

# Jeff Denson



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In the current jazz environment, the art of jazz expression and the world of formal education are fully intertwined. Serious dedication to either path takes powerful commitment, but fully pursuing both demands a level of diligence and focus that is immensely challenging. Jeff Denson is a man who is meeting that challenge.

Fully immersed in both worlds since the late 1990s, the bassist/composer has balanced a full career as sideman and leader while taking a full course of studies leading to his doctorate. In addition to maintaining an intense performing and touring schedule in the U.S. and Europe while in school –including a long relationship with legendary saxophonist Lee Konitz that continues to this day –Jeff has also taught extensively all over both continents.

Today he is a full professor at the California Jazz Conservatory in Berkeley, California and the Director of its Outreach Program designed to develop the Bay Area's most talented musicians while making the local scene a productive and fertile environment for jazz. While this intensive level of activity is easily a full-time job, Jeff takes a relentless 24/7 approach, composing for and leading three distinct ensembles, participating in a few cooperative groups and working on his three-act Chamber Opera, WEBS.

At first glance, it might seem that Jeff Denson, like so many of the younger generation that has emerged in the past 20 years, is a product of the formalized jazz education system. This is simply not the case. In reality, he has developed in the age-old tradition that dates back to the earliest days of jazz –listen to the masters, sharing in oral traditions through his personal mentors, and straight-up hands-on experience in the trenches.

Jeff's "bandstand" credentials are indeed impressive. He has recorded 10 albums as leader/co-leader and over a dozen more as a featured sideman - four with Konitz (including live recordings at the Village Vanguard and Birdland). Over the past 15 years, he has shared the bandstand with an impressive and diverse array of remarkable musicians including Anthony Davis, Mark Dresser, Joe Lovano, Jane Ira Bloom, Kenny Werner, Dave Douglas, Bob Moses, Giacomo Gates, Howard Alden and many more.

Born in Arlington, Virginia –just outside of Washington, D.C. –in 1976, Jeff grew up in a fertile musical environment and began playing the alto sax at 8 years old, switching to electric bass in high school. His mother's love of the Beatles became his own, and he also discovered R&B, especially Stevie Wonder, James Brown & the J.B.'s and Marvin Gaye –particularly affected by the legendary Motown Records bassist James Jameson. By the time he was completing his high school education, Jeff was playing and singing with his own funk and rock bands. His interest in jazz started with fusion –Jaco Pastorius and Stanley Clarke –but shifted direction one fateful day. Like countless musicians over the past 50+ years it was a chance encounter with Miles Davis' Kind of Blue –specifically Paul Chambers playing lead on So What –that provided an epiphany. Soon after, Charles Mingus' Haitian Fight Song locked the young bassist into this new direction, both as a player and an artist.

After two years of studying visual arts (painting and photography) at Virginia Commonwealth University, Jeff entered Northern Virginia Community College in 1997. Here he met Herb Smith, an intense and influential teacher, with whom he played professionally for a number of years in every corner of the local scene. A single lesson with the great post-bop bassist Butch Warren led to another traditional aspect of true jazz education –a personal mentorship built upon hanging out on the scene and listening, questioning and learning first-hand from musicians. He also continued listening intently to the bass masters –he names Ron Carter, Ray Brown and Scott LaFaro as major influences –and for two years studied privately with an extraordinary teacher, Pepe Gonzalez, who made a profound impact upon the young musician. The element of intensely personal mentorship that he has experienced - especially the one that Pepe provided to him as a musician and a man –has powerfully influenced Jeff's commitment to his own students, laying the foundation for his own contribution to the passing-down continuum that is the legacy of jazz at its most sacred.

In 1999, Jeff began his studies at the renowned Berklee College of Music, and after graduating cum laude in 2002, his career hit full stride. Jeff began performing extensively with Minsarah, the internationally acclaimed cooperative trio he had formed in 2001 with

fellow Berklee students, pianist Florian Weber and drummer Ziv Ravitz. Touring extensively in the U.S. and Europe, they recorded their first album for the now-defunct Hubermusik Records label in 2003 and were signed by Enja Records in 2006, recording two albums. Growing rapidly in stature, they performed at top concert halls and festivals, including the Berlin Jazz Festival, JVC Jazz Festival in Paris and the Montreal Jazz Festival among many others. In 2007 they joined forces with Lee Konitz, becoming the legendary figure's first regular ensemble. They recorded three albums together for Enja and toured regularly, especially in Europe with dozens of tours since 2007. In 2010 Jeff moved to New York City and became a highly in-demand member of the local scene. Amidst all this activity Jeff continued his studies, while continuing to play, perform and teach.

He received his Master of Music in Jazz Studies from Florida State University; and his Doctorate of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance with an Emphasis on Composition from the University of California, San Diego in 2010. Jeff's intensely focused experience at UCSD, where he also studied privately with Anthony Davis and Mark Dresser (who Jeff cites as a most powerfully influential teacher and a very close friend), added another important dimension to his musical vision—a deep love of the Western Classical traditions, especially Bach, Debussy, Ravel and the 12-tone masters, Berg and Schoenberg, along with Eliot Carter. Weaving this influence into his own composing and theoretical imperative, particularly in the context of his Secret World ensemble, Jeff has embarked on a truly unique path as a composer and performer.

In 2011, with extensive experience in providing workshops, master classes, lectures and clinics all over Europe and the U.S., and seven years of institutional teaching while pursuing his advanced degrees, Dr. Denson accepted an offer from the Jazzschool Institute (now the California Jazz Conservatory) to become a full professor in order to focus upon his goals as an educator. Despite Jeff's educational commitments he remains a fully committed active musician and remains powerfully focused on his own sweeping musical journey.

An acknowledged and highly respected master of his instrument in both the jazz and Western Classical disciplines, Jeff clearly expresses his view on technique:

That mastery fully serves his purpose as a composer and leader. A man of limitless creativity and vision, he is influenced by a wide variety of interests including film, nature and painting (particularly Vincent Van Gogh). All of this is reflected in his broad-based and ambitious artistic imperative, which includes vocal music (he is an accomplished singer), electric music, experimental forms, larger ensemble works, multi-media presentations and video.

He is currently focused on four projects as a leader, Jeff Denson's Secret World (a quartet featuring Jeff on bass and vocals and has included such extraordinary trumpeters as Ralph Alessi and Cuong Vu), Electreo (an experimental ensemble of electric bass, electric bassoon and percussion), the Jeff Denson Trio, featuring pianist Joshua White, and the Jeff Denson Trio +1—a project that will feature a special guest artist each season, beginning appropriately with Lee Konitz in 2014/15, already slated for more than a dozen performances in the U.S. In addition, Jeff performs solo and in some special duets. He has recently released two duo recordings on pfMENTUM Records: I'll Fly Away, a re-imagining of hymns and spirituals with Joshua White; and Two, with the remarkable European clarinetist Claudio Puntin.

From his position as Outreach Director for the CJC, Jeff is nurturing young musicians into the world of professional performance, promoting partnerships and relationships among various elements of the Bay Area scene. A key part of his mission is to provide that special growth experience of allowing young musicians to share the bandstand side by side with the professionals with whom they will become colleagues in the future. His ultimate goal is to not only foster this emerging talent, but also to create an atmosphere of activity and productivity that is intended to make the local scene a viable professional option for young musicians. It's his hope that this will keep this young talent in the area rather than departing for other cities in search of career success.

For Jeff Denson, this multiple commitment does not create conflict, but rather, confluence.

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