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D'RIVERA, RUBALCABA, PRIETO,  
VIRELLES & MORE ON LEARNING  
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**SCHOOLS &  
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A SWINGING SYMBIOSIS

**PITT'S  
NATHAN  
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REFLECTS ON HIS  
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**MATT  
WILSON**

TALKS MENTORSHIP, ENTERTAINMENT & IMAGINATION



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# Different DRUMMER

AS KIND AS HE IS SKILLED, **MATT WILSON** REDEFINES  
JAZZ PEDAGOGY WITH AN EMPHASIS ON MENTORSHIP,  
PERFORMANCE CHOPS AND UNINHIBITED CREATIVITY

By Andrew Gilbert



Wilson performs at the 2013 edition of Jazz Camp WEST, where he was artist-in-residence

ROSAURA SANDOVAL

Matt Wilson might be jazz's most unlikely revolutionary. Famously affable, the drummer is one of the music's most approachable stars, and a quarter-century in Boston and New York City hasn't worn down his ingenuous Midwestern mien. But make no mistake, Wilson is looking to open up another front in the endless debate about the efficacy of the jazz-education industrial complex. Rather than steer aspiring jazz musicians only to four-year institutions, he asks, why not create paths for young players to work directly with veteran artists?

At a time when university students are burdened by more debt than ever before, this is a conversation worth having, and Wilson isn't merely posing rhetorical questions. Working with his manager, the gifted Canadian-born vocalist Amy Cervini, Wilson is launching Very Inspiring Teaching Artists, or VITA, a confederacy of top-shelf players who are similarly committed to passing on jazz as an oral tradition. The project is very much a work in progress, but he's enlisted an impressive multigenerational array of co-conspirators, including Terell Stafford, Ray Anderson, Ron Miles, Jane Ira Bloom, Myra Melford, Mary Halvorson and Curtis Fowlkes. Wilson is well placed to lead this particular charge, as a player admired for his exuberant musicality and gift for elevating just about

any ensemble, whether leading the rough-and-tumble Matt Wilson Quartet and his more melodically driven Arts & Crafts combo, or working as a sideman in any number of bands.

In a recent conversation at JazzCamp West, where Wilson served as artist-in-residence for a week in June, he talked about his experiences as a student and as a teacher, and about the necessity of breaking down self-defeating customs that separate jazz musicians from their audiences. Anything but a bomb thrower, he's by inclination a builder who wants to foster alternative routes for aspiring young musicians. "I'm not trying to make anybody angry, that's not the point," says Wilson, 50, his thoughts pouring out in characteristic double-time. "I'm not that kind of person. I'm not confrontational. Look at what Barry Harris created. Why can't we have more of that? Why does it have to be something where you end up with a piece of paper, something that's accredited? We can have that too, but we can have these alternative routes. ... All these jazz programs are great. I just want to say, 'What can we also offer?' I'd like to see if I could help bring back mentoring as an alternative to the collegiate way. Say to somebody, 'Here's some people I think it would be really great to hang out with.' You pay them, get to hang out with them, be around them."

Wilson also notes that teenagers and 20-somethings aren't the only ones who can benefit from consorting with veteran masters. More than a generation after the wholesale collapse of jazz's apprenticeship system, even players who are well established "have been hiring older musicians and creating their own apprenticeships," Wilson says. "Ethan Iverson working with Tootie Heath and Billy Hart. Or Bill McHenry using [Andrew] Cyrille, or any number of people. It's like, maybe I didn't get a chance to go through that thing, so I'll get it this way. Treat these guys with a lot of respect and learn, but at the same time really get to play music with them and be around them."

Ultimately, however, Wilson's crusade isn't directed against four-year music programs. (One reason is that he's often found himself situated comfortably inside those programs, most recently as a faculty member at Sarah Lawrence.) And he's certainly not the first or only player to argue for the importance of jazz options outside of higher education. He wants to save jazz from the conventions that push away people who might otherwise find delight in the music. In much the same way he believes that it's imperative for younger musicians to create meaningful bonds with older players, he sees jazz musicians cutting themselves off from audiences by accepting today's performance practices as they find them. His advice can sound anodyne ("Be nice! Be happy! Be grateful! Be!") Wilson writes in a handout—see sidebar), but the mission of VITA is to make sure young musicians think about all of the possibilities when it comes to performing.

Already animated, Wilson gets positively

▼ Let There Be Jazz: Wilson leads a workshop at Jazz Port Townsend in July



passionate on the subject, his eyes lighting up as he rattles off ideas for breaking out of the jazz-gig rut: "Don't play in the auditorium, play in the lunchroom! Play at a farm. Bring the music to people in different sorts of ways. We all like to see things in alternative places. Collaborate with local people more. Find out who's around in your local scene and use them: a blues guitar player, great rock players. Collaboration is such a big thing right now, particularly interdisciplinary, but in colleges a lot of time it's really separate."

On a related note, Wilson wants to ensure that upcoming players "don't think of entertainment as a bad word." He harkens back to a time when jazz was dominated by big personalities, and not

Boston, which meant I was heading down to New York all the time, and I heard Elvin at the Vanguard and Philly Joe at the Lush Life in the same night! I heard Airtio and Terri Lyne Carrington and I heard Billy Higgins for the first time. I went out and bought a cymbal with rivets the very next day."

Wilson displayed a gift for teaching early on, and a few years after he moved to New York in 1992 he started taking students. One of his first was Tomas Fujiwara, who had grown up in Boston studying with legendary drum teacher Alan Dawson. Shortly after enrolling at the New School, Fujiwara went to see Dewey Redman at a duo concert in a Brooklyn loft and was thunderstruck by the

## WILSON WANTS TO ENSURE THAT UPCOMING PLAYERS "DON'T THINK OF ENTERTAINMENT AS A BAD WORD."

necessarily all life-of-the-party extroverts. "Joe Lovano and I talk about this all the time, about jazz's great characters," he explains. "Dizzy was a character. Monk was a character. Louie Bellson. We could list them all day. There were all kinds of characters, and they had personalities."

...  
HAILING FROM A FAMILY OF STORYTELLERS AND BIG personalities, Wilson found an ideal mentor as an undergraduate at Wichita State, where he encountered J.C. Combs, an innovative educator whose idea-a-minute pedagogy fit Wilson's needs perfectly. Rather than focusing on Wilson's technique, Combs steered him toward drummers who could feed his expanding musical consciousness, encouraging him to apply for an NEA apprenticeship grant to study with Ed Soph, which brought Wilson to Boston in the summer of 1984. "The great thing about J.C. Combs, the sign of a great teacher, is that if they don't know what to do they'll find somebody who does," Wilson says. "Too often people will either put something down if they don't understand it, or try to fake it. If you don't know what to do, you find somebody who does. So J.C. brought a lot of people in, and he'd figure out a way to pay for it. He loved that challenge. He'd have lunch with an ophthalmologist or something, and say, 'I have a chance to bring in this guy Jeff Hamilton, and I need this kind of money,' and he'd write J.C. a check."

Hamilton, who first met Combs when they happened to sit next to each other on a flight, ended up being one of Wilson's important mentors, the person who clued him in that if he aspired to a particular drum chair the best path was to immerse himself in the group's music. (This led Wilson to memorize a large swath of the Phil Woods Quintet book featuring Tom Harrell.) But Wilson has forged bonds with older artists long after establishing himself as a first-call cat.

"Now I consider Billy Hart a mentor, even if it's just a few words here or there," Wilson says. "Cyrille was important. I took one lesson with him and he told me I should move to New York. I was in Boston at the time and I was thinking about it, and then [bassist] Cecil McBee was very important for that transition. But as far as really learning how to learn, it was Ed Soph. I got this NEA grant to study with him, and I'll say to the American taxpayer that the \$2,600 I got in 1984 was a pretty damn good investment. It has more than paid for itself in what I've paid in taxes and what I've given back to the country in other ways. I spent that summer in

saxophonist's young drummer. "Matt just floored me," Fujiwara says. "He was so musical and tasteful and dynamic and interactive. It was one of the most memorable performances I'd ever heard. I hadn't heard of Matt before, but I couldn't get that concert and his playing out of my head."

In those pre-Internet days, Fujiwara had little idea of how to track Wilson down, so he found the phone number of the loft and left a message on the answering machine a week or so after the concert. Within a day or two Wilson called him back, and Fujiwara signed up for lessons. As Fujiwara recalls, Wilson concentrated more on how to think about playing than on mechanics. He recommended Stephen Nachmanovitch's book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (which Fujiwara read and valued).

"We talked very little about single-stroke rolls," Fujiwara says. "I'd go to his gigs with Dewey. He would have me play a lot more than he would. Then we would talk about it afterwards, concepts and strategies for improvising, creating different moods. The way he talked about that stuff was informative. He didn't say, 'This is how I do it.' He gave me broader concepts so I could figure out my own solutions to these puzzles. He gave me this information in a specific enough way that it wasn't too esoteric and in the clouds, but broad enough that I could make my own thing with it."

As the father of four, including triplet boys, Wilson always seems comfortable with meeting young musicians where they're at. Perhaps more important, he's honed various tactics and games that knock down the self-consciousness and self-criticism that so often sabotages creative progress. His playful approach to teaching works because it's inextricably tied to his musical sensibility.

...  
WILSON'S GIFT FOR CONNECTING WITH BUDDING players is one of the things that attracted the attention of bassist John Clayton, who has hired the drummer repeatedly for the Centrum Jazz Workshop in Port Townsend, Wash. "He is the Pied Piper of jazz education," Clayton says. "He knows how to draw everyone in, how to tap everyone's musicality. It doesn't matter what you play, he'll get you to play more. When he's doing a clinic, I'm the guy in the front row because I learn so much from him every time I watch him work with people. He exemplifies being a jazz musician and teaching this aspect of jazz. He always dares, and he's not shy about putting on a Superman cape if it helps. I think he's magic."



Clayton isn't kidding about the cape. Wilson has created a character he calls "the Allowor," a superhero endowed with the power to permit musicians to try anything on their instrument, to allow in the sounds everyone else is making and respond in kind. Keyboardist Gary Versace, a charter member of VITA, has taught dozens of clinics and workshops with Wilson while touring with the drummer's Arts & Crafts. He spent eight years as a tenured associate professor in the University of Oregon's jazz studies department before moving to New York, and he sees the value of college jazz programs, particularly for 18- and 19-years-olds who might be looking for structure and similarly music-obsessed peers. But he's a true believer in Wilson's mission, having witnessed his success tacking against prevailing educational strategies to help reorient young minds toward a bigger musical picture. "What's unique is that he finds a way, no matter what your age, to work with what you have rather than to impose a set of restrictions and things you need to accomplish," Versace says. "So much of the education world is about giving people more stuff, more toys. I did this too. You want someone to get better, and you hear what they can't do."

Versace's favorite Wilson gambit involves encouraging young musicians to see their instruments with new eyes. If he sees players bogged down, he asks them to think like a space alien who has just landed on Earth and is faced with a large brass tube, or a cylinder covered with a membrane, or a large hollow wooden device with several strings. It's not that Wilson works miracles, Versace says, it's that he helps students find the musicality that can so easily get lost, like at a clinic in the Midwest where a high school band was straining to pull a piece together. "Their director had given them something I feel was too hard for them, or it could have just been a bad day, but they weren't playing the way they would like to, and you could see the frustration," Versace says. "That's when Matt brought out the alien thing. He said, 'Turn your music over. We're going to

create a free-jazz piece. Don't worry about notes on the page. Approach your instrument like you've never seen it before. Go!'

"The piano kid stood on top of the bench and started plucking some string inside. The bass kid was knocking on the wood. He had them create a piece like that, playing the instrument in the 'wrong' way, and they figured it out. The kid tapping on his bass started playing a rhythm, and all of a sudden they were playing together and ended together. When it was over, everybody clapped. Matt said, 'Do you see? You just made music together without knowing anything. You instinctually knew who was taking the lead. You knew when to start and stop.' When they went back and turned their music over the piece was probably still too hard for them, but they brought a new spirit to it."

Watching Wilson put his notions into practice one afternoon at JazzCamp West offered another view into his approach to education. By the time he strolled into the Eddie Marshall Pavilion for an all-levels class billed as "Matt + You + Drums," seven men and two women had settled behind well-worn kits ringing a large rectangular room. Wearing a worn white T-shirt adorned with a black-and-white photo of Mel Lewis, blue shorts, sandals and his trademark horn-rimmed glasses, Wilson spent 15 minutes fielding questions about the music business (mostly relating to online streaming services), and then started the players on basics, playing quarter-notes on the ride cymbal. The exercises progressed in complexity through the hour-long session, but rather than homing in on individuals, he focused on how to think about music and how to approach practicing: "Maintain the same distance in each stroke. Consistent movement is consistent time. ... Practice in long stretches. We can't stop when we're playing. ... What is rhythm? A combination of silences in motion."

While demystifying the mechanics and process of mastering the trap set, he shared stories about encounters and friendships



▲ Wilson as his “The Allowor” character at the inaugural JazzConnect Conference in New York City, January 2012

with fellow players, particularly encounters with legends, like the time Elvin Jones flirted with his wife, or the time Buster Williams greeted him on the bandstand at a Denny Zeitlin gig, saying, “Hey, Matthew. We’re home, baby, we’re home.”

A few hours later with an advanced ensemble in a cabin christened Coppola’s Den (for the beloved Bay Area trumpeter Johnny Coppola), Wilson got down into the weeds, actively coaching the musicians as they played through an original waltz by the pianist. “Play the song; I know you can play the drums,” he shouted over the band in the middle of one run-through. He had the band start the tune at four different tempos, and ended up with an arrangement that opened with a drum solo.

Wilson concluded the session with a B-flat blues. He instructed the two trumpeters to sit on chairs facing one another, and asked them to play together (“More riff-like! Leave space!”). He turned the chairs side by side and asked them to play parallel lines, and ended with the chairs back to back, telling the player on the left to be “the voice” and the one on the right to be “the collider.” Afterwards he explained, “Jazz isn’t always skipping through the park; sometimes we bump into each other.”

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IF WILSON IS BUMPING INTO JAZZ’S EDUCATIONAL establishment, he can’t help himself. There’s a driven quality to his campaign, a sense of mission that’s energized every time he sees young players hemmed in by conventional teaching and thinking. In the middle of our conversation he reaches for his Kindle and pulls up a highlighted quote by Albert Einstein that makes his point about the sort of classroom tyranny that focuses on technical facility: “Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

“I write down a lot of ideas,” Wilson says. “I’m working on this stuff all the time. ... I read a lot, and there have been some really

## WORDS OF WILSON

AT CLINICS AND OTHER TEACHING ENGAGEMENTS, MATT WILSON LIKES TO HAND OUT A PHOTOCOPIED FLYER THAT LOOKS LIKE IT MATERIALIZED RIGHT OUT OF A BRAINSTORMING SESSION. USING SEVERAL DIFFERENT FONTS AND TYPE SIZES, WITH OCCASIONAL PHRASES IN BOLD OR ALL CAPITAL LETTERS, IT OFFERS DOZENS OF SUGGESTIONS FOR AVOIDING JAZZ CLICHÉS. HERE’S A SELECTION.

1. **please** maintain a sense of wonder!
2. **find interesting new venues**
3. **MOVE FOLKS AROUND!**
4. perform some music by folks who get less play—Ornette Coleman, Coleman Hawkins, Sun Ra, King Oliver, Albert Ayler, Andrew Hill, John Kirby, Abbey Lincoln, Julius Hemphill, Melba Liston, Randy Weston, Lucky Thompson, Anthony Braxton, Shorty Rogers, etc.
5. why is the bass solo last? why does everyone play on the same form? why can’t a horn player accompany a bass solo?
6. **ALLOW A CONCERT TO GET OUT OF HAND!**
7. Will the intent of entertaining diminish the art form? **NOPE!**
8. **celebrate your community, jazz musicians love to collaborate! Welcome the cats.**
9. use different band set-ups like the old bands used to do. Mix it up.
10. **I HEREBY DECREE, TAKE AWAY THAT MOAT!**

CHOSEN BY ANDREW GILBERT

inspiring books lately. Jeff Bridges’ book, *The Dude and the Zen Master*, talks about jazz. Phil Jackson’s new book, *Eleven Rings*, is incredible. I would have him teach at a jazz conference in a second. He’s got a whole Monk section in the middle based on the advice Monk gave to Steve Lacy.”

Monk would have likely approved of many of Wilson’s ideas. After all, he embraced the notion of jazz as performance, telling Lacy, “Always leave them wanting more.” And Monk, like Wilson, saw jazz as a creative pursuit with infinite possibilities. “Whatever you think can’t be done,” the pianist said, “somebody will come along and do it.” That’s what Wilson’s counting on. **JT**