

An Interview with Jay Beckenstein
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Interviewed by Harvey Cline

After 25 discs and 30 years on the road, one of the hardest working men in jazz sat down with SmoothViews recently. Jay Beckenstein of Spyro Gyra discusses his new disc, ***Wrapped In A Dream***, and the group approach to the release. He shares his love for the great outdoors, and the sadness of leaving his "home studio" of many years. Jay has a deep appreciation for the fan base as well as his best friends that he's been lucky enough to work with during that time...

SmoothViews (SV): Congratulations on the new disc, Wrapped in a Dream. This is the 25th one for you, I believe.

Jay Beckenstein (JB): Yeah, twenty-five... if you don't count the collections and things like that.

SV: I've got to say that it sounds like you're the hardest working artist in smooth jazz today considering your release schedules and tours.

JB: Well, we're one of them and we've certainly been blessed with longevity. It's amazing how long it's lasted and, frankly, how fresh it remains for us.

SV: It seems like you continue to reinvent yourselves and the next disc is better than the last.

JB: We try. We try not to repeat ourselves. But after twenty-five CDs, that's getting to be a tall order.

SV: The release date is February 28th. I've been listening to it this week and it seems to be a mixed bag of several artists from the group and a couple from Chuck Loeb. How did you choose the songs for the disc?

JB: Well first of all, everybody in the band has an opportunity to write. It gets filtered through me. I get to hear two or three things that everybody submits. That's one of the reasons that Spyro Gyra records in general are kind of eclectic and bounce around the place, because each one of us... although there's a lot of overlapping territory... each one of us have a slightly different take on it. Then my stuff personally, I'm just trying my hardest to be inventive at this point to produce things I haven't done before, take approaches I haven't taken before. And so I think my stuff tends to be rather diverse. No matter what style we're playing in. and we play in a lot of different styles on this record, the individual voices unify it. I sound like myself no matter what I'm doing. And that's definitely the case for Julio, Scott, and Tom as well. It's a nice thing that we're able to play. There are cuts on the record that are clearly coming from the smooth jazz direction. There's a cut on there called "Wrapped In A Dream" that's a straight-ahead thing. There's world music with "Impressions of Madrid." There's blues-

oriented stuff like Julio's tune and Scott's tune is very, very traditional jazz ("The Voodoo Youdoo"). So it's really all over the place.

SV: I've noticed that. It's like each song is so different after the other one.

JB: Yeah, and I like it that way. As a musician it makes it much more interesting to play a variety of music.

SV: You were talking about the guys from the band. What is it like to have so many accomplished musicians who add so much to the mix?

JB: A big relief. That's another reason, even though we've done 25 CDs, no one feels particularly burned out because the creativity of the band is a shared thing. It really is true some people maybe 20 years ago weren't great writers, but we've all had our opportunity to hone our craft. At this point... Ludwig Alfonzo, our drummer, is kind of brand new to it, so I wouldn't put him in the same boat... but the four of us Scott, Tom, Julio and I have had a lot of opportunities to become better and better writers. I really think there are four strong voices there. Then add on to that Chuck's contribution and you've got a lot of good writers.

SV: How did Chuck (Loeb) come into the mix this time?

JB: Ever since I did my solo record about four years ago when I used Chuck as a producer. I'm usually the producer of the Spyro thing, so when I did that solo thing I was trying hard to get away from the Spyro Gyra sound. Then I used Chuck, Chieli Minucci and Jason Miles to kind of take over some of the production things and send it in slightly different directions. It was all great, and I made three very, very close friends during that process. I really came away from that feeling that Chuck had a marvelous ability to write songs that the radio liked, that definitely fell into the smooth jazz world. But there was nothing about them that was overly sweet or overly simplistic. They had a really nice sophistication to them. It was like bittersweet chocolate. Over the last few records, I've invited Chuck into the mix knowing that he was going to deliver tunes that were going to be really, really sophisticated.

SV: The opener, which is called "Spyro Time," is a funky little tune that kicks the album off to a great start. Do you see this one being around awhile because of the title?

JB: "Spyro Time" refers to most bands when you tell them to meet in the lobby at 8:00, they're going to show up at 8:10. For some reason, Spyro Gyra shows up in the lobby at 10 minutes before 8:00 and we call that Spyro time. We're always early. It's just a joke. When someone shows up on time, we remind them that the band operates on "Spyro time." So Julio just thought it was a cool title for his tune. That's very much a Julio Fernandez tune. Julio comes from a Cuban background, so he has a great sense of Latin music and traditional Cuban music. He grew up in Hoboken, New York and because of that he's just one very funky guy. That tune is pure Julio. It's upbeat, it's positive and it's funky.

SV: You talked about a song that is called "Impressions of Madrid/Toledo" a little while ago... two of your compositions that flow into each other, yet they vary in style. Talk about those for just a minute and what's the background on them.

JB: First of all, I should clarify because I've been getting this from a number of people who say, "What's your connection to Toledo, Ohio?" and it's not [Ohio]. It's Toledo, Spain. The two tunes together are kind of a suite inspired by a number of great trips I've made to Spain over the last few years. Madrid and Toledo happen to be towns that are very close to each other. I have friends in Madrid, so whenever I'm there we take a trip to Toledo. So I tried to capture the travelogue thing in those two tunes. Particularly "Impressions of Madrid." I really tried to do something that had a gypsy-ish and illusion feel like people sitting around and doing the clapping thing like they do in Spain.

SV: Those do flow into each other very well. There is some great saw work on "After the Storm." Is that on your set list to play live?

JB: Not yet. Actually we have not gone into rehearsal for the new album yet. We found that if we do it too early we get tired of it too quickly. So we try not to be doing anything off the new record until the record is out.

SV: That's one of my favorites from the disc. I like that one a lot. The beginning of it sounds like you're sitting out on the front porch on a summer evening.

JB: Yeah, that's the other side of Julio. It's very southern, actually. It's not the front porch to me, it's sitting by the river and you can hear the insects going. In fact, I have a house in the country and we have our recording studio there and all those insects were in my back yard.

SV: You close with "Woggitybop." Tell us a little bit about that one and who Claire is.

JB: Well, Claire is my 18-year-old daughter. She went off to college this year. Her nickname is "Woogy" or "Woogity." It was my "sending my child off into the world" song. I have two more, so I'll be doing it again.

SV: Do you have a favorite on the disc yet?

JB: Well, I kind of like "Wrapped In A Dream." My original love of jazz was from the 50's... that's the age I am. My great hero of that period of time was Miles Davis. I've never stopped loving that kind of 1950's jazz esthetic. On "Wrapped In A Dream," I went back to my earliest days of listening to music. It was a 100% live performance that we set up. It was the first take. There was a very beautiful organic magic to the way the whole thing came out. It was really terrific interplay between the musicians. You can really hear us talking to each other. I think that's one of the really great things about jazz and one of the great things about jazz played by a band that's been together as long as we have. There's a great deal of responsiveness between the

musicians and that tune really was a very, very lovely conversation between the players in the band.

SV: So basically it came from the heart of everybody?

JB: Yea, and off the cuff.

SV: Did you have the title of the disc yet?

JB: No, no, no. Actually, we did have the title of the disc and my tune did not have a title, so I grabbed it. I thought it was appropriate.

SV: Seems like you're using younger talent on this one. How did that work out for you?

JB: Great. Particularly Josh Dion. Josh plays drums on a lot of the cuts on this record and he is a fire brand. He's got terrific energy and brought a lot of enthusiasm to the project. That was a lot of fun playing with him. Youth is a good thing. The combination of youth and "old," or people that are seasoned, is really cool. We're good for youth, and youth is good for us.

SV: Yes, they serve each other. You seem to release a new disc almost every year. How in the world do you continually do that year in and year out?

JB: Because it's a group effort. If any one of us had to do that, we would get very tired. I think it would be very repetitive, and we'd be saying the same thing over and over again. But because there is so much talent from the band, it gets spread around and keeps it fresh for all of us.

SV: I notice you play alto, tenor and soprano quite a bit. Which one is your favorite?

JB: Wow, that's a good question. Sometimes I think I'm best on soprano, so that might be my favorite. Sometimes I wish I was more of an accomplished tenor player, because I do love the richness of the tenor sax. But that's kind of the instrument I've played least in my life and maybe I feel least confident.

SV: Seems like every time I've seen you live, you just get into the soprano more and more.

JB: For some reason I'm just very comfortable on it, although these days it's evening out. I'm playing a lot more tenor on records. Sometimes I like the horn I've been playing the least because it's kind of new. If I've been playing a lot of soprano, then I get a kick out of playing tenor.

SV: That's understandable. You mentioned your studio, Bear Tracks Studio, a few minutes ago which is an old home turned into a studio. You recorded there for the last time now, any thoughts on that?

JB: Well, it's not just a recording studio; it's the home I've raised three children in. I'm going to miss it a lot. At least half the place was dedicated to a recording facility and the world is changing. Big studios are very hard to sustain as businesses. Modern digital recording is making it easier and easier

for people to work in their living rooms instead of the big studio. The time has come to move on. My kids are leaving home, and the studio is becoming a financial burden, so onward and upward. I'm sure we're going to find nice environments to record in. I never want to lose that idea of all of us playing simultaneous. It's something that a band that's been together for 25 years; that's one of the things you develop that ability to really improvise with each other. Mailing tracks back and forth is fun and it's nice, but it's a little like making music with an erector set. I just love doing it the real organic way. No matter what the environment we find for recording, it's going to have to involve us being able to set up all together and play in real time. The guys in the band are great at enhancing each other's material. We've all come to trust each other so much there's none of this, "Hey, play what I wrote." We're really open-minded. It's benefited all of us and everybody's really generous. I've been in recording situations where somebody came up with a good idea and the next thing you know, there's some argument in the lounge about, "Well, I wrote part of your tune now." There's absolutely none of that in this band. Everybody's happy to contribute to each other's material without any thoughts of ego or ownership. It's a very conducive to your material getting better than what you brought.

SV: It's sort of nice when age seems to do that to you, isn't it?

JB: (laughs) We're like a five-way old married couple in some ways... in the sense now that everybody in the band knows everybody's quirks. We know what everybody's bad day is like. There's an awful lot of friendship and affection in it at this point. I know that if anything bad happened to me the guys in the band would be there for me and vice versa. It's a lovely thing to be able to work with people who you respect and you have a professional relationship with, but at the same time you go, "These are truly my friends."

SV: That's great. "Morning Dance" came out back in 1979 and every group always has one signature song. Has this been a blessing or a curse for you?

JB: (laughs) Well, certainly it's been a blessing in the sense that the record was a platinum record and it produced us too. An awful lot of people, and many of which are still buying our CDs and coming to our shows, sure that's been a blessing. On the other hand, I find myself very grateful that we're not a band that had six or seven hits that when you go do a show, the audience expects you to play those six or seven hits over and over again. I like to believe, whether it's true or not, that the best music we're making is the music we're making now. If I were out there just playing the same bunch of tunes all the time, that wouldn't be the case. We'd simply be a display case for the past. So I'm glad we had the hit we did.

SV: That's great. What are you doing when you're not being a musician?

JB: At the top of the list, I'm a dad. I'm somebody who loves the outdoors. I love hiking. I love camping. I like horseback riding, fishing and anything that puts me in the woods in front of a fire is for me. I also like painting and

gardening and a bunch of other things. First and foremost, I like hiking up and down mountains, walking through the woods and spending my time in the outdoors.

SV: It sort of refreshes your batteries?

JB: You know I was born in New York. I grew up in the suburbs and the woods... when I finally discovered them... were so magical. I kind of like being alone. I love the quiet of it. I love the smell of it. I was obviously some kind of a woodland elf in my past life. I like bundling up and putting the snow shoes on. I just like it out there.

SV: You just got back from Seattle and Florida. Do you have a comprehensive tour schedule lined up for spring or summer yet?

JB: It's falling into place now. We have a week in Japan. We have a number of interesting dates with the military. We're playing Annapolis and Norfolk Naval Air Station. We have a concert this weekend with the Air Force Orchestra. At this point the work for the late spring and summer are just firming up.

SV: We hope to see you on the road this summer. Is there anything you'd like to tell our readers in closing?

JB: We get asked a lot why the band has managed to last 30 years and I'd just like to say the people are still buying our CDs and still coming to our shows. We've lasted 30 years because people have stayed interested and we love what we do and we are deeply grateful to everybody who has stayed interested in us, because that's the reason we get to do what we do. So, thanks!

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