

About the life of a touring musician – An interview with the world class saxophone player Chris Potter

In the course of the new “Folkwang Visiting Artist Program” of the Folkwang Jazz Department the saxophonist Chris Potter dropped by for four days to convey his knowledge and make music with the students. At the end of the masterclass he took his time and got interviewed by StudiScout Felix Waltz. They talked about the meaning of music, his time as a student and the common things beside the arts.

At the beginning of the masterclass you said, that you've been on vacation - where have you been and what did you do?

Well, I guess I was on “vacation”, it was kind of moving around and visiting the family, because my wife is from Győr, which is a town in Hungary, halfway between Vienna and Budapest. So, we were mostly in Budapest, but also went to Győr and a few other cities down there. This is what we usually do in the summer, because my wife and daughter almost always go to Hungary for July and August when there is no school and then I join when I am not on the road. So I finished my tour with Dave Holland and Zakir Hussain a few weeks ago and came to Hungary then, to have some quality time with my family, which was really needed.

Did you have your instrument with you?

I did, I did! But I wasn't able to practice all that much. For a week or two, that was kind of nice to give myself a break from actually being right in the middle of music. You start to think about things in a different way, when you are hanging out at the beach. Of course, you still have these musical thoughts going through your head but it gives you the chance to digest things. However, sooner or later you really have to get back to physically playing your instrument, especially the saxophone is a physical thing and your muscles need to feel kind of comfortable at it, so you really have to do it.

Was there any moment in your life when you didn't pick up the saxophone for a longer period?

I started playing the saxophone when I was ten, from that moment on I did it nearly all the time. Maybe a week here and there, but usually it is a day-to-day thing.

By far the longest time, that I didn't had the chance to play, was in my middle twenties. I got a serious problem with my left inner ear and I got dizzy, thinking of losing my hearing and so on. So I had a couple of different operations and they said, that I shouldn't play for six weeks because of the pressure. So this was the only time since I started playing the saxophone that I didn't play for like six weeks at a time. That was a rough thing. I actually have no hearing on my left ear, but it's been this way for almost twenty years now, so I got used to it.

Could you use this time for doing other things?

Yeah, I definitely wrote a lot of tunes and thought about things. I mean, this was a very intense period, because I didn't know if this problem would continue in my other ear, I didn't know if I would be able continue to be a touring musician, I didn't know if I would be able to her music.

So, it was a big time of asking myself a lot of questions that I didn't want to ask, which in the end - well, I'm not glad, that it happened, it would be nice to hear through both ears again - but in a way I think I gained some knowledge. When you really look into the tunnel and you decide: "No, I'm not gonna give up, it is not my time to give up!", then it makes you that much more determined to keep on going.

You are very often part of studio-productions, either as sideman or as leader; you play together with many different musicians - even the cast of your own records changes a lot. Can you say, which is the important thing that gives you the feeling like "I wanna make music with this guy!"?



Chris Potter had lot of stuff to tell - serious and theoretical things about music but also funny stories he experienced in his career.

Besides the obvious level of musical skill, to be able to deal with whatever music I throw out - you know, someone better understands kind of the references like where the music is coming from and what I'm

trying to combine and what the vibe is - that is on one level, like a technical level.

But there is something which goes beyond that, I mean I find myself being inspired so much by the people that I work with. Both, the people that I worked with when I was working in their bands but also the people working in my bands. And I depend on this in a way to know which direction the music is gonna be, so when I plan a project, when I plan to put together a band, I am thinking of the sound of the band based on the people. Of course, the instruments matter, but what matters even more is the personality a person brings to the music.

And the way we relay to each other on a personal level, I mean, this a thing which becomes really important, especially when you are on the road. When you are touring and maybe two hours of the day you are actually on the stage, playing the concert, which leaves twenty-two more hours. And you wanna be with people that you like having around.

I have found that I also learned so much from the other musicians. I think we all are listening to different things, we all are influenced by different things, by the people in our lives and when we come together we can share that. And their worldview starts to influence my worldview and that starts to influence the music.

Is it possible, that a musician changes a whole composition of yours?

Yeah, I mean, when you bring in music, you sometimes have a very specific idea and it is what it is and you just manage to play it that way. But other times I am not really sure exactly which way it wants to go and I wanna leave some space for it to go in different directions. And I am sure that, depending on the group of people I introduce it that it is kind of different. With one band it makes sense to play something in a certain kind of slow medium tempo, where there is another band that maybe just wants to be fast. That's a simple example. The actual musicians who are playing it, are the ones who are creating it, even if I wrote the notes.

I like to approach my own music, if I can, as if it's not my band. I want to hear it from a more distant point of view, so I can hear what works and what doesn't work. Sometimes you can have the tendency to wanna force it into an idea that you have about what it is supposed to be. So, if you're able to let go of that and realize, what is actually going to work, then it will sound better and it's even more personal. This is interesting, I have seen that a lot.

Do you remember special point of realization in your life concerning the meaning of making music with other people?

The first thing that comes to my mind is linked to a very sad event. I remember, that in the week after 9/11 I was supposed to play with my band at the "Monterey Jazz Festival" and we were all feeling like "Wow...is this really a time for a jazz festival?! Maybe we shouldn't go...", but we decided to go. Of course everybody was nervous about flying, so we were the only people on the plane. I was wondering, "is anybody going to show up?! What's the vibe gonna be like?!" And I was very surprised, a lot of people came and you felt, that they were really hungry for music, in a special way. They're not usually that hungry. So it told me really: "Ok, that's what music is about!" It is not just for the moment you are feeling good. When you really need some connection with other people and you need that uplifting feeling - the people really need music! So at the concert, it wasn't like "Yeah, that's kinda nice", the vibe was like "We need this!" That was a huge lesson.

We are all students living in that "students-bubble", inspiring each other, sharing records, jamming around, talking about music every day. You studied first at The New School, later on at the Manhattan School of Music. How important was that time for you?

I grew up in South Carolina, where there were no other students my age, who were interested in playing Jazz, who were really that serious about music at all. So I was the only one and that didn't change until I moved to New York. That was the first time that I met people my age, that where interested in and also committed to jazz. It was wonderful! Listening to records all the time, having the chance to just play together, think about music, find ideas of each other; I think that was really the most important thing about school for me. There were different instructors, who really helped me, who inspired me, gave me ideas, but usually the things that I remember are not even specific things that people said. It is just the feeling that I got from the people. When I went to The New School, it was an amazing situation, there was a Jam Session every Monday evening with Jimmy Cobb, the drummer of Miles Davis "Kind of Blue", and he just set up his drums and people call tunes and we just play and play. So I could watch him play, could see how he acted and had the chance to play with him. And on Wednesday was the Groove-Session with Bernard Purdie. He kept playing the groove for hours. That was incredible!

Do you still have contact to some of your fellow students?

Some of the musicians, that I knew back there, are doing very well. When I was at the New School there were for example Larry Goldings, Peter Bernstein or Brad Mehldau. So I definitely see people from this time.

Do you have friends who are not musicians?

I do, yeah, I mean it is interesting, now that I have a daughter, you end up meeting a bunch of people, who you wouldn't otherwise know because of school friends, which I kind of like. Because usually most of my circle has been musicians or friends of musicians, any kind of artists. But now it is nice, it is always interesting to hear the questions that they have for me. They conceive, that somehow I can make a living and then they ask me: "What, you are a jazz musician? This still exists?" This is quite funny sometimes.

Many of us also want to tour around the world as a musician, but also wanna have kind of that common lifestyle like having someone to love, maybe children and so on. What is the experience you made, is it possible to combine these two ways of living?

Well, you have to find some very patient people to be in your life. That is kind of the way it is. Many jazz musicians I know have families and the grown up children of them seem to turn out ok! So, I hope it is all right for my daughter indeed. For her it is just the normal thing, I go away, play a concert and then I come back and of course she is really bored to see the gig but also a little proud. And when she gets older hopefully she will have more understanding of what it is about - but all in all: It can be done!

How often do you have to remind yourself, that you are doing what you really love and earn your money from it?

Pretty much every day. It is really not something that I take for granted. You know, I am not a multi billionaire, but I always have the feeling, that in terms of doing something, which has a meaning to me and having the chance of being around other people, who are doing things, that are meaningful for them and share that, I am often amazed, how rich I am. I know people from all over the world, from all kinds of different backgrounds, ages, it's just a big, wide view of humanity that I have because of what I have chosen to do for living. I never knew that, when I started playing saxophone - I just wanted to play the saxophone - and now I realize, what an amazing situation that put me in.

Last question: How often do you get confronted with quotes and jokes about the one magician, living his dream in Hogwarts?

Very often. Too often. I guess those books came out when I was in my twenties. I kind of assume that every customs agent, that I ever handed my passport to is gonna make that joke and of course, these are the people, who control whether you can come in to the country or not. So, you know, I am like: "Oh that's funny! I never heard that before!"

Thanks for your time Chris!

Yeah, for sure! Thank you!