

Interview with Jason - Part Two Transcript

Cam:

This is part two of the chat I had with Jason Lim.

After you were at school, after you'd learnt quite a few instruments and you had the influence from your grandfather, you went to Perth, studied undergraduate?

Jason:

Yep, yep. That was a music performance degree.

Yeah, it was, I think I did qualify up to the BA, so yeah, Bachelor of Arts, and I mean, it's funny, it was that transition of going from being the "best guitar player" in my high school, and playing in band right there to, yeah, and then going to Perth where, I mean, it was, I learned a lot, I had a really good experience there, but I think they were budget-wise, they were stretched thin. I mean, they didn't have the capacity to give us one-to-one tuition, so it was first-study instruments a couple of times a week, but it was group lessons, so going straight in, starting at the HNC level, so Higher National Certificate level, which was the first year I was in, and you're thrown straight into a room of, I was one of 26 guitar players in a single group lesson, so that's a lot of egos crammed into one room, trying to play faster than each other, and sort of quickly realised, oh shit, some of these guys can play a hell of a lot better than me, so I think that was, it was inspirational, because it was like, okay, I know this is the new bar, this is where I sit on this scale of range of players, and I mean, yeah, it's strange.

Anyone learning an instrument, it takes years to sort of get to a point where you feel confident in your abilities, and then there might come a time where you end up in imposter syndrome, essentially, you might like join a band where it's like, these players are much better than me, so it's like, how am I meant to keep up? And then it's all a question of confidence, I think, it's just building up confidence in your ability, and you play better when you feel confident, so yeah, there's a lot of learning during that phase, where I was like, okay, I need to practice a lot more, so I think it was after my first year, I think I made very good friends, I'm still very close friends with who became my flatmate at the time, so we're still in regular contact, he's based in Berlin now, and he was a drummer, so we played in bands together for years, and yeah, so I think it wasn't until my second year, I sort of knuckled down a bit, I was like, okay, I want to be as good a player as I can be, so that's when I sort of like really locked in and dialled in a practice routine, that I think ultimately that was a key moment, where I was like, I know where I want to, I've got a target, I know where I want to be in terms of skill level, and I've been given these exercises, and I've got a routine that I can practice, and it's just a case of putting in the hours, so I think for that sort of period, there must have been a solid two or three years where missing very few days, I was hitting about seven or eight hours practice a day, so I think that's where I sort of developed a work ethic, and was able to really learn that I could set my mind to something.

Yeah.

Cam:

Was that the pathway that set you towards Berklee?

Jason:

I think so. I can remember when I first learned of Berklee. I think there were various bands I was into at the time; some of them had members who went to Berklee, or the bands themselves had formed there. I think Dream Theatre was one of them. They were like the founding members of Berklee, and so I kind of learned of that and thought, "Oh, that's significant."

We also had a really good head of the music department at Perth, who was a realist—very practical—and brutally honest with us all. Even during our first induction week in first year, he said, "Very few of you are going to make a living in music," which just completely destroyed our self-esteem. It was brilliant, though—brutally honest.

The induction day itself was the most disorganised event. We all arrived first thing, around 8:30 or 9:00 in the morning, met everyone, got online, and had our student cards made up. Then we were told, "Okay, come back at five o'clock." Naturally, we thought, "Alright, pub." So, the entire group of us just went to the pub and got completely shit-faced. But we got to know each other very quickly and bonded. It wasn't by design, but it was a very efficient way to get us all acquainted. By the time we showed back up at five o'clock, I think there was a faculty band playing and some sort of introduction. By then, though, we were all long gone mentally, so it was a blurry rest of the day.

Still, it was good. We got our self-esteem smashed when he told us very few of us would actually make it in the industry. That bonded us as a group in some ways. He was great—Lorenzo, the head of the department. He was a bass player who had a lot of experience as an active musician, playing on cruise ships and in function bands. He gave us the reality check: "We're in the north of Scotland. Glasgow's the biggest city and hub for music here; London's bigger. There's not really a professional music industry in Scotland. There's a lot of culture and history, with a big trad scene, but if you want to be a professional player, you'll need to get a good wedding band together." That's the reality of how you'll make a living.

From that point, I started thinking about my next steps—what I could aim for to open up new opportunities. Learning about Berklee through bands made me set that as my goal. Probably during my HND, around my second year, I decided, "Okay, that's a target. What do I need to do to get there?" The answer was simple: do the work, practice, and build up proficiency on my instrument to become a better musician.

Before Berklee, there was an opportunity through Perth College to do an exchange program at a college in Illinois, in the Midwest. I was kind of the guinea pig from the music department because we didn't really know much about the scale of their music department. Another student had done the exchange the previous semester, but they were studying something like accounting or business management—completely unrelated to music. It was a bit of a gamble, but I thought, "This will be an experience no matter what

happens."

It turned out the college, Monmouth College in Illinois, had an incredible music department. I initially signed up for one semester but extended it to stay for a full year. During that time, I took up the violin again and joined the Chamber Orchestra. I played guitar in the rhythm section of their big band and started a jazz combo, playing local gigs like at country clubs. I also did one-to-one tuition in upright bass for the year because the guitar player was also an upright bass player. I felt like I had my guitar practice routine down to maintain and refine my skills, so I took the opportunity to explore something new.

Studying classical bass was amazing. I learned German bow-hold techniques and played classical music on the contrabass. I also studied marimba with a percussion lecturer, learning four-mallet marimba techniques using the Burton grip. Practicing the marimba was intense, and even after a year of diligent effort, I could only play the most basic tunes. It was more about building muscle memory for something so different. It was a great experience and gave me another perspective on music through a completely different instrument.

Cam:

You are listening to *The Big Note* on 97.1 FM 3MDR, and this is a pre-recorded interview where I'm talking with Jason Lim, a musician, composer, producer, and music technologist. He's the founder of Instruō Modular Instruments, based in Glasgow, Scotland. He's also a dedicated dog lover and caretaker for Winston, his lovely greyhound—my favourite dog in the whole of the Northern Hemisphere.

Okay then, back to the chat.

It sounds like you had a really eclectic exposure to a lot of different stuff, but then you developed an interest in electronic music and electronic synthesis of sounds. How did that come about?

Jason:

So that was at Berklee. That was kind of later stage, later years at Berklee, and I got in eventually after I applied while I was in the US. So I flew over to Boston. Eventually, once I got accepted, I ended up deferring my place for a year and then went back to Perth College and did the BA year—so finished my degree—and then went out to start a whole second degree. So yeah, perpetual student for many years at that point.

Really, my eldest daughter would very much relate to you because she did a diploma of music, and then she did three years of her degree, and then she did her master's in teaching music. She's only just finished that, and she'll be 27 next year. So she feels like she's been a professional student ever since she left high school.

Yeah.

It must have been eight years solid because it was four years for my degree at Perth, including the year abroad, and then straight into Berklee after that. I was there for maybe four and a half years. I think credit-wise, I had more credits than I needed because, you know, you pick your schedule semester by semester. So I ended up having more credits than most dual majors would have,

but I just kept taking electives. I mean, I was like, this is such an opportunity. I took a semester studying turntable techniques with a guy who came into Boston once a week to teach the class because he was full-time DJing based in New York. That was great because they had a lab with about eight to ten sets of decks and mixers. The whole room was just vinyl—so the whole thing was taught on vinyl, no CDJs or anything digital—so the entire class was taught on vinyl. For the midterm, you needed to spin a set. So I was like, okay, pick your records and just practice that.

You had to do at least one example of doubles — being able to beat-match and loop sections and stuff. I thought, this is brilliant. Where else am I going to get the chance to study this and get college credit for messing about on turntables? Yeah, it was brilliant.

So I kind of dabbled in a bunch of different electives, played in various ensembles. I was in a few jazz ensembles, ended up getting back into metal, and was playing in several metal bands that were official class ensembles where... Yeah, it was great. We were just making an absolute racket as part of...

Cam:

You took advantage of the opportunities that were afforded you, so you didn't seem like you were a lazy student. Do you find it ironic that your parents wanted you to go towards the creative side, away from academia, but you spent so long in academia? I mean, you were studying the creative side. They do say medicine and the health professions, there's quite a bit of a degree of creativity. There's a saying that, for example, nursing is part science, part art, because you have to be very intuitive and sort of improvise all the time. And doctors do too, because every situation is different. Every patient is different, but that's a different story.

I did warn you that I'm going to ask you for some music pieces. So did you think about that?

Jason:

Yep, yep. I've mulled over the last couple of days.

Cam:

I didn't want it to be a task!

Jason:

No, no, no. It was good, because I was like, "Oh, there's kind of the obvious ones that would be..." Yeah, so... It was good fun. I was digging through, and I found a few tracks that were... I think it's a broad range of them.

Cam:

And you got a vinyl collection after your...?

Jason:

I do, yeah. It's not been played for a minute, because Emma got me a PlayStation 5 for my birthday a couple of years ago, so it's now sitting on top of

the record player. To put records on, I need to disassemble the entire system.

Cam:

So what songs have you picked for me?

Jason:

So I've got five that I've found. The first: *Freddie Freeloader* by Miles Davis, off *Kind of Blue*.

[**Music:** "Freddie Freeloader" by Miles Davis from "Kind of Blue" (1959)]

Cam:

You're listening to 97.1 FM 3MDR, and we just listened to *Freddie Freeloader* by Miles Davis from *Kind of Blue*. That track was picked for us by Jason Lim, who has kindly spared the time to talk to me about his life, music, and influences. He tells us why he picked this song:

Jason:

That's one of the best albums ever recorded. I think just from a music production standpoint—compositional, improvisational—it's great. That album was kind of an early introduction to jazz. It's just such a staple and something compared to more, like, bebop or more technical jazz, I guess.

Cam:

Busy...

Jason:

Yes, yeah. I mean, Coltrane's solos on that record are quite busy, but I resorted to quite a lot of the tracks. So, *Freddie Freeloader*—I've transcribed most solos on that as part of studies. There was an ear training class that was one of the core classes at Berklee. Even though I'd studied a degree in music already, they very much want you to go through their harmony, ear training, arrangement, counterpoint, tonal harmony. They want you to do their core foundation classes.

So, I think you're allowed to test out of them. I tested into the third level of ear training and, I think, second level harmony. But it's intense. The level of detail they went to was like, I've not looked at music to this level before. The ear training classes were sight-singing. So, it was solfège. It was being taught to recognize intervals and verbalizing. I mean, I heard some horror stories from friends of mine that I made. Everyone had to do these classes, but there were so many faculty members that taught it in very different ways that some of them, it sounded awful. Like, you'd be sitting in the class, and it was just like one after one. It's like, 'Okay, sight-singing, this example, go.' Just... No sort of prep. It's just on the fly.

So, yeah, I think I lucked out. I ended up in a class that was taught by Bob Patton. He was a sax player, but he taught this class. He taught it in a very particular way where he didn't put you on the spot. So, we kind of had that as a

benefit. We weren't completely put on the spot to sight-sing in front of a group of our peers. It was sight-singing, but it was all together, like all singing together in unison. And then where he put the workload on was for midterm exams and final exams.

You had to pick a song, pick a solo, like a substantial amount of it, and transcribe it to then perform it—song solfège over the original. But it was meticulous in how he directed you to do the transcription. It was a case of, you have to learn to sing the solo in terms of, like, you know, once you can... It had to be done by ear before you put pen to paper and actually transcribed it. So, it was like, 'Okay, figure out the intervals, figure out the key, where the tonality is, what modality it is, and learn it so that you can essentially sing it back.' And then it was transcription—having to do the, you know, put dots on lines—and then the actual performance.

Cam:

You could have auditioned for Frank Zappa, because I think that's what Steve Vai basically did. Frank got him transcribing much of his guitar solos.