between 7:30 pm and midnight, Beeson is the on-air host who combines classic jazz ballads with a dose of contemporary and slightly upbeat tunes to create a style that is uniquely Evening Jazz. For local rock-and-roll audiences who tune into Audioasis on Saturdays between 6pm and 9pm, Beeson is one of four co-hosts who seeks out and broadcasts hometown rock-and-roll bands.

The dual musical interests serve important purposes for Beeson: sharing the types of music he likes with listeners, while supporting and promoting local musicians.

"I'm so impressed by musicians," he says. "It's magical to be able to write songs." Though he played drums in high school and received a music scholarship to study percussion, Beeson says he wasn't disciplined enough to stick with lessons. Instead, he decided to promote music instead of perform it. "I was such a fan of the other bands, I never got into my mind that I was ever going to be as good as my favorite drum-



ABE VS. ABE: KPLU and KEXP radio host Abe Beeson takes one on the chin for local music. (PHOTO BY WILLIAM ANTHONY)

mer," he says. "It seemed to me that the thing to do was to try and promote other bands and bring them a little bit of success. It made a lot more sense career-wise because I could make a living doing that. And it felt like I was still a little part of that scene—not necessarily as a musician, but helping out musicians because I was so impressed by what they were doing."

That interest in music traces back to his parents, a free-spirited couple who met in the Puget Sound region (his father, Ed, was born and raised in Ballard; his mother, Donna, in Lakewood, near Tacoma) and went to college at Central Washington University in Ellensburg—where Abe was born. His parents dropped out of college and moved to West Seattle, where Ed started out in the restaurant business. The Beesons eventually moved to Duvall, Washington when Abe was 8 years old, and opened the Silver Spoon restaurant. Ed booked folk musicians to perform at the restaurant. Music was a regular facet of the Beeson household. "My parents played music all the time while I was growing up," he recalls. "It was mostly rock-and-roll: The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. A little bit of jazz would trickle in there, too. For the most part, it was a pretty normal Baby Boomer parents, rock-and-roll upbringing."

Beeson developed an interest in punk rock as a teenager. His criteria for selecting albums

was strange: the more unusual the cover illustrations, the more appealing the albums. "I would go to the record store all the time, look for the craziest album covers I could find, and hope for the best," he explains. "I had some really weird albums that I never would have bought in the first place, if it weren't for the album covers. My interest was just always finding something different that other people weren't hearing, and making them my own in a way."

Later on, that strategy paid off. As Beeson continued to explore somewhat strange and marginalized music, he developed an appreciation for the various genres. He opened his mind to largely unknown and less appreciated musicians, which in turn broadened his musical palette and furthered his interest in music.

Simply put, music became Beeson's passion.

In 1988, he started college at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU) and volunteered at the student radio station, where he hosted a local music show just as the Pacific Northwest's so-called "grunge scene" was about to explode. A year later, he was looking for a paid position on-campus and was hired as a production assistant at the university's radio station—KPLU 88.5 FM. "That was so stressful and hair-raising and exciting," he says. "I learned so much about production: splicing reel-to-reel tapes with razor blades

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and producing onto carts. This was the old days, before everything was digital. I really got a good taste of radio working in the news department.”

A few years later, he was offered a job as a board operator. He worked Fridays from midnight until 7am the following morning, repeating station identification and weather announcements at the top of each hour.

Six months later, Beeson hosted his first radio show on Christmas Day 1990. “They pretty much gave me the play list with mostly Christmas jazz,” he says. “There wasn’t a lot of programming on my end, and I didn’t really say much when I got on the air. I just kept it real basic: *That was Miles Davis and here’s Dave Brubeck*. I didn’t screw up, nobody was disappointed, and there was no dead air.”

Beeson was hooked on radio.

THE FOLLOWING YEARS were tough for Beeson. Though he graduated from PLU with a Bachelor’s degree in Communications and found plenty of opportunities to volunteer at radio stations, paid positions were rare. He found piecemeal work at KPLU working overnight shifts from midnight until 4am. Not really knowing much about jazz at the time, he went into the station’s record library and started looking for strange album covers. “I would go in there, look for the names I knew, and think, ‘This Ornette Coleman album cover looks pretty cool,’” he recalls. “It was three o’clock in the morning, and I would play this really long Coleman piece and wait for the phone to ring. Some people would call and say, ‘I can’t stand this. I’m never going to listen again.’ But every once in awhile I would get a call from someone saying, ‘Wow, that’s really amazing. Thanks for being out there.’ I had a really good opportunity in those days to experiment and listen to music I otherwise wouldn’t have listened to—and just really get my radio legs.”

But the job at KPLU didn’t pay enough to make a living. In 1993, he found full-time work in the mailroom of a downtown Seattle law firm. Meanwhile, his cousin, Gregg Fergel, was working at The Backstage in Ballard (a club owned by Beeson’s dad, now closed) and had embarked on a joint project with Jack Straw Productions and KCMU to create a program called the Live Room to showcase local music. “They needed to find a DJ that would do it for free and could be counted on to do it every Saturday night,” Beeson explains. “My cousin knew that I was working radio. He gave me a call and asked if I was interested—not knowing at all what I was getting into. That became a big part of my radio

life, doing that show.” During a typical one-hour show, Beeson would invite a band into the studio and combine live performances and interviews.

By 1995, Beeson was hosting three overnight shifts per week at KPLU, the Live Room on Saturdays at KCMU, and working full-time at the law firm. He decided to scale back his work and quit KPLU. He continued to host the Live Room, which aired for nine years. It was an experience he proudly recalls. “Doing the Live Room all those years, I was so impressed,” he says. “[The people who booked the show] brought in so many great bands. I was such a sucker for live music. To see these musicians so passionate about what they were doing—I was just so enthralled and impressed each and every time. Whether or not they became successful at what they were doing, I really respected these people.”

Beeson’s departure from KPLU didn’t last long. By the mid- to late-1990s, the station was hiring Beeson on an on-call basis—mostly when another radio host was sick or on vacation. “That was kind of my key to success in radio: never say no to any shift,” he says. “If they had someone who couldn’t work the overnight, they would call me. If they had someone who couldn’t work the evening show, they would call me. I was on-call to do anything.” He was eventually hired for the station’s Afternoon Jazz Matinee—a show that aired from 10am to 1pm on Saturdays. He started to collect a nice following of jazz listeners and was recognized as a regular host on the station. In 1998, Beeson was hired full-time to host the Evening Jazz program. “I quit my day job, which was pretty exciting,” he says. “After nine years of paying my dues, I was finally able to make a living in radio.”

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Abe Beeson’s Perfect Radio Rotation

THELONIOUS MONK

“Thelonious Monk is my all-time favorite guy. His solo albums are my favorites: *Alone in San Francisco* and *Solo Monk*. Any of his albums would be near the top.”

DAVE BRUBECK

“I love *Time Out* by Dave Brubeck. It’s probably a pretty cliché answer, but it just seems so magical for me to hear him go into a recording studio and mess with time signatures. And everybody was saying the group was never going to be able to pull it off. For them to do that, and from the beginning to the end of the album, it’s catchy as hell. All those songs stick in your head. How did they do that? They go from 3/4 to 4/4 to 3/4—but it makes sense. That album is a real magical album for me.”

ORNETTE COLEMAN

“*The Ornette Coleman Trio at the Golden Circle* was one of the first weird albums I got into. That’s a real favorite of mine, just for its spontaneity and energy. He did three records, and there was a saxophone, bass, drums—and I think he also might have had a trumpet or violin in there.”

NAT KING COLE

“Nat King Cole’s *After Midnight Sessions*. Fantastic! Nat King Cole is one of those guys that a lot of people think is a little bit schmaltzy and silly. But, man, that album is dynamite. His piano playing is great, all the solos are great, and he makes a lot of those old songs really work.”

HOWARD MCGHEE

“He’s kind of a lesser-known trumpet player. He did some side work with Johnny Hartman on an album that’s really great. He did an album called *Dusty Blue* that has some really interesting sextet stuff. He’s kind of got one of those Miles Davis muted trumpet sounds. But he always made it sound real happy and melodic and catchy. I like him a lot.”

SARAH VAUGHAN

“She’s one of my favorites. *After Hours* with Mundell Lowe and George Duvivier. Just guitar and bass. Oh, my God! I say this on the air sometimes, but it seems like she’s showing off. What a show off! I think she was kind of a precursor to a lot of what the pop singers of today are doing, that kind of in a way started with Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. Just kind of the vocal gymnastics that they do. Anytime you hear the national anthem and see people doing that—a lot of that started with Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald. Nobody can beat them. Why even mess with that? Just sing it straight. You’re not going to do it like Sarah Vaughan did.”

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only way I have of expressing myself. That's how I communicate what I need to communicate. I need to have people listening. It's nice to sit around the house and play my guitar. But when you're playing for people, that's what I love. I still don't know that there is anything describable in what I'm trying to say. I feel lucky to be able to play music in front of people, but it can seem so selfish. I'm doing it for myself, but I need people there. It doesn't make any sense if the people are not listening. But I also know that you cannot try to figure out what people want to hear. All I can do is what I want to do. I just put it out there and hope that they are willing to listen. I think musicians get into trouble when they try to figure out what someone else is going to like, which can turn into a disaster.

EARSHOT: What do you envision for the future of jazz—and for yourself, personally?

FRISELL: I can get kind of bummed out with everything getting computerized and compartmentalized. Everything's getting squeezed out and I get discouraged. But then I'm actually pretty optimistic. There is always somebody doing something interesting and this kind of music has always been a little bit underground. You have to look around for it a little bit, but I think that's just part of the deal. You start to think it's not there. You can get discouraged. But then if you look, there is someone in some basement figuring something out, trying to do something. I think the future is going to be fine.

Lloyd Peterson is the author of the book, The Mystery of Sound: Today's Innovative Voices in Jazz, Improvisation and the Avant-garde Discuss Diversity and the Creative Spirit, to be published by Scarecrow Press this fall. This interview was excerpted from that book.

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TODAY, BEESON SPLITS his time between KPLU's Evening Jazz program and KEXP, where he co-hosts Audioasis—a varied showcase of Pacific Northwest music that features live performances and interviews. Though it might seem that there isn't a connection between the two styles of music, Beeson has found that jazz and rock actually have quite a few similarities. "That's the part I really love about Audioasis," he explains. "A punk band comes in and the bass player says, 'Do you work at KPLU, too? I listen to that show all the time. I'm a big Miles Davis fan.' To see these young musicians—musicians that you wouldn't in a million years pick out of a line-up as a jazz fan—say they listen to KPLU. For me, that's really satisfying."

The Evening Jazz gig allows Beeson to learn, explore and develop an appreciation for jazz. "I still feel this to this day that I'm way too young to be a jazz DJ," says the 35-year-old Beeson. "I wasn't old enough to see Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis, and all those greats. In a lot of ways, I missed out on the heyday of jazz."

Still, he knows enough to guide listeners through important performers and recordings—and even provide some insight into the music.

"What KPLU and the show can do is get people educated enough about the basic core of jazz so that they'll know enough to go out and

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look for [other recordings]," he explains. "Someone might say, 'I know Brad Mehldau. I've heard him and his trio on KPLU. Here he is playing with Kurt Rosenwinkel. I wonder if he's good. Maybe I'll try that out.' That's what I think we hope to do. That's what I hope to do at KPLU—give people enough of a base that they'll start taking some chances."

Beeson hopes his jazz show provides a relaxing and reflective resource for listeners. "For Evening Jazz, there are stragglers coming home from work who want to unwind," he adds. "There are people at home cooking dinner, reading a book, taking a bath, or relaxing. It's really setting a mood to unwind and decompress after a tough day. But also, in the last couple years, we've tried to bring the energy up a little bit. We're not going to play 'Sing! Sing! Sing!' But we *are* going to try and bring a little bit more swinging stuff into the mix to keep the energy up and showcase a little bit more music. It gives a little bit more depth to the ballads when you play them after a slightly more mid-tempo tune. It's like, 'Wow, OK, I feel the mood of this ballad. It's a little bit more intense.' Rather than when you are just running them altogether."

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sat/june 12
mia nicholson
Hot, sultry jazz vocals 7:30pm

mon/june 13
miguel zenon 4tet
Drebbel post-venice septet 7:30pm

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