



# Q&A with

photo by stephen butler

*Saxophonist and educator Matt Otto moved to the Kansas City area a couple of years ago and made an immediate impact on the scene. He brought with him the experience of being part of the Los Angeles and New York City scenes, and can be regularly heard in a wide variety of bands throughout the area.*

*JAM: What led you to become a musician/educator? Any key influences or mentors, or any "this is what I want to do" moments? Was your family musical?*

**MATT OTTO:** My parents (I have four: a mom, a step mom, a dad, and a step dad) are all hobbyist musicians. My mom plays classical violin and was a music major for a bit, my step mom is a good classical pianist, my dad plays banjo and sings, my step dad plays guitar and sings. Without their endless support and encouragement I would have been forced to do something else for a living.

I loved music for as long as I can remember and began playing piano at 3 although not seriously at all. At 9 I began saxophone and got serious about that in junior high school. By that time, I knew I wanted to play sax for a living and my first 2 teachers, Don Hawkins and Paul Carman inspired me to become professional.

*JAM: You've lived all over, and even attended four colleges. How have these varied experiences influenced you?*

**MATT:** I practiced a lot in my early 20s and still do, as a result, it took me a while to finish my degrees since I kept dropping out to practice and play professionally. In the

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**interview by Roger Atkinson**

end I got my masters in Jazz performance and I learned a lot studying, performing and living in different places, all my teachers and experiences helped me become the improviser I am today.

**JAM:** *You perform in a wide variety of settings, from more or less standards to original music to more experimental (I'm thinking Black House Improvisers). What is your ideal setting?*

**MATT:** My original passion is for free improvisation. At Berklee in the 80's I mostly played free jazz, studying with George Garzone and getting into the music of Albert Ayler, late Coltrane, Pharaoh, etc... During the 7 years I lived in NYC I played with Rashid Bakr, a wonderful free drummer who worked a lot with Cecil Taylor. That band only played free – we rehearsed playing free, we performed playing free sometimes with William Parker.

Over time I began really enjoying improvising melodically, in a note by note, harmonically specific way. I began hearing melodies over chords in a more literal sense and my theoretical knowledge of harmony became more of a sound based language and less abstract.

Now I love both playing free and improvising in a harmonically structured environment. Playing free, unfortunately, is a hard way for me to pay the bills!

**JAM:** *You mainly play tenor, and play this great bass sax. Do you play any other instruments? How did you come to get the bass sax?*

**MATT:** I only play tenor, soprano, and bass sax, all in B♭. I originally got the bass sax to perform and record these sax quartets I've been writing for a while but have not yet finished. The local pianist and composer Brad Cox asked me to play bass and soprano sax occasionally with the Peoples Liberation Big Band, so that has been a wonderful opportunity to play some creative, challenging music on the bass sax.

**JAM:** *How much did you know about Kansas City before you moved to this area? Is what you've seen what you expected to see?*

**MATT:** Before moving to Kansas City I was only aware of Charlie Parker, Count Basie and Bobby Watson, which is reason enough to move here. Gary Foster, originally from

Kansas City and now living in LA, told me a lot about the scene before I moved here and I was quite encouraged with what he said.

The music community here is healthy and creative, with a wealth of fantastic people and players. I've been both supported and challenged by the music scene here and am honored to be part of it.

**JAM:** *If someone came to you for advice on what a new music venue in KC should be like, what would you tell them? What kind of a club would be that perfect place for musician and listener?*

**MATT:** I think that a good model for a jazz venue is exemplified by the Blue Whale in Los Angeles, owned and run by Joon Lee. Joon books creative, forward thinking original music made by passionate players, dedicated to the art form. He gives the cover charge to the band, and sells food drinks and food. The bouncer takes the cover and enforces a "no talking policy". After just a few years the place is always packed, the players make a good wage, and the audience trusts that the venue will always have quality, well rehearsed, interesting, creative music.

**JAM:** *Let's talk about technology: In looking at your Web site it is apparent that you have greatly embraced it to share lessons you have prepared, and you've even started giving lessons via Skype. Tell us about your experiences using technology, how you evolved into using it, and how it enables you to reach students and the listening audience? Are there downsides that you have to overcome as well?*

**MATT:** I started my blog several years ago with the goal of sharing my recorded music and ideas about improvisation on the internet with whom ever was interested. It's become a nice way for me to connect with other musicians and at the same time work on new ideas.

Both private study and music school are expensive and not everyone can afford them. The blog allows me to offer free educational resources through videos, PDFs and mp3s so that anyone with Web access has the opportunity to improve as a musician and deepen their enjoyment and understanding of the art form.

The Skype lessons allow me the possibly to teach people from all over the world; for instance, I have



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PHOTO BY STEPHEN BUTLER

recently taught people in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Dubai, and Caledonia through Skype.

It's also been great for releasing CDs both for free download and for sale via links to CD Baby and iTunes.

I guess the downside is that there's only so much you can do on the net to change the unequal conditions people live in world. Real mate-

rial change is needed so that everyone who is interested has both the time and resources to study music and art.

**JAM:** *This technology is much different than what was available when you were a student! How can a student effectively sort through all that is currently available?*

**MATT:** The internet is an amazing resource and if I had access to this sort of information growing up I might have become a different player or person.

I think the importance of critical thinking skills becomes apparent as soon as you begin researching and sorting through information on the internet. This is just one reason a good balanced education is so important, it gives us the ability to think for ourselves and make choices that are both in our best interest and in the best interests of the majority of the people in the world.

**JAM:** *And it's not just educational information, it's the availability of music, generally... all that is on YouTube, Pandora, or even the Smalls Web site. All we had were records and radio! What all does this impact? For example, does it impact live music venues when there is so much free product out there? Why go to Smalls if Smalls is streamed every night?*

**MATT:** It seems that both free access to music and information is creating a sort of cultural renaissance, not so much changing our basic social structure but allowing people to connect and be influenced by each other's ideas and music in a more immediate and collective way.

In many cultures music is a social art form, everyone participating on some level, either singing, dancing or playing instruments. The internet has allowed us to be part of something akin to that, a sort of community of shared, albeit contesting, ideas and sounds.

I believe music, and cultural forms, will always be best experienced live, but the internet is a great way for us to share ideas, communicate, collaborate, and learn and grow from one another.

**JAM:** *Where do you see the technology going?*

**MATT:** I think technology will continue to evolve until we are more or less integrated with technology at a biological level. This may sound a bit hard to believe, but having watched several TED ([ted.com](http://ted.com)) lectures on the future of technology, I have been amazed at just how far we've already come. For example, one demonstration showcased a new technology allowing people to control robotic limbs through a wi-fi connection with a brain controlled implant within the muscle tissue of their arm. This sci-fi like technology was mind blowing to watch and is already here now.

**JAM:** *It seems that with the continued growth in jazz education that there are more good players than ever, yet the market (venues and listeners) has not grown. Do you see this changing? What does it mean to musicians in the future?*

**MATT:** It may be harder to make a living playing music these days due to the "more players, less work" phenomenon. I think if society put more focus on education and material equality the ensuing freedom would lead to a much broader love, understanding and passion for high art and cultural quality.

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**matt otto q+a** *continued from page 26*

If we, as artists, want more opportunities, and a broader audience, we need to help create a society that cares more about arts and cultural than with individual private profit.



PHOTO BY ROGER ATKINSON

I believe as society moves toward material equality, we will see a wider appreciation for cultural quality.

*JAM: Do you listen to a lot of music? What have you been listening to recently?*

**MATT:** Yes, I usually listen to some music every day. I get a lot of joy from classical music as well, Bach is probably my favorite, but I really enjoy the 20th century composers as well, Bartok, Ligetti, Elliot Carter etc... I listen to as much new music coming out of NYC jazz scene as I can. It seems that there's so much amazing music being written and recorded these days, I just can't keep up with it all. That said, I still end up listening a lot to classic jazz recordings by Lester Young, Warne Marsh, Coltrane, Ornette, Keith Jarrett, Paul Desmond, Bird, and all the many dedicated improvising musicians that have recorded over the years.

*JAM: What are your current projects? Any interesting gigs coming up? Any travel?*

**MATT:** I just finished having my new album, Broken Waltz, mastered and will be releasing it very soon. It is the last recording I did before leaving LA several years ago and is comprised of original songs that I wrote which are inspired by the 60's folk music that I grew up listening to; Phil Ochs, Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez etc... I'm very happy with how the project turned out.

I'll be heading back to LA for a string of gigs in April with the trio "Joeless-Shoe" and again in May to do a recording with composer and guitar player Justin Morell.