

## Talking Jazz

### A Jersey Jazz Interview with Joe Corsello

By Schaen Fox

*Joe Corsello is one of the few highly accomplished musicians of his generation to have had several full-time careers. His early and serious interest in music, and his natural talent, allowed him to achieve early success. He worked with stars such as Peggy Lee and Benny Goodman before he could vote. While still relatively young, he gave up music for a career in law enforcement in his hometown of Stamford, Connecticut. After many years away from music, he found his love for it renewed to the point that when he retired from the police, he returned to the drum chair. The fact that he currently tours with Sonny Rollins shows that those years on the police force did not diminish his force at the drums.*

*In addition to his musicianship, Joe's personality must be a factor in his success. When we did the phone interview in March of 2012, we had never met. He is so warm and engaging that our talk lasted several hours. I have included the very start of our conversation here to illustrate his personality.*



**JC:** Hey, Schaen. How are you? This is a great time to do the interview. The sun is shining here, and it's an absolutely gorgeous day.

**JJ:** Yeah we got the same down here.

**JC:** In Jersey? [Laughs] The sun is shining in New Jersey! I find that hard to believe but okay. [Laughs] I love it.

**JJ:** Is there anything special you would like to talk about?

**JC:** I have read a lot of your stories. I know normally that is your first question. I was thinking about it and I thought about something that has been hounding me for the last 45 years. This would be the time to get it off my chest. [Laughs] It was a sunny day in September, about 1971, and our phone rang. It was Alice Goodman, Benny Goodman's wife. She said, "Why don't you come over around four o'clock for cocktails?" I had been working with Benny for about six months. We had become friendly, and the wives got along together. It was a nice situation.

We lived about a mile down the street from him in Stamford, Connecticut. We used to love going up to his house just to sit around as he told so many incredible stories. Benny was mixing martinis and at about our second, he said, "Oh Joe, I have been

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meaning to ask, I'm cleaning out the attic and garage; and I have Gene Krupa's drum set. I was wondering if you would like it. Feel free to just take it today." My ex-wife chimes right up, "Well, what the hell does he want with that? He's got four sets in the garage now. We've got no room for anything and he is not taking any drum set back with him today." So that's my Gene Krupa drum set story. If I had that today, I wonder what it would be worth. [Laughs]

**JJ:** I almost cracked my jaw when it hit the floor. I don't have to ask why she is your ex-wife.

**JC:** [Laughs] That was a very big contribution. Divorce court, I could see it coming. But I had just left Peggy Lee and I was doing an endorsement for Pearl Drums. They had sent me a brand new set of drums; the Zildjian Company was sending me like two cymbals a week. I had a garage just loaded with stuff. I could understand her point. To her, "Who was Gene Krupa?" just another guy that worked with Benny. To me, it really meant a lot. I was about 20 years old, and Gene was my absolute idol. It was the original one too, the Ludwig set he had played with Benny. I don't think the drums ever hit the dumpster. They went to somebody.

**JJ:** I believe they are in the Smithsonian.

**JC:** That particular set is; now 45 years later I meet Mike Stamm. His parents grew up in Chicago and Gene Krupa was their best friend. Mike actually took a couple of lessons from Gene when he was a little guy; and Gene gave him a wartime set of his drums. On the front of the bass drum it says, "Keep Them Flying" with a picture of a B-52. He had the drum set in his basement and showed them to me numerous times. He worked it out with Zildjian Cymbal Company to house them in their museum.

Zildjian has the original Ringo Starr Ludwig drum set, the Elvin Jones original drum set, all the drum sets. Craigie Zildjian was so impressed with the Gene Krupa set that she actually built a room called the "Gene Krupa Conference Room" at the company in Norwell, Massachusetts. Now all the people that come through the facility, she takes them right past the glass-enclosed Gene Krupa drums set with all the pictures, cymbals and drums. It is quite a sight.

Apparently he had a bunch of drums. Drummers tend to collect a lot of things. Mike also gave me a Gene Krupa bass drum. It had been altered because a spur and a couple of the lugs were broken and replaced with newer equipment. I have that in my basement. I had a grand opening here with a whole bunch of drummer friends and said, "We are going to remove the bass drum head. I don't know what is in here, but I can hear something." Back then they used to pack the bass drum with a lot of newspaper to kill down the overtone when you hit it. We open the drum and sure enough there was a newspaper. It had been ripped into little sheets and we sat around trying to put it together. It was *The Chicago Times* from 1952. You had 12 or 13 grown men sitting on the floor trying to put a newspaper together. Drummers are crazy, but it was kind of cool. [Chuckles]

**JJ:** What was Benny's house like?

**JC:** He had an absolutely beautiful, typical North Stamford home. It was an old colonial, and his backyard backed right up to the third hole at the Rockrimmon Country Club. There was a beautiful in-ground pool, and he had completely redone the pool house into a studio. He had a 9-foot Steinway piano there. That is where we used to rehearse. A couple of times Columbia Records brought their mobile truck up and we recorded at the pool house. When the Benny Goodman archives were at Yale University, I spoke to the curator, and he

told me they had those three master tapes. So far, nobody has any interest in putting them out; and they probably won't come out.

He was quiet a guy. He first heard me playing with Peggy Lee. She was just another sweetheart. She took me right under her wing, and we had such a good time together. I was with her for almost a year. Paul

McCartney had written arrangements for her for a record called "Let's Love." It was geared around a 40-piece orchestra with a rhythm section. The orchestra was incredible. We opened at the Plaza in New York City and were there for two weeks. It was completely sold out, standing room only and two shows a night. Benny Goodman was there opening night, and that how that began with me.

The first group that I played with Benny was with John Bunch, Slam Stewart, Bucky Pizzarelli, Peter Appleyard and Urbie Green. Zoot Sims was the first tenor player we had. Here I am a little 19-year-old playing the drums. It was kind of nerve shattering playing in front of audiences I had never experienced before. We were playing festivals with 10 - 20,000 people. At the Royal Albert Hall he wanted to acknowledge that the Queen was there, and Rex Harrison and Paul McCartney also. Then [he said] "... now we're going to play 'Sing, Sing, Sing' and I'd like to feature my drummer Joe Corsello." All I wanted to do was vomit or pass out at that point but we made it through it. [Laughs]

There is a nice recording that someone did from Hamburg, Germany, in 1973. That record has been out and has pretty much that band on it. I think George Masso is playing trombone instead of Urbie and Al Klink playing tenor instead of Zoot, but we had a great trumpet player, John MacLevie from Scotland. If you go on my website, there is a video of that concert, and it is also on YouTube. That is so scary because that rhythm section was so phenomenal, so tight. With Slam Stewart, Bucky Pizzarelli and John Bunch, to be the drummer all you had to do was sit there and flap your arms and you were right in time with them.

**JJ:** Did Benny say how he ended up with Gene's original set?

**JC:** I think he left it at Benny's house for the rehearsals they did. This is the story Joe Morello told me afterwards because I never asked Benny. When they traveled, a lot of that stuff went to Benny's house. When I traveled with Benny, I had to bring my own drum set, and numerous times Benny would say, "Just leave them here and I'll have the road manager get them to the airport."

**JJ:** Did you write down any of Benny's stories?

**JC:** A lot of my stories are things I saw myself. Benny did some really off-the-wall things, but he would tell me stories about how he hated drummers that did this or that, or were show-offs. He was trying to mold me into what he was looking for in a drummer. He had fired Grady Tate and gotten rid of Connie Kaye. I stayed with him for

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three years. Some of the funny stories are about how cheap he was, but I don't think he was malicious. I think he just wasn't thinking. We were in the Dallas airport on a Sunday morning and he said, "Do you think you could find me *The New York Times*?" I said, "I'll take a walk and see." Well, the Times on a Sunday in Dallas is not the \$1.25 it is in New York City. I had to spend five bucks. I handed it to him and stood there, and he never said, "What do I owe you?" [Chuckles]

Another time, we were playing with Zoot Sims, Bucky, Slam Stewart, and John Bunch — the whole bunch. After the concert, Benny goes, "I want to buy you guys breakfast." We went to this diner and were eating and talking, and it was great. When the check came, Benny asked for it and said, "Oh, Zoot, you had the two eggs and bacon. Yours is a dollar thirty-five. Joe, you had pancakes. Yours is two fifteen..." He collected money from everybody, but that was his idea of taking us out to breakfast.

On the other hand, you hear about musicians that really disliked him. I never saw that side of Benny. Benny had a lot of problems, like he was in a lot of pain with his back. He was in his 70s when we were doing these world tours with flights of 10 or 11 hours, and Benny was really hurting. It was a lot for me and at that time I was in my early 20s.

Benny was a different kind of character. He had money and was going to have a good time, and he did. He had tailored clothes and shoes. I looked up to him for that. He dressed to the nines. He had a home in St. Maarten and here in Stamford and his penthouse in Manhattan. And he played his ass off. He was really a tremendous player. We used to play with symphony orchestras a lot. We would do half the program with the sextet, and the other half he would play with the symphony orchestra. I would sit there and listen. He would do the clarinet concerto in b-flat, and it was unbelievable. He was a great sight reader, just a phenomenal musician.

**JJ:** Do you have any souvenirs that Benny gave you?

**JC:** [Chuckles] I had some reeds that I picked up. He used to offer me so much stuff, but no, I don't have anything. When you are 20, you don't think about those things. I have very few pictures of Benny Goodman, very, very few; just the ones people took during concerts. [Chuckles] I've sat on a couch with Frank Sinatra when I was with Peggy Lee. We were in her green room after one of her shows. They had a cocktail party. Frank and I are sitting on the couch talking, and he said, "These things bore the crap out of me." I said, "Me too." He said, "Let's get out of here." I'm thinking about all these different people that I've sat and had

conversations with and hung out with and not a picture because, like I said, when you are young you don't think about such things.

**JJ:** Did Benny keep any souvenirs around that he showed you?

**JC:** No. The only things I remember seeing in his living room were Grammy awards that he had won. Those you do not keep in the garage. Those are pretty exciting to look at. There was beautiful artwork but as far as having a room with pictures of him with musicians, like I have I never saw that.

**JJ:** Well do you have any souvenirs we would see around your house?

**JC:** My house is loaded with CDs, cymbals, and drums. I had a carpenter build a CD rack that houses about 3,000 CDs, and I still don't have enough room for them all. Everybody says, "Why don't you put them on an iPod?" But I have the biggest kick being able to hold them and read the liner notes. The iPod is great when I'm traveling but when I want to sit and really listen, I love to have the CD in my hands and read the notes. The kids don't have that today. They download stuff and have no idea who it is. And there are no record stores where you can go and just browse.

**JJ:** Before we get too far away from it, how did you get to work with Peggy Lee?

**JC:** I was playing at Michael's Pub with Marlene VerPlanck and Peggy's manager heard me. He asked me how I felt about playing with Peggy Lee. I said I would love to. He sent me a cassette of the tunes Paul McCartney had just composed and arranged for Peggy's "Let's Love" tour. I thought it was tremendous. The first day of rehearsal was scary for me because Joe Beck was playing guitar. A lot of heavy New York studio musicians were in the orchestra along with the violins, the cellos, the harpist, three keyboard players, a percussionist, and I was the one keeping the whole thing together. It was strange because Peggy was a straight ahead singer and Paul McCartney was the rock influence. A lot of the stuff was written in different time signatures, so you would be playing along in four and then a couple measures of five, then seven, then back to four. I was never used to that. I think three was the weirdest signature I had gotten involved in until I heard Joe Morello play "Take 5." When you are playing with a 40-piece orchestra in these weirder time signatures, it is more difficult for the drummer. The string players play way behind the beat, but Joe Beck and I got together and talked over the charts. We were like a team in the rhythm section.

Peggy called me that night and said, "Do you like those drums that you're playing?" I had a small jazz

kit and said, "I love the drums, but I don't think they are right for what we are doing." She said, "Why don't you get yourself a set that you are comfortable with?" I went to The Professional Drum Shop and put a huge set of Pearl drums on Peggy Lee's account so I could move the band. Red Norvo liked my drum set, but Peggy Lee didn't; so I ended up with another full set of drums.

I was with her in the '70s and she was suffering with everything. She traveled with two nurses and during the day she stayed in bed. One day at about three in the afternoon she called me up to her room and in this real groggy voice goes, "Joe I think I've had a stroke. I just want you to know that we are not going to be performing this evening." The nurse winked and smiled at me. I went back to my room and called the other guys. I said, "We may have a problem tonight. Peggy is not doing too well." Then I get a call, "Make sure you are on stage at seven." Next thing you know, here she comes down the runway on stage. Later I saw the nurse and asked, "What's up?" She said, "We glued her eyelids open. You must take everything she says with a grain of salt." She was a big complainer.

**JJ:** She was also known for controlling everything in her show. Was that a problem for you?

**JC:** It wasn't because I used to be directly behind her. She stood by the piano, right where it opened up. I was behind that. They had a fan inside the piano, and she got her air from that fan. But she was a control freak. Everything had to be in its proper place as far as the musicians were concerned. Tony Bennett is the same way.

**JJ:** Your father was with Sammy Kaye. Is there much of a history of musicians in your family?

**JC:** My grandfather used to just strum a guitar and sing Italian songs with his jug of wine. [Chuckles] My uncle Tommy was a professional trombone player who turned me on to people like J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding. My dad was the original Hawaiian guitarist with Sammy Kaye. That is how I got my start. The rhythm section musicians used to come to our home and the drummer would give me things. One day he was ready to throw a cymbal out, so he gave it to me, and his old snare drum. I basically started making a drum kit up of my own. I was probably about five or six years old and would play the drums along to their records.

**JJ:** Les Paul talked about how some musicians who were stuck in sweet bands hated their jobs. What did your dad think of Sammy Kaye's music?

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**JC:** My dad talked more about what a character Sammy Kaye was. I think my dad enjoyed the music, especially since he played the Hawaiian guitar, and most of those tunes were written around my father. He wasn't heavily involved with jazz. Around the house there was always a Tony Mottola record and all that Enoch Light stuff. He was a bass player and a guitar player and really wanted to play like these guys, but he could not understand how guys could solo the way they do. I think the music of Sammy Kaye was right in his element.

When I was with Marian McPartland, we played Nixon's inaugural ball. Agnew, the Vice President was there and the band across the hall was the Lester Lanin Orchestra and I remember it had Big Chief Russell Moore on trombone and a whole bunch of jazz players. They hated that music and said, "We are so embarrassed to be here. We didn't think we'd see Marian McPartland and her trio. What are we doing here? We are sorry. This sucks." Big Chief Russell Moore had on the little sailor cap that Lester Lanin used to give them, and he was so embarrassed. I said, "Don't worry about it. Come over and play with us." [Laughs] So I know that feeling.

**JJ:** Please tell us about what it was like playing an inaugural ball.

**JC:** Marian McPartland got called to play the inaugural ball for Richard Nixon. We went through the FBI background checks. The Secret Service agents came to my home and interviewed my neighbors. When I got to the White House, they took my drum set totally apart and looked inside the drums. They searched me and gave me my pass into the hall. We did our little concert, and the rest was mainly cocktails where Lester Lanin was playing. I got to hang out with everybody and sat at their tables and talked to them. I ended up sitting with Agnew, who I thought was a pretty cool guy. He was talking politics, and I pretended to know what he was talking about. I got to meet Nixon and his cabinet.

Every time Marian would play Blues Alley in Washington all those politicians were like nine deep at the bar every night we were there. I said, "This is how the country is run? Are you kidding me?" One of them was a great clarinet player.

**JJ:** OK, back to *your* story. Was high school important in your development as a musician?

**JC:** I played in the high school band. I was going to play football, but on my second outing I broke

my nose. I decided that it would be safer to play snare drum in the marching band, and I played in an otherwise all black jazz band. I was the token white guy.

I would practice for eight or nine hours a day. I'd go to a friend, John Kaye's house, who ultimately became the percussionist with Elvis Presley, with my practice pad when it was still dark out. We would practice until it was dark out again playing the whole day. I went to high school with Paul Congella and when I was 13 years old, I played in his bass player father's polka band. Paul was a great bass player and really good composer/arranger with Duke Ellington. He quit music and is an I.T. guy somewhere in New Jersey. One of my best friends in high school was Jackie Robinson Jr. To this day, I kick myself in the rear end because I think about all the times sitting on their couch with Jackie Robinson to my left and Rachel to my right watching TV. I say to myself, "How stupid, because all I had to do was ask him to sign one or two balls." [Laughs]

When I went off to Berklee, Jackie joined the army. He served during the Vietnam War and was tragically killed driving on a rainy night. He hit a tree and died. I still see Rachel from time to time. She is living in Brooklyn now. Ultimately when I was working with Marian McPartland, George Simon asked if I would be the house drummer for the Jackie Robinson Jazz Festival at their property. That was an experience I'll remember because I was a young kid and got to play with Bill Evans, Tony Bennett, Herbie Mann, Gerry Mulligan, Dizzy and Jimmy Owens.

**JJ:** What was it like when you went to the Berklee College of Music?

**JC:** Back in 1964, it was still in a little house on a corner. I think the total enrollment of the students was 250. [Chuckles] There were 10 or 11 drummers all studying with Alan Dawson. It was just a trip for me. I had done my homework on Alan Dawson. I didn't go in for any kind of degree program. There would be just a piece of paper saying I was a drummer when I graduated. I made it through my first year, and my grades were not so great because I started playing seven nights a week. I don't think anyone had ever graduated from Berklee back then except arrangers who wanted to get the four-year benefit of the place. They had explained that to us during our orientation days because apparently lots of students didn't last longer than a year.

It was pretty funny. I was getting home at four or five o'clock in the morning from playing in all the different places in Boston with such great musicians. I was 17 years old and got asked to play in a

group with Sam Rivers, the tenor player. One night Sam said to me, "Well this is going to be my last week because I have to go on the road for a couple of months." I said, "Where are you going?" He said, "On the road with Miles Davis." Well he might as well have told me he was going with Santa Claus because I would have believed that as much as Miles Davis. I called up my good friend Michael Cuscuna and asked, "Have you ever heard of a tenor player name Sam Rivers?" He said, "Sam Rivers? Oh my God he is tremendous. He is going with Miles Davis. I just read it in *Down Beat*." [Laughs] I felt like a real jackass. My second year, Lee Berk called me into his office and said, "Joe, I'm sorry but you are out of here." I stayed in Boston for probably another half year continuing to play and still studying privately with Alan Dawson. I just loved Alan. At night, I would go see him play. He was a tremendous teacher and mentor, absolutely phenomenal.

**JJ:** What about your time in the army?

**JC:** I left Boston and came home in 1966. My mother said, "Guess what? Your 2-S status has now changed to 1-A with the army draft and Uncle Sam needs you. You're going to be drafted. Get yourself down to the army recruiter and do what you got to do. This was your idea — getting thrown out of college." The recruiter asked, "Do you have any skills? I see you went to music college." I said, "I play the drums." He said, "There is an army field band in Maryland that's auditioning for drummers. Would you like to audition?" I did the audition. He called and said, "Are you putting me on? You got a 100 on that audition. Why would we want to put you in a Maryland band? We are going to audition you for the army band. They are housed in New York City." I took that audition and got 98.

I went to basic training at Fort Dix. After the eight weeks they made the announcements to the whole platoon. They would say some name and, "You're going to Vietnam," then the next one, "You're going to Fort Bragg for advanced infantry training. And Pfc. Joe Corsello," and there was a pause and the sergeant said, "US Army Band, Governors Island, New York City." [Laughs] I had to sneak into the barracks, get my stuff and get out as quickly as possible. I was supposed to go to Governors Island, but they moved us to Fort Wadsworth.

I went to the Army band and got to meet some really monster musicians. Most of the guys were from Manhattan School of Music and Juilliard. It was about a 130-piece orchestra, which was absolutely unbelievable, and then we had a stage band made of such phenomenal musicians like Lou Soloff and Donald Hann on trumpet. Everybody in that band went with somebody heavy when they

left the army. All the arrangers from New York City, like Gary McFarlane and Johnny Richards, would come out and we would play their charts for them for free. Then they would go back to their own orchestras and put their charts together and do what they had to do.

At the time the army was allowing me to take music lessons with whomever I wanted to. They picked up the tab. I studied with Joe Hunt, Duggy Allen and Sonny Igoe. It was great. I was basically living in New York City, and I got to meet so many musicians. That is when I joined Local 802 and got my cabaret card. You needed that to play anywhere where there was alcohol being sold. From that point on I was a musician. That was stamped on my forehead, full-time. [Chuckles]

I did that for roughly two and a half years. Then a U.S. Senator asked, "How would you like to get six months early out of the service? The Glenn Miller band with Buddy DeFranco is looking for a drummer." He pulled some strings, and I went with the Glenn Miller band. That was tremendous playing with Buddy DeFranco. He was a great guy and would feature the rhythm section with just himself on a lot of tunes. He gave me an opportunity to play with heavyweights, which was great. I was with the band maybe seven months and learned an awful lot. It was the original Glenn Miller book, and it was huge; there had to be a thousand arrangements. The pages were all yellow, busted and broken with coffee and mustard stains on them. I would open the book, and it would break. I would have to fake half of it.

**JJ:** I'd like to back up a bit. What made Alan Dawson so important to you?

**JC:** Alan had a totally different method of teaching. He wanted you to be your own person. He didn't want you to sound like anybody else. He wasn't your average teacher that would teach, "You need the 26 rudiments." He would teach you the basics, but he felt that 90 percent of your playing came from your heart. The other 10 percent was the technical end of it. That is what I convey to my students. I use the same approach. He was a great man and died way too soon of some blood disease. I was absolutely devastated. It was almost the same feeling I had when Papa Jo Jones passed away. Papa Jo and I were really good friends.

**JJ:** OK, then. This is a good time to ask you about Papa Jo.

**JC:** I met Papa Jo when I was about 12 years old. Michael Cuscuna [later a co-founder of Mosaic Records] and I were invited out on a boat with a gentleman named Willis Lineman. He was quite a wealthy man and absolutely loved jazz. They would tie up about six or seven cabin cruisers in Long Island Sound and get a band together for the afternoon. We were friends with his son and he called and asked, "Would you and Michael like to



Posing during a break in recording are: Joe Corsello, guitarist Gene Bertoncini, vibist Mike Mainieri and bassist Michael Moore. Photo courtesy of Joe Corsello.

come out? We have a terrific band: Coleman Hawkins, Mike Mainieri playing vibes, Johnny Morris playing piano, Ray Lucas playing bass and Papa Jo Jones." We just flipped out. It was a day in August, like 90 degrees, and Coleman Hawkins shows up in his three-piece suit, shirt and tie, had his hat on and carrying his tenor. [Chuckles] Now again — it is 90 degrees! Then Papa Jo shows up wearing a sports jacket, shirt and tie, looking so sharp and dapper. Then the two younger musicians show up, and they start playing. It was an experience of a lifetime for me.

Someone mentioned to Papa Jo that I was a drummer and would it be alright if I played a song. He said, "Oh, by all means." I started playing brushes. When I finished he said to me, "You played more with your left hand in that one tune than I played last year. What's the matter with you?" So he pulled me aside and that was my first lesson with Papa Jo Jones. What a nice man. When I got older and started going into the city, I got to see Papa Jo. I told him about that and he said, "Oh, I remember." I'm sure he didn't, but we became friendly and used to talk constantly. He lived at Frank's Drum Shop on 8th Ave. Frank Appaletto owned it, and Jo Jones lived in a room there and gave lessons during the day. As a kid, I would just

sit in the store and watch every drummer that I had on record or even thought about just walk in.

One day Louis Hayes walked in. He had just recorded "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" with Cannonball. He had his Zildjian ride cymbal, an old K, made in Istanbul. He said to Frank, "How much?" Frank said, "You can't sell that. That is your ride cymbal. Are you crazy?" He said, "Aw, how much? How much?" Finally Frank said, "Alright, I'll give you 50 bucks for it." I'm listening, and Frank is watching me. I said, "Frank, I've got to have that; how much?" He said, "Give me 65, kid." I said, "I don't have any money. Please hold it for me." He said, "I'll hold it for a day." I ran home and begged my mother and everybody for \$10, for \$5, until I got my \$65. I went back and bought the cymbal. The cymbal today is probably worth quite a bit. Everyone that sees it completely flips out. Jeff Hamilton saw it in Italy when we were playing a festival and ran up to the bandstand pretending to be the drum tech. I saw him running through the crowd with the cymbal. I'm yelling, "Stop that man." That was a kick. [Chuckles]

Jo was a sweet guy. One of the last times I saw Jo was in Heathrow

Airport in London. We had just arrived, and I saw this elderly black gentleman sitting in a corner with a towel around his neck sweating profusely, shaking. He said, "Oh I've got pneumonia. I'm going back to New York. I'm too sick, too sick." At the time they had removed half his tongue because he had cancer from smoking cigarettes, and he had a stroke and used a cane. I just felt so bad. We hugged and talked, and I sat with him for as long as I possibly could. I think within a month or two he had passed. He was a wonderful guy with such a big heart. He taught me so much about playing brushes that my brush playing is all due to him. He would tell you anything you wanted to know, and if he didn't like the way you sounded, he would tell you right to your face. [Chuckles] Roy Haynes is the same way. Roy always asks me to get up and play. "I'm not going to play." He said, "Why not?" I said, "You just don't get up in front of God and play."

**JJ:** About that cymbal, do you have proof that it is the same one?

**JC:** I did the Litchfield Jazz Festival years ago, and Louis Hayes was on the program. I brought the cymbal into the musician's tent, and he looked at the cymbal, and a tear ran right down his face. I said, "I want you to have it back." He goes, "Nope. You got it fair and square. It is yours." I said, "Louis,

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I have kept this since I was 16 years old. The cymbal is yours." He would not take it back. A photographer came and took a million pictures with me and him. He said, "Do you want me to sign the cymbal?" I said, "Nope. I use it all the time. If you sign it, I'm only going to play it off." But I've got all kinds of pictures of Louis Hayes and me holding that cymbal. That is the only authenticity I have.

**JJ:** Did he say why he sold it?

**JC:** I think maybe he was down on his luck a little bit at that time like some of those guys were back in the day. It looked like it was a tough year for him and he had to start selling stuff — like anyone might do today. I can't tell you how many phone calls I get during the week from drummers asking me if I'm going to turn down any work to please throw it their way because times are really tough. Tours are being cancelled because of the Euro. Nobody knows what the dollar is going to be worth tomorrow, so everyone is holding back. Now is the time to buy. Like the housing market, everything for sale, because guys are giving stuff away just to get some money in their pockets.

Especially with jazz music that we all love and listen to; Michael Cuscuna claimed that the surveys Mosaic took showed that two percent of the population listened to jazz and that was 10 years ago. I had dinner with him the other night, and he said it's less than that now. It's tough. Things aren't any better — especially for these young kids that take music very seriously, school and honor students. I hope that there's going to be a place for them when it's that time. I tell them, "You should really get a degree in business. You can always play your drums on weekends and make some extra money, but get a degree that means something." Some are diehards and want to take drums at Berklee College of Music. [Chuckles] I say, "You have got to be completely out of your mind. Go to MIT and study engineering and play drums as a hobby." Because the music business today is nothing like it was then, which is very, very sad.

It is pretty scary. I talked to someone who said, "I'm working six nights a week. Some pay \$75. The big ones pay \$100. I said, "Think about this; if you play 7 nights a week for the whole year, you would qualify for food stamps." He looked at me and said, "What?" I said, "If you made \$100 each night for 365 days you would have \$36,500 a year. Good luck to you, pal."

**JJ:** I hate to say this Joe, but now I'm kind of depressed that I called you.

**JC:** [Laughs] And that is making \$100 a night. These poor kids that are coming out of college are making \$35 or \$50 in these clubs. I can't believe it. I tell them as you get older you won't be able to support a family or do this or that. I have so many parents calling to thank me for talking their kid out of going to music college.

**JJ:** OK, I guess now is a good time to ask why you dropped playing the drums and became a police officer.

**JC:** I did three world tours with Benny Goodman. My wife at the time wanted to start a family. Music back then was plentiful. For example, I knew I was off for two weeks with Peggy Lee so Sandler and Young called, "Are you available for two weeks?" When they were off and Peggy was off again, Tony Bennett would say, "I have a tour. Can you come out for a month?" It was just constant music, music, music. It was so busy you were waking up in a different country every day. It was just so much traveling. The owner of Michael's Pub insisted that I be the house drummer, so for a year I was in and out of Michael's Pub playing with the likes of Red Norvo, Joe Venuti, David McKenna, and Marlene VerPlanck. There was just so much work for everyone, it was a constant situation. It was nothing like it is today.

When I left Benny Goodman I was about 26 years old. All the music and most of the good musicians were starting to filter out to California, [for] the Johnny Carson show and all the studio dates. They were closing a lot of studios in Manhattan because there was no more commercial work. The drum machine took over. I said to my wife, "I really don't know what to do. I'm caught between a rock and a hard place. I really don't want to go into a school system and teach because that's what I'll end up doing for the rest of my life and I don't want that. Let me go back to college and take a couple of courses at University of Connecticut."

I signed up for a graduate sociology course and a psychology course. I'm sitting in a classroom, and I am close to 30 years old at the time. The professor is the new Stamford, Connecticut police chief. I was into maybe the fourth or fifth week and he said to me, "Did you ever think about becoming a police officer?" He started telling me about the police department, what it pays and how good the benefits are. And I'm thinking about when I went to the bank and said to the banker, "I would like a \$5,000 loan. I'm a freelance musician working with Benny Goodman." He laughed, and I walked out of the bank without two cents. I talked to my wife and she said, "Oh, what a great idea. You'll have a paycheck every Thursday. It won't be as much as you're used to making, but we can start a life. We

can buy a house and start a family." In the meantime, Alex Wilder sent me a \$25 check to go see a psychiatrist. Marion McPartland called me, "Are you crazy?" I said, "I've got to do it."

I kind of had a meltdown anyway. I wasn't that interested in music anymore. I had done so much so soon that by the time I was 30 years old I was just totally burnt. I had about 12,000 LPs in the house. I called a guy, and I think he gave me \$2.50 an LP for the whole load. He handed me a check, and I gave it to my ex-wife. I graduated from the police academy, came back to Stamford and rode in a police car for two years, and worked in the housing projects. They really put me in a terrible place right off the bat. I guess that is how you learn. Then I became a homicide detective. [Chuckles] I did homicide, rape, burglary and robbery for 12 years. It was very busy, and I learned a lot.

When I had about five years to go the police chief said, "We are starting a new thing called 'community policing.' We want to put police officers in high crime areas, all these housing projects, and start programs for the children. Would you be interested?" I said, "What an idea! That's great. I'd love to open a music studio for the kids." I ended up with an \$85,000 grant and before you know it, we had a music program running. It was like a pilot program for the country. And that's my police story. [Laughs]

**JJ:** Are you still in touch with any of those students?

**JC:** I see some from time to time. They are playing rap music and stuff they really enjoy. They say if it wasn't for me, they would probably be in jail. If I saved one kid, it was worth the whole program. I still hear from the police department today; our ex-mayor is now the governor of Connecticut, and he remembers it well. Every time I see him or our senators, they have nothing but praise for the whole program.

**JJ:** What other areas picked it up?

**JC:** I know Chicago came out and other PDs from the state of Connecticut. I left when I turned 55, and nobody pursued it because not many other police officers had that musical background. I keep going because it's the children today that I'm concerned about; everything is in education now. Just like with the Zildjian cymbal company, Craigie Zildjian has taken over the company. Her whole thing is putting young kids in the right direction in music and the arts education. And that's my thing now.

I started a program called "SummerJazz Workshop" with a friend, Rick Petrone, a bass player who used to be with Maynard Ferguson. We have an

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## JOE CORSELLO

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elementary band that we begin with every year, and then an intermediate and advanced group. We buy sheet music and get all the old arrangements. We teach them scales, how to play their instruments, and how to solo on a piece. Last year I got about 40 students. I try to be a mentor. It is a great feeling. It is like the way I grew up. I had nothing but the best. When I think about my association with Benny and all those guys taking me under their wings and sitting in a rhythm section with Bucky Pizzarelli it wipes me out.

**JJ:** When did your desire to play music return?

**JC:** About 10 years into being a police officer someone called me to play a gig with them.

"The gig pays about 200 bucks cash for two hours. All you

have to do is walk in with a shirt and a tie, sit down and pretend you're playing the drums. We need a drummer." I said, "I'm not interested." They called me back so finally I said, "Okay." I had an absolute ball. It all came back to me and I started playing drums again.

**JJ:** Before we get too far away from it, how did you connect with Alex Wilder?

**JC:** Alex Wilder was such a good friend of Marian McPartland that he would follow us wherever we went. We became really good friends. We used to talk, eat, sleep and drink music. When I told him I wanted to write a drum book. I asked Alex to write the foreword to it. He told me some horrible life stories. He went through a lot physically that left him smoking five packs, and drinking 15 to 20 cups of coffee per day. I'm sure that is what killed him.

**JJ:** On a happier note, what is it like to tour with Sonny Rollins?

**JC:** When you sit and have conversation with Sonny Rollins it is so refreshing. The man is such a gentleman, and he is scary in the same breath. We were doing a concert in this huge arena in California and the place was mobbed with thousands of people. We were playing a duet thing together and he got up on the drum riser. The way the spotlights were hitting him, and the way the

lights were hitting me with my macular degeneration problem, I almost stopped playing because I got the chills. He looked like God. I couldn't believe it. It was like Jesus was on stage with me playing a Calypso for an hour and a half.



Joe Corsello performing with Sonny Rollins.

He really relies so much on his drummer and percussionist. You work for those two hours and he just goes from one song to another. He does not take an intermission. When he gets into "St. Thomas" he might literally play that for half an hour. And you've got to keep that groove and tempo going and you're soaking wet and the sweat is pouring off of you and you're almost to the point where you are dizzy. I was totally exhausted. Then to look up and see this figure looking at you was scary. I've never said that to him. [Chuckles]

He is a man you can call on the phone and talk to for hours. He calls you in the hotel room at three o'clock in the morning and immediately you're thinking somebody's dead, and it is him. "Hey, what are you doing? I feel like talking." Nicest man in the world, a gentle giant and his playing is still unbelievable, unbelievable. I've never heard anybody play a solo for half an hour and never repeat himself. I don't know what goes through the man's mind, I really don't. That brain has to be saved. I don't know how you can do that. It's like talking for an hour and a half and never using the same words. He comes up with new stuff every time he plays. He and Dave Brubeck are the last of that stature. Dave is 94 and probably not playing anymore, so that is really the end of an era. Sonny is 82, but he is a healthy guy and looks great.

[Editor's note: This interview was conducted before Dave Brubeck died on December 5, 2012.]

**JJ:** How did you hook up with Sonny?

**JC:** I was playing at the IAJE convention in New York City. I had heard that Sonny Rollins was coming in to do a lecture. I had never seen him, and my brother Richard has been his personal engineer probably for 40 years now. I had a couple of hours free so I ran up to see him. He gave his talk and I said hello, and we talked for a second. There were a million people trying to get his autograph or take a picture, and the security guys threw me aside. The next day I was in my hotel room and my phone rang. It was my brother. He said, "Sonny is auditioning drummers tomorrow. We are doing a record date. Why don't you come by?" I went to the studio and they were working on this tune in a waltz tempo. Sonny said, "Can you play in three?" I said, "Yeah" and the next thing I know, I did that record *Sonny Please*.

So far that's his latest studio recording and that was a real honor. Then he said to me, "Are you available?" He is such a humble guy. Like [I could say], "No. I've got to do a wedding on this date and I'm with an accordion player on that date. I can't play with you." [Laughs] I said, "Are you kidding me?" That's how it started. My association with Sonny Rollins has opened the door for me to so many other people like Roy Haynes, [chuckles] who is a great friend. At this point, when I come home at the end of the day, my wife, Debbie will say to me, "Joe, Sonny Rollins called, and, oh, Roy Haynes called. Make sure you give them a call back. "How many people do you know that come home and hear that kind of thing from their wives?"

**JJ:** Since this is for *Jersey Jazz*, would you tell us about any connection Jersey has had with your career?

**JC:** Doing numerous concerts in New Jersey, and meeting Bucky Pizzarelli and Joe Morello. Those two guys alone have to be great for the state. Joe Morello wouldn't leave New Jersey for anything. Irvington was his town; that was it, and he lived in a tough neighborhood. He was from Springfield,

Massachusetts. I don't know how he ended up in New Jersey. I understand Joe's widow has moved to Madison into the same building as Shanghai Jazz upstairs in an apartment.

He is the reason why I am playing drums. My dad took me to a Dave Brubeck concert in the early '60s, and I just watched him [Morello] play. I met him afterwards and he was the nicest guy to talk to. He was such a technical drummer. His hands were ridiculous. It was a situation where this blind kid was stuck inside the house practicing while all the other kids were out playing baseball or football. That was nine or ten hours of practice a day. He started off as a violin player. I understand that he was accomplished as a young kid too. Then his dad used to bring him to vaudeville shows, and they would get front row seats with the orchestra playing in the pit. Joe had his ears on the drummer and kept asking his dad, "Can I study the drums?" Finally he talked his dad into it and became such a great drummer.

The stories he used to tell me were so phenomenal. When he was with Dave and they played these little clubs in Manhattan that were mob joints with the mobsters at the front table. They would say, "Hey, we want to hear a drum solo from the kid." If you listen to all the earlier stuff, Dave wasn't like that. When he had a different drummer on the earlier stuff, there was never any drum solo. Joe turned that band around and was a featured part of the quartet. And people used to go to hear that quartet just to hear Joe do "Take Five." I truly believe that is what put Dave on the map.

Paul Desmond didn't want Joe in the group. Dave loved Joe for the show stopping part of it because everywhere they went, everyone was yelling "Drum solo, Drum solo!" That was the last thing Paul wanted. If you listen to the records that came out under Paul's name he had very quiet drummers playing, and it was never Joe Morello. I understand from Joe that they would get into fights all the time. I think Dave had to pull them apart one time because they were ready to have a fistfight. They hated each other. It must have been a very weird quartet to be in especially when they traveled by car.

**JJ:** The best Buddy Rich concert I ever saw was the night Buddy saw Joe sitting in the third row. He just kicked that band up so far it was amazing. He wanted to show off for Joe.

**JC:** Oh man. He had such respect from Buddy. Roy Haynes just loved Joe. They were very good friends. Joe was a very special man; and he loved to shoot. [Chuckles] That used to kill me. He wanted to go to the range and go shooting. I kept saying, "What?"

He said, "Oh yeah, I've got guns in the house. I've got this 45, and you are not going to believe this thing. It's an original Colt 45 from the '20s. It's got this, it's got that..." and I'm going, "Are you kidding me?" He said, "No, no, you've got to come down and see it, and we'll go shooting." I'm saying, "Now let me see." [Laughs] He was such a beautiful guy.

We just became so friendly over the years. When he found out my eyesight was going he said, "You gotta get a dog." I said, "I'm not that bad yet. Really, I can still see a lot." He said, "Oh, but you still got to get a dog. I've got this place here in Jersey. I'll call them up for you." He was such a caring person. A drum show in Massachusetts called him to do a clinic. He called me and said, "I want you to do it with me, 'Morello and Corsello' — that will be great." All the ads went out, and I couldn't sleep at nights thinking I'm going to do a drum clinic with Joe Morello. Then he was teaching at Glenn Webber's music store, and he fell. He chipped his tail bone, and that was it. That was about a year before he passed. He never really got out of bed again. I ended up doing the clinic with John Riley, the drummer with the Vanguard Orchestra, but I still have the posters. It was such a thrill that he asked me to do that with him.

There was a guy that died very depressed because of his eyesight. We had something in common — the macular degeneration. He had it as a young kid and totally went blind. We used to talk about that all the time and talk about music. He used to send me stuff all the time. I've got drum solos of Joe's that were never recorded for the public. It is a thrill to have been part of Joe's life.

Every time I go to Jersey and play concerts, I love it. It's a state I wouldn't mind living in especially if I could live near Bucky. [Laughs] I would like that. Some fantastic musicians came out of there. And your Jersey Jazz Society is fantastic. Hilton Head has a jazz society and Orlando and they will have 800 people show up for a concert. These are phenomenal organizations keeping the music alive. I don't know what venues there are in Jersey anymore. I look forward to Shanghai Jazz. I love that owner [David Niu]. He's fantastic. The last time I played there was because Alan Vaché called me. We go there and Warren showed up, so I had the two of them in front of me. Alan is the closest thing to Benny Goodman I have heard so far, and Warren is unbelievable and so nonchalant. You could have a ball with him and never know he played the cornet; then he picks it up and wipes everybody out. I said, "You make me sick." [Laughs]

His dad, Warren senior, was my whole hook with Jersey Jazz. When I was with Benny Goodman, his

dad said, "I'm forming a band to bring down to Saint Maarten to play at the Mullet Bay Beach Hotel for two months." We went and played cocktail hour every night. That is how my association began with Warren, Jr. He was just a young kid. The father would have me come down to Jersey to play every Sunday afternoon. He was just a gentleman too, the nicest guy in the world. He wrote articles about me in *Jersey Jazz*, but then the *Jersey Jazz* consisted of three pages folded in half. [Laughs] The whole Vaché family was tremendous.

**JJ:** Would you tell us a bit about your work with Don Elliott?

**JC:** Don was a phenomenon when it came to playing vibes and the mellophonium. The mellophonium is very difficult, and Don just played the hell out of it; but Don's forte was his voice. Don would do sessions where he would put his voice four or five times overlapping into a chorus. He would come up with ideas for jingles for commercials no matter what. I worked with Don doing all the TV and radio commercials like Coca-Cola, Hertz Rent-a-Car, this one, that one. Every time I turned on the TV or radio, I heard myself playing drums.

His wife Doris was big on Park Avenue where all the commercials came from. She would come back from meetings and say, "Don they need a 60-second commercial for Aer Lingus." He would say, "Oh I've got just the thing." He would think for a minute, take out composition paper, then he would call me, and I would put the click track on. He would run it and say, "Okay you've got 60 seconds, just put the drum track. I would say, "Don, what the hell is this going to be?" He would say, "Well, wait till you hear it." Then the next week the bass player comes up. Then he'd put the horn section on it. Then he would get the chorus on it. Then the guy overdubs his voice and, before you know it, it's like a 40-piece orchestra with the talking about the commercial.

Don was just a great guy and a great family man too. He had a son and daughter, and everybody's name began with D, including the dog. He had you laughing constantly. He was always telling jokes. You would sit in the studio to do a date and start off having coffee and a couple of cigarettes in his little sunroom and you were just laughing and laughing. He ended up with something stupid — colon cancer. Sal Salvador died of colon cancer, but Sal was a guy that hated doctors and hospitals never wanted to go to one. Don tried everything. Doris took him to Germany, Israel, to "eat this root, eat this grass it will be good for you." The poor guy tried everything and died young, not even in his 60s.

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**JJ:** When was the last time you saw him?

**JC:** We're going to do a record for Columbia. He put a band together and we were rehearsing up at his house. Then I went touring with Marian McPartland playing a bunch of festivals. I finally called and told him, "You better think about getting another drummer because I know you really want to get this project done. I know John Hammond is upset that you haven't finished." He was very good friends with John Hammond. He ended up calling another drummer and finished the project. It was a nice record with all originals and nice arrangements all by him. The front cover was of the studio and the guys standing out front.

I sat through sessions with him and Quincy Jones.

Quincy would come out to Connecticut to Don's studio and we would sit for days going over movie scores. I did the soundtrack for the movie *La Menace*. Gerry Mulligan wrote the music and Don Elliott did all the arrangements for it. So much important stuff came out of that studio. Five years ago his widow Doris had me go up there, and all those original tapes with original material by Bill Evans and other famous musicians are still on those shelves.

He liked the challenge of his writing. He would write some really phenomenal stuff especially for drummers because there was a guy that really knew what he was doing. He knew he wanted sounds that would go from lower to upper, going from the floor tom-tom to the upper tom-tom rather than vice versa as most drummers do. He used to write specifically for that too. I remember doing the soundtrack for Gerry Mulligan, and it was the same thing because Don was involved with it. They were way ahead of their time. Gerry Mulligan was another phenomenal guy that died too soon. I'm sure that had a lot to do with him doing stuff for all those years when he was younger. It catches up to you.

**JJ:** Is there a film, book, play or anything you feel gives an accurate depiction of a musician's life?

**JC:** The Dexter Gordon film, *Round Midnight*. I look on that as a documentary. Knowing Dexter and the



Bassists Rick Crane and Michael Moore posing with Joe Corsello at Shanghai Jazz, where the trio performed with Moore that night on piano. A live recording of the show was released in February. Photo by Tony Mottola.

kind of person he really was, the movie was so true to life because that was him. It really showed his lifestyle. My really good friend Michael Cuscuna helped produce it. I asked him, "Was that difficult to do?" He said, "Joe, you have no idea. Between him, Freddy Hubbard and the musicians that were in that; trying to get everybody together and do what we had to do was so difficult." It was so true to a musician's lifestyle. Obviously that was the way he wanted to approach the music business. I remember seeing all the musicians when I was a kid. That is what everybody was involved in, drugs and alcohol, because they thought they played better. It is kind of scary. Clint Eastwood's *Bird* was also so true to life, but *Round Midnight* is my number one movie.

**JJ:** Well, since you have had two careers, how about a film about police work?

**JC:** A fellow from Columbia University has just done a documentary on me. It premiered a few weeks ago. He interviewed me at length about two homicides — one that I actually worked on, and one from 1953 which has haunted me. A professor at Rutgers University found out that I live in

Stamford, Connecticut and he ranked about what a rotten town it is with the worst police department in the world. When I questioned him about it he said that his niece was murdered here, and it was never solved. She had taken her first job as a nurse. The family put her on a train from Jersey, and she never made it. Her body was found in the woods in Stamford, Connecticut. She had been raped and viciously killed. He gave me her name and a friend researched all the paper clippings from the newspapers. I put the whole case together. It is about four inches deep. They had arrested two guys but didn't have enough evidence to convict them. I found a retired detective still alive and living in Florida and interviewed him. He remembered everything about the case. The guys had admitted it to him, but unfortunately they didn't have the evidence to back it up. One of the brothers is still alive, so I have been working with the police department to try to put the case back in the forefront.

When I look at these shows today, *CSI Miami*, *CSI New York* and another New York show — some of that is pretty true to life but when it comes down to the court and to the DNA testing, they pick up a fingerprint, put it in the computer, and it comes up with the person's photo and everything you want to know about him. [Chuckles] We can't do that. We haven't come that far yet. But in the way of shows, the working with prosecutors and judges, team players that are in your squad nothing really portrays that on television. Some movies are thrilling, and I sit on the edge of my seat, but the end result is not real. I could better answer that question had I not done what I did for 11 years. It amazes me that they shoot at a fleeing car in the middle of downtown or trying to shoot a suspect in the middle of a department store with a million little kids around. That is stuff that rarely happens, but for TV it is thrilling. [Chuckles] But I can't say I've ever seen anything that has been true to life for me.

**JJ:** Well, this has been thrilling for me. Thanks for taking the time.

**JC:** Thanks a lot Schaen. Bye-bye. JJ

*Schaen Fox is a longtime jazz fan. Now retired, he devotes much of his time to the music, and shares his encounters with musicians in this column.*