

## Jazz Conversations: Jerry Tachoir

Written by [Ron Wynn](#)

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Jerry Tachoir is a nationally acclaimed bandleader and among the nation's foremost authorities on vibes, marimba and percussion. His newest release is "Stories," featuring the Jerry Tachoir Group. Originally from Pennsylvania, Tachoir is now very much at home here in Nashville. He's also the author of "A Contemporary Mallet Method: An Approach To The Vibrahone & Marimba," and does numerous clinics around the country in addition to performing with his group. We talked about his new release, his feelings about the Nashville jazz scene, his work at clinics and other topics.

*(1) When did you decide on the vibes as your instrument of choice and has jazz always been your first musical love?*

I actually started out as a drummer. I had a great teacher in the Pittsburgh area who insisted that his students become well-rounded percussionists and not just drummers. So because of Babe Fabrizi, I started playing all the percussion instruments, Xylophone, Marimba, Vibes, Tympani, Drum set, hand percussion, etc.

Once I discovered the mallet side of percussion and that I could take my rhythm skills and play melodies and chords, I was hooked. Though I still loved all of percussion, the tuned bar side of percussion became my emphasis.

My career path was pointing toward classical music. I was very active with all the orchestras in the Pittsburgh area, the Pittsburgh Youth Symphony, the Pittsburgh Symphony, the Wilkensburg Symphony, the McKeesport Symphony and the International Orchestra in Switzerland. I was mainly the mallet guy and was hired and featured to play all the mallet instruments. At that time, there weren't many mallet percussionists and my mallet and reading skills were highly sought after.

My interest in jazz came about when my ride home from an orchestra rehearsal (I was too young to drive) got two free tickets to attend the Pittsburgh Three Rivers Jazz Festival. I didn't want to go, I Was A Classical Musician and wanted to go home and practice. Well, either I go to this jazz concert or walk home and it was 12 miles to my home, so I reluctantly went with a very big negative attitude.

I remember it was the Herbie Hancock band. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was exciting and invigorating and I never heard anything like that. At that point, I needed to learn about this jazz thing. I immediately went out and bought the jazz record of the year – Miles Davis Bitches Brew. Wow, I didn't understand it and it seemed totally weird to me.

Since I was already a signed artist/clinician with the Musser Mallet Company in 1972, I got to meet Gary Burton at a music event. I told him I wanted to learn more about jazz and improvisation. Gary invited me to study with him at Berklee College of Music in Boston. From that point on, I became predominately a mallet player, vibes and marimba, devoted to jazz.

*(2) Where was the new LP recorded and how did you decide on the concept and personnel?*

The recording was done in my personal recording studio – Good Vibes Sound Studio in Hendersonville TN. I get the best sound and have some of the best mics and equipment comparable to other studios I have ever been in, plus, I don't have to move my instruments.

The concept of this new CD was to document a collection of Marlene's new compositions, each have a unique story, hence the title of the project "Stories."

In addition to my regular band with bassist, Roy Vogt and drummer, Rich Adams, I had a chance to reconnect with a friend who just moved to Nashville, Danny Gottlieb. Danny and I did a recording together around 1985 called Jerry Tachoir and Friends and I really enjoy his playing. So I decided to split the drumming role on the new CD between Rich and Danny. I always like to have percussionists on my projects to fill in the holes and add some colors and sound effects. On several of my last projects, I used Tom Roady who passed last year. Fortunately, I was able to keep it in the family and use Beth Gottlieb, Danny's wife, to add some percussion. Beth and I both endorse the Ludwig/Musser Company and she did a great job.

*(3) Who would you consider influences?*

Obviously having studied with Gary Burton, I picked up his harmonic thinking and 4 mallet concept, though mine is a bit different being that I used the two inside mallets as my predominant melody mallets and later adapted his concept of using the two top mallets in both hands. This actually gave me more independence as I had both techniques together.

At one point I was told that my band sounded exactly like the Gary Burton band, which even though was meant as a compliment didn't sit right with me. At that time, I made a conscious decision to avoid listening to vibes players and started to emulate pianists. I like Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett. I try to take my 4-mallet technique on a 3-octave aluminum bar instrument and play as a pianist. My left hand becomes my accompanist and my right hand does the soloing and the other mallets fill in the chords and additional notes. So, for the most part, I am a frustrated pianist stuck playing a limited range instrument with 4 mallets in which you have to stand.

*(4) You are both a bandleader and a clinician. Do you enjoy playing gigs or conducting clinics more, or enjoy them equally?*

I actually consider them both about the same. When I do my jazz clinics, I always do a lot of playing to allow the students to see and hear my technique. During my concert performances, I tend to feel as though I am also teaching, since so many people have never seen my instrument played, especially with a solid 4 mallet technique, and with our original music, there needs to be a little bit of explaining. Though the music does tend to hold it's own.

*(5) What do you consider the greatest challenge in terms of vibes within a jazz context?*

I have a saying, "if you are going to be a vibes player; your phone will seldom ring and if you are going to be just a marimba player, don't even bother to have a phone". Meaning – as a vibes player, I'm forced into a leader role, since most musicians and bands seldom consider hiring a vibes player to replace a keyboardist or guitarist. So, I have to generate my own work. To be

honest, I have a certain personality trait that demands perfection and creativity. I'm not a control freak, but I do expect a lot and as a leader, I can control what we play and how we perform it. This is an art form that I am so proud of and only want to give my best, all the time.

*(6) What initially brought you to Nashville?*

This is a very interesting question. I was living in New York City and took a multi-percussion job in a musical call "Pennsylvania USA". It was a wonderful show and I was given a lot of liberty to improvise on mallet percussion as well as all the percussion instruments I was expected to play. Well, the show opened in Hershey PA. Then the 3 Mile Island nuclear accident happened and after several weeks, the show closed because nobody wanted to come near for fear of nuclear exposure. This show was written by Paul Crabtree, who wrote several shows for Opryland. Incidentally, Paul passed during the opening of the show, so this show was plagued with negative karma. The people involved in the show from Nashville told me to move to Nashville that my mallet skills could be utilized. We had given up our apartment in New York as I was doing this musical, so we had to decide what to do. There are essentially 3 music centers in the US, New York, LA and Nashville. We already lived in New York; LA was too far away, so we decided on Nashville.

Living here has been wonderful and controversial. We love it. It is a great central location to tour out of. It has great studios and is very much a music center. However, outsiders and those in my circle of jazz only knew of Nashville as Country Music and Minnie Pearl. I constantly had to justify my move here and I know in the beginning of my move, I lost some work simply because they couldn't imagine a contemporary jazz group being based in Nashville. Fortunately, I know most of this has changed. There are incredible players here and more moving all the time simply because it is affordable, centrally located and a music center.

*(7) You have your wife working alongside you in the group. Have you always worked together professionally?*

Actually when we first got married, we made a conscious decision not to work together. We were afraid it would jeopardize our marriage. When we were in Boston, I had other musicians I toured with and my first record "Forces" actually had another pianist, Tony Germain. There are a few of Marlene's original tunes on that project.

It wasn't until we moved to New York that we started to perform together. We made a promise that we would discuss any problems on the gig and once we got home, we wouldn't discuss this anymore. We somewhat try to keep that promise even today. First, Marlene is a prolific composer and I really like her music. Her piano playing is unique and compliments my busy vibes playing very well. She has a wonderful touch and offers a unique style with extreme taste in her solos. It just works.

Her ability to scat sing has added a wonderful nuance to our music and has become somewhat our signature sound. Her gift of perfect pitch has made this and her creative compositions a true asset and something I am so proud of. I am the luckiest guy on the planet to have an exceptional spouse, a fantastic pianist, a composer of creative compositions that are truly original and she can cook!

*(8) How would you assess the current state of jazz in Nashville from both a personal standpoint and in terms of potential/growth?*

The last several years, I have been touring a great deal performing at colleges and festivals. I don't get the opportunity to perform in Nashville as much as I want and I'm not totally in touch with the local jazz scene anymore. However, when we first got here in 1979, there wasn't much of a jazz scene. As a matter of fact, I was told that if I wanted to work as a session musician, don't say that you are a jazz player. Well, Sorry, this is who I am and what I do.

We were very lucky when we arrived in Nashville. We were immediately hired at a new hotel – The Radisson Plaza and put

into a beautiful modern black and silver lounge and were free and encouraged to play OUR JAZZ. We developed quite a following and it was very successful. I immediately got to meet all the who's who of the Nashville music scene and they all came out to see and hear this new kid from NY playing original contemporary jazz in Nashville. They dug it. This gig went on for more than a year until a new food and beverage director came in. These guys immediately want to make a change and the first place they start is with the music. His idea was, that since this is Nashville, we need to make this hotel Nashville as well. He literally brought in hay bales and hired a country band to turn this upscale black and silver lounge into a barn. Needless to say it failed and that was the end of that gig.

For a while, I felt like we might be overexposed in our hometown of Nashville and we decided to concentrate our energy on the rest of the world. In that regard, it has been very successful, however, we lost our Nashville connections but hope to be in a position to do more locally soon.

*(9) Will you be doing any touring with your current group?*

Absolutely, we are currently booking the summer jazz festivals now. In addition to festivals, we always do a lot of college dates where we will do a master class then an evening concert either with the band or as a Duo. It's a very exciting time for the Jerry Tachoir Group and I'm looking forward to taking this new music to the people. I know they will love it.

*10) What things professionally have you not yet done that you would like to do in the future?*

Having been a leader as I said earlier, I would like to play with someone as a sideman. I actually was hired to play with George Shearing and did one gig with him. He got sick and decided to take some time off and retired the band. My luck!

Knowing what I know, I would be such a good sideman and it would take away a lot of stress and I could just play. Not sure how long I could do that, since my personality wants to control, but I'm willing to give it a try. We have a new Jazz Concerto for Vibraphone and Orchestra that Marlene just finished composing, and I look forward to getting that performed sometime soon, perhaps locally.

There are a few jazz festivals throughout the world that I haven't played and I hope to get to most of them sometime soon. With this new recording, this might be the year. I really like even numbers – so 2014 is going to be great!