

Tom Daniels

Interviewed by Leslie Smith of CJFX's "Stop Time"

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Leslie: Tell me about growing up in Corner Brook, your education, your mentors, and how you came to St.F.X.

Tom:

It seems a little bit strange, a jazz musician coming from Newfoundland, but actually there's been a lot of great jazz musicians from Newfoundland. Jim Vivian is one of Canada's best bass players and he's from St. John's.

I came from a pretty musical family. My father plays the piano, plays the clarinet, plays the guitar. My sister sings and plays the clarinet, and the piano. And my mother sings. A lot of my relatives play instruments and sing. So there was always music happening. My folks put me in piano lessons from a very early age, grade two or something like that, and made me stick with that all through the end of high school. There was a lot of times when I really wanted to quit, but they wouldn't let me and I'm really thankful for that now.

When I was about 12 years old I got interested in the guitar. That sort of bit me, that bug bit me harder than anything else. I continued to play the piano and I played a little bit of drums, but I focused mostly on the guitar. And then of course we had a decent high school band program. I played the trumpet and did some percussion stuff in high school, and continued to play guitar in the jazz band. By the time I was getting ready to finish high school, I felt like I wanted to go to university to do music.

I was also studying some classical guitar at the time, and I had to sort of make a decision between whether I wanted to go to Acadia for classical guitar or whether I wanted to go to St.F.X. to play jazz music and spend most of my time on my electric guitar, and I opted for that.

There's a lot of music happening in Corner Brook. My piano teacher was a guy named Gary Graham, who was sort of a mentor for the city, really, in terms of instruction in choir and piano and whatnot, and he was a big influence on me when I was growing up.

Leslie: I'd like to know more about your Jazz ID Award and going to the Yokohama jazz festival, and what this will do for your career.

Tom:

The Canada Council put out this application for a competition called Jazz ID, which was to find five of the best young Canadian jazz musicians, and I applied to the contest and won, I was one of the five winners. We all went to Toronto in November to showcase our music at the CIJC, which is the Canadian International Jazz Convention. We went there and did a showcase, and there were sort of delegates from Japan and other countries there that were interested in the winners of the competition, and the Japanese people really liked my band and another band as well. So I was one of the two who were chosen out of the five to represent Canada at the Yokohama Jazz Festival.

I think that the jazz ID competition was a really good thing for the careers of all the musicians that were selected to be involved. There were a lot of fairly important people there at

the convention who were interested in seeing our music. Not a whole lot has come of it except for this thing to Japan, of course the other three band leaders that weren't selected to go to Yokohama, I'm not sure what has happened for them in terms of spinoffs since. But for me, going to Japan is a big thing. I've actually been to Japan before but this will be an exciting time to play for the Japanese people and to meet some other contacts and just to spread my music further across the world, and I'm really looking forward to it.

Leslie: Your music is influenced by a number of styles. While you studied here at St.F.X., who are some of the musicians you listened to who may have influenced your style? And how would you describe your own style?

Tom:

Well, it's kind of funny because I think I have a pretty broad range of influence. I studied classical piano, classical guitar. High school, sort of concert-band trumpet, percussion, rock guitar, lots of different stuff. I went to school, I did my undergraduate and my masters degree in jazz performance. I think that's certainly helped me to learn my instrument better and realize all the possibilities on the instrument. Although – I'm not that old, but the older I get, I'm starting to realize that I'm going back towards my roots. You know, I really love classical music, I love rock-n-roll, I love pop music, I love jazz music. I'm gaining a great appreciation for Celtic music now. I'm writing a lot of music in that style as well. So I really can't put a finger on exactly where my music is coming from, with the exception of ... it could be influenced by anyone like John Coltrane, he's a jazz saxophone player, Pat Metheny is a jazz guitar player, Eddie van Halen, rock guitar player. The piano music of Ravel. I don't want it to sound kind of pretentious, but really it is a huge spectrum of things that I listen to. I love the Beach Boys. I think anyone who hears me play can hear the diversity in that, even though my style is very singular, I think. When I play the guitar it sounds very similar all the time, but you can hear a lot of those things in there.

Leslie: Talk a little bit about teaching at St.F.X., and how you balance that with doing your own music. Do you have a lot of opportunity for your own writing?

Tom:

It's certainly difficult to balance my academic responsibilities with being creative because teaching takes up a lot of time and energy. I have a lot of guitar students and I teach various courses. This year I'm teaching World Music, last semester I was teaching Jazz Composition, and in past years I've taught Theory and various things. So, I find definitely from September to April is really busy. I do have a lot of time to write my own music and do a lot of practicing and preparation for the summer, which is when I do most of my touring and work, sometimes outside of the province and outside of the country. I spend a lot of time in the United States playing and recording and touring and stuff.

I love teaching, I think I have a gift for it. My father's a university professor at Memorial University and we sort of grew up in an academic environment, so I always felt that I took from that and I find that I can communicate my ideas fairly clearly to the students, and they seem to enjoy my classes. I love that aspect of it, and having to communicate my ideas about music further instills in my mind the things that I value in music so this teaching-and-playing continuum – that I'm going back and forth – I think strengthens myself as a musician. I'm writing and performing,

and also teaching, and those things sort of circulate themselves in my brain and make me a stronger artist.

Leslie: Tell me more about this World Music course.

Tom:

It's Music 118, World Music. This is the second year it's being offered. Last year it was taught by a different professor and this is the first year I'm teaching it, but it's relatively new to the curriculum and it's a very exciting course. I'm learning a lot and hopefully my students are learning a lot as well.

Leslie: What else is in the future for you and your group. This summer?

Tom:

It's hard to say right now. The last three summers, I've spent most of my time in New York City. I have a bunch of friends there that I play with and record with. There's a scene there that I'm a fairly big part of. Although, in the last year I've sort of decided to spend a little bit more time focusing on my own music rather than being a sideman in other projects.

This summer I'm going to be staying in Nova Scotia, staying mostly in Antigonish. I have some other gigs, but I'm going to spend a lot of my time focusing on my own writing and my own composing and my own performance with this new trio and this new style of music that I'm involved in. I have previously spent a lot of time in New York City, and I've developed quite a few important contacts and musical friendships there. Every time I go there there's lots of gigs and lots of recordings and things happening. But I think I've spent a lot of my time focusing on collaborations with other people and working as a sideman on other projects, and I don't really want to do that anymore. I think the style of music that I'm working on now has a real unique and strong vibe and I think I want to spend as much time as I can honing that on my own. I don't really need other people to do that, per se, with the exception of the musicians that I'm involved with with that kind of music.

So I'm going to stay in Antigonish and enjoy the beautiful weather and write some music and take what happens with the Yokohama festival and this new trio of mine ... actually I have a new CD that's coming out. It'll be released in about two weeks, called The R Months, which is my latest recording. Actually I recorded it two summers ago in New York City. It features two amazing New York musicians, Jamie Haddad on percussion and drums and Peter Herbert on bass. The music that's going to be on that CD is also the music that I'm doing with my Canadian trio which is with Mark Adam on drums and Jim Vivian on bass.

That's what I'm looking forward to this summer, for that CD to come out and to do some more writing and just to enjoy the weather.

Leslie: Can I ask you about the significance of the name of the CD, 'The R Months'? And will there be a local launch?

Tom:

There isn't anything planned but I will definitely be launching something here, certainly. I would say that the Yokohama thing will be the big sendoff for that CD but my CD will be coming out in

the middle of March so I'm going to try to organize a concert here to represent that music.

Significance of The R Months ... I don't ... not really ... It's one of the tunes on the record, and obviously the R months are all the months in the year that have the letter R in them, and I just thought it was kind of a neat thing. I really have nothing else to say on that.

Leslie: You've applied for a Nova Scotia Arts Council grant. What would that go to?

Tom:

I've gained a pretty high appreciation over the past few years for Celtic music. This is probably the most important spot in the world for that kind of music, and there's a lot of amazing artists and musicians up in Cape Breton that to me are just spellbinding in terms of their abilities and their roots. I think being just a jazz musician or a pop musician or an improvising musician is a little bit limiting in terms of the area. I've seen a lot of concerts, and my girlfriend plays the fiddle, she's an amazing fiddler, and so I've been more interested in that lately.

I've applied for a Creation Grant from the Nova Scotia Arts Council. The winners of that will be announced in the middle of March. Not sure if I'll get it or not – I hope I'll get it. But regardless, I'm going to focus my energies on composing a bunch of tunes for fiddle and guitar, and I've already recorded one with my girlfriend, and it turned out really great. So that's a new interest of mine and I think with my knowledge of jazz music and classical music and my broad range of influences, I think I can really add something meaningful to this genre of music. I feel fortunate to be in the area I'm in in that I can gain that Celtic influence in my music as well.

Leslie: Does this mean the Red Shoe Pub is going to be in your future?

Tom:

Well definitely! I know Rob Willson pretty well and he's looking at getting me in there and my girlfriend plays there all the time. Actually, we did a duet performance at Kintyre Farm festival in Judique in the summertime, so yeah I think I'm kind of eking my way into the Celtic scene, and I like that a lot.

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