

"SAXOPHONE JOURNAL MAGAZINE"

John Klemmer by Thomas Erdmann

More than this interview will ever be able to properly portray, Klemmer is quick, smart, funny, highly observant, still seeking musical truth, and the possessor of one of the world's most facile minds -but to know this all you have to do is listen to his music. It would be almost impossible to plan out a career as multi-varied, historically important or musically significant in jazz and music than the one tenor saxophonist & composer John Klemmer has led. From the beginning of his career as a solo artist, through his brief big band work, to his musical creations that reached a pop and R&B audience, to his solo saxophone achievements and work with early electronic effects, not to mention anything of his creating new concepts & production styles as well as production work for pop and R&B artists and his many compositions performed by himself as well as a slew of others, few if any, save Miles Davis, have followed their musical muse into uncharted waters with the strength of conviction John Klemmer always showed and continues to exhibit, even to this day. Born in Chicago. Klemmer's first music lessons were on classical guitar at the age of five. He began classical alto saxophone studies at the age of 11 before switching over to the tenor saxophone in high school. His artistic leanings led him to study a wide variety of music's conceptual areas, which in addition to saxophone included clarinet, flute, piano, composition, arranging, music theory, music history and conducting - both privately and at places such as The National Music Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. This added to previous work he had done studying visual and graphic arts at the Chicago Art Institute. From an early age, just in his early teens, as a Chicago saxophonist he alternated

working in his own band along with sideman appearances in some of the city's best groups like led by good friend Eddie Harris, rock guitarist Harvey Mandel, famed producer James Guercio & every & any kind of music he could get his hands on.

Klemmer, always and still the consummate hard-worker, was rewarded for his years of dedicated practicing and gigging by being offered a contract with Chess Records immediately following high school graduation. In 1968 he moved to Los Angeles and

his music found a wider audience. His first recordings show a young artist mixing avant-garde tendencies with smooth flowing lines and phrases and his brief work with the big bands of Oliver Nelson and Don Ellis

are some of the finest exhibits of how the fire of personal passion can

pay big dividends in the creation of magnificent extended, and sometimes

non-traditional, none-the-less exciting, artistic statements.

In addition to his fusion work, and always searching forward,

Klemmer

continued his personal odyssey of musical meaning by studying film scoring with Nobel Prize Nominee Albert Harris. His next work led to the

creation of a passion for personal statement so intense and outside the

mainstream at the time that he is often referred to as the creator of both Smooth Jazz (see the interview with guitarist Larry Carlton in the

October/November issue of Jazz Player magazine) and New Age music. Some have even called him, although Klemmer dislike's & disagrees with it, The White John Coltrane.

Klemmer's work during this time on albums such as Touch and Lifestyle,

and his musical experiments with electronic devices such as the

Echoplex, are continually referenced as a major influence by some of today's most forward thinking artists (see the interview with Jane Ira Bloom in the May/June 2000 issue of Saxophone Journal). This

groundbreaking approach to art and search for a personal voice

continued

in albums such as Cry and Solo Saxophone II: Life, where Klemmer recorded

without a net—forsaking all accompaniment by recording totally in the solo saxophone realm. Today it's easy to see his influence on the next generation of solo saxophone artists like Evan Parker.

By this time Klemmer was known not only as an artist of high personal

musical integrity, but also as an accomplished producer for pop, rock and R&B bands, and as a composer who could easily negotiate any style. His

chart-topping pop hits include those written for artists like The Manhattan Transfer, Danny O'Keefe, Freda Payne and Bobby Bryant.

Coexisting with this style of writing is his incredibly vast & valuable catalog of jazz

music found not just on his own recordings (some of which are published

and can be used as play-along tracks in The Classic John Klemmer Songbook, Hal Leonard—Centerstream Publishing), but also done by others, such as The

Don Ellis Big Band. During this time Klemmer would also occasionally take select work as a guest artist. In so doing he created significant musical statements in work with Steely Dan, Nancy Wilson, John Lee Hooker and Roy Haynes, among others.

Around 1989 Klemmer took one of his now famous & controversial sabbaticals walking away from the all-encompassing music business he

had been involved in, literally non-stop since he was a mere 14–15 years old, to take his longest sabbatical yet in order to rest & concentrate on

composition. False rumors of health issues abounded. In the 1990s he returned to the studio recording MAKING LOVE VOL. II & SIMPATICO etc. & to the studio & stage questing with

selected other artists (most notably in smooth jazz & new age with Craig Chaquico, 3rd

Force & David Arkenstone to name a few) & has had his music sampled by more contemporary rap & dj artists than can ever be listed (The Beastie Boys & many, many others) and founded his own record label (Touch) to release selective new special recording projects along with his major releases.

After John moved to the West Coast he played briefly in The Don Ellis Big Band,

recording on a number of historically significant albums. In fact his solo

on his own song & chart Excursion II from the Don Ellis Live At Fillmore album is essential listening.

S.J.; What was the experience in Don's group like for you?

J.K.; I was only with Don Ellis for a short period of time and I always find

telling the story of that solo on Excursion to be funny. There was so much going on

in the band because it was so big and the arrangements were so busy, that at times there was literally no other way to cut through the band other than to scream when you soloed. I would have to go up into the high register and

just scream. As an artist it doesn't matter if you're doing a solo with a big band like that or a small group, when you're taking a solo, especially if it's improvised, the art is in finding a way to deal with whatever's going on at the time. Maybe the guitar player is not in tune etc. or whatever. You have to deal with it. In that situation the band was so

bombastic that at times there was no way for me to do things with any degree of finesse, so I just blew. The tune, Excursion II, was a track off of my

Blowin' Gold album which was a big hit at the time. I had asked a friend

of mine to write the arrangement for Don's band.

S.J.; Grammy winner Les Hooper, right?

J.K.; Yes. I knew Les from Chicago. He's a really lovely & talented guy. He also did some

beautiful string arrangements for my second album for Chess. I only played that chart one or two times before we recorded it.

S.J.; There is a logic to that solo that is outstanding. You develop your thoughts so well, and then build the solo to the screaming which itself becomes a logical extension of the lines you've been playing up to it. Then you bring the solo back down and the band comes in. When you analyze the solo it becomes like a solo by Monk, in that if you remove any single note it loses its intensity and the logic falls apart.

J.K.; That's interesting in that while appreciating & respecting Monk, I never really cared for his music for whatever reasons. The only way I

think that solo might relate to Monk, other than what you insightfully describe,

would be that Monk had a very jagged, angular kind of playing that didn't make sense, yet it did. I guess that solo is reminiscent of that. They finally released the Live At Fillmore album on CD.

Yes. Excursion II was a really challenging chart to play with the band being that large & busy of a band as it was. Don was very much into brinkmanship-how far can you push the envelope of whatever you're in.

Don carried this brinkmanship over from the old days of bebop I think. When I

was a kid in Chicago, 14 and 15, I went to a ton of jam sessions. I was able to do this as a kid because I was already very well known on the scene and could

get into the clubs. It also helped that I looked & carried myself a little older.

I would go back to the same couple of places say on Sunday and Monday nights.

I would play and all of the legendary Chicago guys would be there listening. In the beginning I'd play and nobody would say hello. I felt

shy and ostracized, until one time that I came in and they called a tune

that I played the living crap out of. All of a sudden it was, "Hey man, how

you doing man! Can I buy you an orange juice?!" It was that kind of healthy competition. You only got respect once you earned it. It was a great time of 24 hour exposure to the greats. The other thing connected with this was that there was also an unhealthy brinkmanship

involving how far you could push the envelope, not only musically but also in your personal life. Sometimes that would overtake logic. This brinkmanship was a big part of that whole era. I believe Don was into that. That's why, I think, things got a little over the top in his band.

It's always interesting to see how long it takes to hit the bottom if you jump off a cliff, but at what price glory? There were a lot of things Don did that were interesting because nobody else had the guts,

but sometimes it bordered perhaps on indulgence & questionable musical taste etc. Coming from Don's

background you can maybe understand it a little if you know about Don's & that era's history. Brinkmanship played a big part in his life and music.

Sometimes I think the musicians would get so hung up in going along with this brinkmanship & trying to give Don what he wanted that they were

sometimes more involved in that than the larger musical aspect, and that would get

irritating to me. However inside that brinkmanship, related to the story I just described, a

healthy competitiveness existed. Like I described, that night nobody would talk to me until I played great.

That night I was asked to play a song with intricate changes and the house band threw everything at me, and when I played well I had earned their

respect. Whatever hurt or anxiety I had had before was gone because an

unbelievable sense of accomplishment resulted from that success, and this

would lead you to then become confident like them. In other words, once you

achieved that status you could almost then tell those same people whose

respect you wanted with a degree of cynical humor & a wicked little smile on your face that everyone understood,

"Ah, no thanks, man, I don't feel like an orange juice. See you later!" It was all about a serious game of, "I got you." All that kind of thing would go

down and it was fun yet a very, very valuable thing. That's what I meant about Don's brinkmanship. I

was never in his head to clearly know his motivations etc. so it's difficult and presumptuous to

judge what another man's motivations are. Moving on please, speaking of a person's motivations etc.,

it has always & still does amuse yet is baffling & irritating to see what people have written in reviews, articles & general banter by musicians & people in general about me. For

instance, people really think & believe they actually know why I recorded a certain album & music

and why I did this & why I did that musically, professionally,

personally & in my career etc.

I would & still wonder how these people can be so presumptuous & ignorant to really think & believe they know such things & even have the guts to repeat these delusions as some kind of expert psychic insight they have.

Why don't people just ask me these things directly instead of making up stories other's

will believe? If they ask me the truth might be more interesting & even more provocative than what they make up.

S.J.; My next question plays right in to this. Your album Cry is magnificent.

Today when you read reviews of it critics will refer to it as smooth jazz, new age, or quiet storm. I remember when it came out. Then, and

now, I hear it pure and simply as a jazz album. I also know you had a tough time getting the record company to release that recording, even

though it eventually became not only a big seller, but also one of the best and most famous saxophone albums ever. Could you talk about that

recording?

J.K.; When that thing came out the reaction was unbelievable. The jazz radio

station in New York at the time I believe was WRUR. Word got back to me that they

were playing the whole album, not just selected tracks, over the air.

The whole album. It sold a lot of copies and really hit with the

audience. Cry, and my other solo saxophone album, Life, are really just

like Touch, except there's no rhythm section. Those solo sax albums are the

essence of me and the essence of what people had found that they already

liked about me. During that period of time, the late 1970s, and I hate placing things within time contexts because music should be timeless, but when Cry came out I had made some comments in the liner notes, which

were, of course, was not reprinted when the CD came out, about some certain

kinds of meditations I was doing I thought I would share & give

insight to who & what I am & how the record & concept was conceived. All I was doing was passing on some things I had learned for people to do whatever they wanted with it. Well the critics jumped on that. They said it was this new new-agey crap, because the new age movement was just new at the time but not really what eventually came to be known as New Age music. I like New Age music. I think even more could have been done with it. The critics, as most always, were wrong what & why I was doing & who & what I am.

The album was just the essence of me being me in the same way Touch is the essence of me being me.

S.J.; Before Cry there weren't very many, if any at all, saxophone players who would walk out to the edge of the stage and play in a solo context for long periods of time. Was there anything in your early development that moved you in this direction?

J.K.; Yes. In Chicago I grew up in an upper class suburb before I moved away from home, which was literally the day after I graduated High School. In high school my great bandmaster, god bless him, so good to me, Chuck Groeling, actually gave me a key to the school so I could come in very early or stay late practicing in the practice rooms that also had pianos. Well. I got a little one-bedroom apartment on the third-floor of a building in the near north-side of Chicago 2 blocks from Wrigley Field. Needless to say, it was always difficult finding a place to practice & put jam sessions together. Right around the corner were some 24-hour Laundromats. I used to go down there in the middle of the night to practice all night and the solo saxophone thing probably started there. Actually before that I would go out in the middle of the night in a snow storm & practice in the back seat of my father's cadillac when I still lived at home. I also had some bass and drummer friends and we would play in duos and trios constantly. All my best friends were drummers because if I couldn't put a band together the drummer & I would just practice & play together for hours. I had the keys to one of my father's business

warehouse's & I would play & imagine a complete rhythm section in my head. Actually we would fall sleep & just wake up & start playing again.

This sometimes would go on for days.

Instead of practicing in a very disciplined way, my manner of practicing

was to just play non-stop. You know, I would get these great commercial gigs at these beautiful hotels downtown Chicago, with just me & 4 strolling violin players where we just walk from table to table in our tux's & take requests.

Man. I had to know a lot of tunes in different keys & know the changes of them inside out. I didn't really practice by sitting down for so many hours of very structured practice sessions. That would bore me.

I'll tell you something I've never told anybody before. To keep from getting bored practicing I would sit in front of the t.v. all day with the sound off improvising to old movies as if I was doing a sound track trying to musically interpret the mood of the scenes.

Then I would turn the t.v. to a half hour sitcom or soap opera, put the sound back on, & I created this method with dots & dash's to write out the rhythm of the speech dialogue going on between the characters and then turn the t.v. off, look at the dots & dash's, from a half hour long show, of the the speech rhythms & put notes to them & then practice playing that over & over & then turn to a different program & do the whole thing all over again.

This way when I played a solo rhythmically it would sound like actual people talking back & forth but noone ever knew I was doing this & it worked beautifully in my solos for the rest of my life. Sometimes during solos I will create

conversations between people in my head like; "Hi. How are you?" "Fine. How are you doing?" "Well. I just saw this beautiful girl and"? "And what, man"? So on & so forth etc. like that. In these conversations in my head sometimes I will really crack myself up & noone can figure out what I am smiling or laughing about on stage etc. Perhaps that is what you heard in the solo on Excursion II? That talking thing.

So. I always had certain harmonic schemes, or certain technical aspects of the saxophone I was set to work on all the time. I still do that.

I also had a piano-less trio, way before I got my record contract,

whose whole idea was that if you don't have a chordal instrument behind you, like a piano or guitar, the way you structured your solos and the lines you play, especially if you're playing standards and recognizable songs, you had to play them in a way that makes the listener hear & understand the song. You still have to play the changes but even moreso without a piano or guitar etc. It is even more of a challenge to do that within a piano or guitar-less trio. If students would practice playing songs in situations without chordal instruments they will find that by the time they get to a group with a chordal instrument they will know the song's internal harmonic structure inside and out. Because I was into this thing about constantly non-stop playing instead of very disciplined & structured practicing sessions, everyday & night without fail, it was a literal non-stop hunt, other than the hours I felt comfortable practicing in my apartment, to find places to play & jam for hours on end. Every night & day I hunted for places to play & practice. Because I was always playing during these many many hours I was really always essentially practicing, performing and soloing as if in live performance or a recording session. Sure, I had scale or tonal concepts and other technical issues in mind, but rather than the possible tediousness of structured woodshedding I was always playing & practicing in situations where I had to work out the changes etc. & was distinctly & precariously on my own. And here I smile because I remember a famous bass player once asked another famous bass player many years ago, "What do you practice man?", and the other guy answered, "I don't practice man, I hate to practice, but I love to play!" That's literally where I was at. So I was always playing, practicing & working on some kind of musical projects & goals in situations where I had to make them work out. Also there used to be an old jazz phrase at the time called, "Strolling." What would

happen is that if I was in the middle of a solo I'd take the horn out of my mouth and I'd yell, "Stroll!" This meant that everyone in the band would lay out and I would solo on my own, sometimes even for an hour while they waited, which made me have to play, in tempo, and keep the changes going without any help. Well this was exactly what I was already doing all of the time in my own practice & playing work away from bands, on my own, in my playing & practicing by myself or with just a drummer for hours if not days on end. The "strolling" could also happen during anyone else's solo in the band as well. I would point to a guy in the band & yell "stroll!"

This was a way, trying to be a good & inspiring band leader, to keep everyone on their toes and to keep it interesting for the musicians as we played these 9 to 5 am gigs 6 nights a week. You know, looking back, it was great physical exercise as well. I was very fortunate in that at a very early age I was able to hire the best Chicago musicians to play in my bands from whom I could learn from. Actually I would hunt for gigs so I could hire them instead of waiting for some opportunity to meet & hopefully play with them.

These were guys 3 or 4 times my age that had played with Bird, Miles and 'Trane etc. in the very early years and were all very lovely warm giving guys who taught me so much incredible valuable stuff. They literally adopted me & protected me from stuff. All of them had this amazing experience, knowledge & talent. Yea. By the way I am going to start offering free downloads on my website JOHNKLEMMER.COM of a lot of recordings of these early club & concert performances.

Going on. There was an exercise a teacher of mine gave me once called, "The bumps." In this exercise the teacher would call out, "One," at the beginning of every measure, and I was supposed to play through the silences without ever losing the tempo & the swinging time feel which at times was blisteringly fast. That was the challenge. The only thing about the "Stroll," situation, however, was that the guys in the band would just get up and leave the bandstand instead of sitting & waiting there. They would go sit in chairs right in front of the bandstand & stare at me grinning and I'd find myself soloing without

time or backup without ever knowing for how long it would be or when they were gonna decide to get back on the bandstand.

My pride, oh, it would not let me give in & motion to them to have them come

back up. I'd just close my eyes & keep playing & go forward. All of this became part of my constant playing and

practicing routine, including later when I moved to Los Angeles. I'd "Stroll" on my own by myself on the beach & wherever I could find a place to play.

S.J.; To backtrack for a second, am I correct you went out to LA because of

Don's offer to play with him?

J.K.; Correct. I had never heard of Don and had no idea who he was until after he

called me and asked me to play with him. At that time, right before I left for Los Angeles to work with Don, I was bored & frustrated as I

was recording with the only label [Chess] in town & the heaviest guys in town had worked for me.

I had nothing to do & after the cold & dirty streets etc. in Chicago I wasn't sure I wanted to go for more of that in New York.

Don made me the offer to join him on the phone. At the time I was literally just

walking out the door to do a commercial gig and wearing a tuxedo when

the phone rang. Don said such and such & that a saxophone player had recommended me to him and he had heard my first album and would I like

to come out and rehearse with the band, play up and down the West Coast

and then go to Europe with him. I said yeah in an instant. I didn't ask him anything about the music or even ask for travel money

because I was so ready to leave Chicago. Like a lot of times a bell just goes off in my head & I say yea-it's time-do this or that. The guy who recommended me to

Don was a sax player I really didn't know & I had hung with one night, after a commercial gig we were on together.

I remember telling this guy I was bored etc. I have always been into a kind of zen thing where if I didn't know what to do next I would just stand still & almost do nothing & let it come to me & it always has.

I had never thought about L.A. So right after getting the offer from

Don

I went to the gig where I was working that night, and asked people who Don Ellis was. They laughed that I took the gig without even knowing who he was, but, I trust my instincts.

S.J.; What was LA like for you?

J.K.; I was blown away by all of it. It was lovely and the rock explosion was happening right then and everything I needed to have happen was happening right then & there. I was being reborn, as it were. I guess I was

somewhat confident, but not cocky, because I came with a pile of charts

that featured me. I laid them on Don at the first rehearsal before even meeting him

because I thought this was like Chicago & a take no prisoners serious situation like in Chicago.

I learned later that Don loved the ballsiness of it & the fact that I sight read his charts perfectly the first time.

One like in 32/8.

Talking again about solo saxophone etc., we were doing a lovely outdoor summer concert

somewhere and when I came up to play my solo on my Last Summer's Spell chart, which Don

has recorded but has yet to be released, where the band would stop mid section and I

would have an open solo section. As I walked up front I said to Don, "Hey man. Plug me into that echoplex thing. I think I must have played for 45

minutes plus straight without accompaniment. I remember I kept hearing Don

clear his throat really loud during my solo. I thought, "No way am I stopping. You'll have to kill me to get me to stop playing." I just became immediately enthralled with playing with the echoplex. In Chicago, part of the solo

saxophone thing, tied in with playing in a piano-less group, was that I was trying to play so fast that you could hear the chords almost like a chordal instrument. In other

words, I would play through the chords, like a C7 to an F7 or whatever so fast you could actually hear the whole chord

not just a few notes & people could hear the changes as you were

going.

plus that way I could also pile changes on top of changes. I guess 'Trane was trying to do that with the Sheets of Sound thing, but I hadn't heard that yet.

This echoplex thing (now known as digital delays etc.) just fit perfectly into how

hard I had been working and searching for a new sound. I could play doubly fast this way and play four or five changes on top of each other which created this flying expansive type sound.

I became enthralled with this sound and idea that fit me so well with the echoplex. I love lovely and beautiful playing, and this new concept with the echoplex also had a hauntingly beautiful sound.

When playing it it only enhanced my ability to play chordally etc.

I was told early on to learn the piano (arranger's piano they called it—just enough to play chords etc.

so I would & do actually see the piano & the chords in my head while I'm playing.

S.J.; That comes out beautifully in the solo cadenza, the “Stroll” section, on Excursion II.

J.K.; Thank you. Man you really like that solo, huh? Anyway. Long long after I left Don my record Touch hit and I was doing a lot of concerts. You know the more you're doing concerts, in some way, depending on what

you want to do with it, concerts become more of a structured show or a

presentation, rather than just getting up there and playing like in clubs, and this

was especially true in that era when I was opening for pop and rock acts, or they were opening for me. I got into this thing where I would do four or five tunes with the band, and then I would chat with the audience. I would tell who was in the band, the names of the songs, as

well as, “Hi and how are you.” It was a way for me to give the guys in the band a break as well as connect more with the audience. I started doing the solo saxophone thing at that point in my own concerts. I don't

know how I got into it per se, but I would just start playing solo. It was like, with ten thousand people, you could hear a pin drop, the

audience would be that respectful and into my playing. I remember one time in Seattle I had requested, through my agency, William Morris, to try to always rent as stage props, if they possibly could, real plants and trees to have them all over the stage. There had to be ten or fifteen thousand people there. As I'm doing my solo saxophone thing, there was a cricket in one of these plants. It made a sound for a minute and a few people giggled. I slowly walked over by the tree, and I started to do a duet with the cricket. It was beautiful. All of the people were so quiet and it was terribly moving for me. After the concert a number of people came up to say how moved they were by that moment as well. That's how the solo saxophone thing continued to evolve. Of course I had added the echoplex by then.

S.J.; Your use of live electronics has been cited by many artists, including

Jane Ira Bloom here in Saxophone Journal, as inspirational and important

to their development. How did you come to work with electronics?

J.K.; Hey man. I didn't know I influenced anyone. In Chicago I had an acoustic bass player in my band who played not only bass, but also country guitar. At that time we were doing a lot of avant-garde material & experimenting with everything & anything. You know Chicago at that time was like a school, 24-hours a day. Because he played guitar and had an amplifier he was the first guy I knew you had an acoustic bass hooked up

to an amplifier. But he had also taken a \$2,000 German wood bass and cut

a hole in the back of it. He put the insides of a radio in the bass and hooked it up to a foot pedal. During his solo he would push this foot switch and the dial on the radio would go all over the place.

S.J.; John Cage.

J.K.; Exactly, remember his radio pieces? All these guys in Chicago would be constantly turning me on to different music & artists in music, art & philosophy etc. I would drive by this bass player's

apartment and see blue lights pulsing through his windows and hear these low deep bass throbbings, “Woo, woo, woo, woo’s” coming from it. He & a lot of other guys were really into all of this electronic stuff long before I had heard of anybody else trying it. So through all these great guys I became acclimated & open to all these types of concepts.

Talking about my bass player as an example of the degree of constant creativity I lived in then, one day he came to my apartment in what he called his electronic suit.

He had contact mics all over his body underneath his 1920's zoot suit with small speakers here & there. We spent the day together walking around town listening to the sounds his suit was making & checking out people's reactions.

Absolutely beautiful man. He was always looking for new sounds and trying different

things out. He sent out invitations to a private concert he gave in his driveway at 7 am with four pairs of shoes.

I got pretty alarmed because I actually knew what he was doing & saying with it.

So. You can see when I joined Don's band & all he had going on it was really just mere child's play to what I had been exposed to. Funny but terribly creative stuff.

When I first came to LA I heard of some guy who worked in a back room of David Abell piano store [piano's for the stars you know] so I went over there and asked him to plug me into this early giant, massive, fully plugged out, pre-synth, early synthesizer of that time that I had heard about. From where I had come it was just a natural progression, that I would seek out new sounds and modes of playing. Hey. I remember that day. Oscar Peterson walked over to tell me he liked my records. I was amazed he knew who I was. Come to think of it the same thing happened later that year with Roland Kirk, Louis Armstrong, Miles, Burt Bacharach, Dexter Gordon, Sonny Stitt, name dropping here huh, & a slew of other jazz & even heavy rock guys. Still amazes me. I was all alone at my tape vault the other day & Graham Nash walks down the stairs & says hi John. We hung out for that afternoon. Never met him before.

Anyway. Then in working with Don's band, who had everything but the kitchen sink going, I ended

up, like we all do, picking and choosing different things that came my way and finding my own way to use them. I think even back in Chicago as well as today, I want to get the most beautiful sound I can out of my instrument, which is why, even to this day, I never use any electronics that distort the original sound of the saxophone. I'll only use those effects that enhance it. I always tell my sound man, and you'll still hear this in my shows today, I want 75% acoustic, and no more than 25% of the effect.

S.J.; You use them very subtly.

J.K.; Thank you. This is still something I'm going through now. I want to hear more. I also have some new things I have yet to release where I've moved even further, through the use of synthesizers. It all goes back to my early experiences, being in Chicago in an environment where everything was accepted, and being around guys who were experts and the first in their field. I want to & have tied all this new technology into my solo playing in wanting to play chords, and still being frustrated with only being able to play one note at a time. I have some stuff no one has heard yet & to the best of my knowledge haven't done yet. You know right now I have a ton of pedals and effect boxes and other electronic materials in my rehearsal room. The guys in the stores love to see me coming because I bring a big bag with me in order to try as much as I can. With these devices, which are predominantly made for guitar, you never really know if they're going to fit in with the saxophone and my conceptual thought process on the saxophone. It's just alchemy and chemistry. Some work and some don't. You know. It has always bothered me that what effects I have and will use with my sax have been thought of as gimmicks, especially with jazz traditionalists, or they're

just not taken seriously as an integral part of my sound. Effects on the saxophone seem to some people as almost sacrilegious and I have never understood what the big deal is. Effects are taken seriously with guitar, and even acoustic guitar, and keyboards. I just don't understand why they can not be accepted and taken seriously with saxophone, or any woodwind or brass instruments. They are just a part of my sound concept, what I hear in my head, and I only use them coupled with my acoustic sound.

S.J.; Throughout your career you've taken a number of sabbaticals where you've taken time off and gotten away from the music world. I found a quote where you said, in reference to one of these sabbaticals, "I wanted to profoundly change my musical and career direction and I realized I had to change the inside before I could change the outside."

Could you describe what happens when you take these sabbaticals?

J.K. I'm glad you brought this up. In relation to this last long sabbatical that I took, which was a rather sudden disappearance, there was a lot of

false & untrue rumors about my health & other stuff. I should have expected it being that it was such a sudden disappearance with no announcement to the press or even some friends. There were these false rumors and speculation's about my health, and I actually sued a couple of people and had to threaten to

sue others to stop some of the crazy rumors going around about me.

It really started to

get irritating if not alarming because as well as being false & even off the wall, which even almost affected some business deals, they were unkind and insensitive.

S.J.; I was worried about you.

J.K. I guess a lot of people were, & maybe I should be flattered, but I would call it more idle gossip & rumor from what got back to me.

I remember my best buddy in Chicago, Shelly Elias, owns a jingle company, some saxophone player he hired showed up for the

gig and said to him, with sort of a gleam in his eyes, that he had heard John was

really sick & some other stuff. My buddy said to him, "No. John's not sick or anything man. I just talked to

John yesterday & he's way cool, and, you're fired. Get out of here." One of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me. That gave me some insight as to what was going on about me out there & I didn't like it.

You know, even though I pride myself in being keenly aware of everything & everybody that's going on around me & in the world, I feel that I am in this world but not necessarily of this world that much.

You know what I mean? My focus has always been on the work I feel I have to do on myself, my music & art & what I have to accomplish & give.

All that is my life's work that I must get done. I have always felt more like an observer & reporter of myself & everything else rather than necessarily a participant & that that was my job to do.

Sounds corny but to love really.

This is gonna sound dumb but people are always telling me I might be more famous than I realise. I have some great publicist's & press agents who apparently really do their jobs well, but like everything else, for the most part, they & everyone do what I tell them to do.

I'm just focused on being me & doing my things. Apparently, without my realising it, stuff I do seems to maybe have some kind of maybe strong impact on people when I do something.

But I can sometimes be very naive to how people can be & what goes on in some corners of this world.

Being mysterious & taking these breaks I do can have some career advantages maybe, I've come to learn, because

it's that old show biz saying, "say anything you want but just spell my name right" thing, but that was never my intention during these breaks.

I have been told a long time ago that I was pretty mysterious to everyone because I was always off doing stuff by myself, not really hangin out with cats you know, & would always seem to be making these huge, sometimes dramatic & some say surprising innovative moves, that made people always wonder what the hell was going on with me.

Let me tell you a story, which I think will help the readers get an

insight into what I think, what I go through and what I do when I take these time outs. A number of years ago I was at the Montreux jazz festival during a period when I was going through a Coltrane-esque period of high-energy high-intensity music. We were recording the concert live for Impulse records & French TV and I had a dynamite rhythm section. We are out there on stage and roaring. The energy level was high, which was what I was after at that time. After a while of playing so fast and so intense and with the energy so high there was a shimmering beauty to it that goes beyond avant-garde or dissonant - then even more so when I added the echoplex. It was truly gorgeous. As I was playing that night a bell went off in my head. I'm still soloing and playing but I started to think, in my head, "John, where can you go, how much further, can you take this?" I opened my eyes and looked at the audience. You know the Montreux Jazz Festival is very prestigious, but there really aren't that many people in the audience as one might think. I thought to myself that I wanted to play for more than just these people. I finished the concert, walked off stage to where my producer and wife were standing. I said, "I'll never play this music again." They said, "Oh yeah." Well, I went out and played two or three encores, came off stage and said it again, that I wouldn't play this music again. Nobody believed me. I came home and I didn't record or perform for 2 years. I just sat in the house all day & night, put my feet up on the piano, listened to music, wrote, thought, read some horses and read a lot of philosophy & stayed as alone & quiet as I could. You know the music biz is very intense. I really didn't know where I was going nor did I care. A lot of times that's the best thing, to not know where you're going. I think it was Herbie Hancock who wrote a song called "You'll Know When You Get There". I decided to take music and my life down to its barest essentials. Both physically, technically, psychologically and philosophically - just to the

basics of melody, harmony, rhythm. In life as in music. I did that with my life by being quiet and off the scene. I took some drum lessons without drums because I wanted to just talk about rhythm. Touch

and all of that new music, came out of that experience. That's how it goes for me, and it can happen at numerous times. I also don't really know when it's going to happen. I can also tell when I'm going to move

on from a certain kind of music into something new when my fingers, my

hands, will literally not go there anymore. I will literally have trouble playing the old music because my mind does not hear it anymore.

I've moved on. But I don't know it until then. You now. We are gonna be offering free digital downloads of a lot of some early stuff & other things on my website.

The other side issue is that I've never been someone who hangs out. I learned that in Chicago by seeing so much self destructive etc. behavior.

Coming up in the music scene, both in the music and music business world, it can

be quite unhealthy. I either always made sure I was left of center or away from it all. One of my favorite philosophical quotes from a book I read is, "The man

stayed isolated for a distinct point of view." I don't remember who wrote

it, but it has stuck with me. Another quote that stuck with me was "transcend your environment". Many of the things I've read in that area

are not ideas I'd learned, but rather a validation of what was already going on in my head. It helped me realize I wasn't nuts, because so much

of the scene and the business can be a waste of time and a drain of energy. Believe it or not, in many ways I'm actually pretty shy as well, so that

ties into it as well. I started practicing alone, playing alone, and being alone a lot. That has it's roots in some childhood experience's I think. What I do is whatever I do when I take these breaks. I'm not doing anything

outlandish. I'm just living my life & taking things as they come. If I

don't want to play I'll just stop playing.

>From a career and business standpoint, I don't think these sabbaticals have

been in my best interest, but it's what I do. I think also here that over the years I changed directions too fast & people could not catch up to me.

Some people are fans of different periods who when they hear something different make rash untrue assumptions & judgments about my reasons for changing.

Turns out I am different things to different people. Despite what some may think & say I have never changed directions for any other reasons than that's what I wanted to do then.

Granted I know what I'm doing when I do it. While I readily & happily admit to desperately wanting to communicate with as many people possible, why not, every different style of music I've done was done with the exact same degree of sincerity, desire, & commitment as what preceded.

Dangerous as it is to say right now in the current business climate, back then, I said to record companies etc., it's my way or no way, release records with no music on it, and it worked because I was always right so the record companies got used to it & trusted me & let me do what I wanted.

That sure doesn't seem to be the case today for everyone right now. Right now, and maybe for a long time to come, there is no available platform to do anything new and take chances, not meaning avant garde, but any type of music even pop & very commercial stuff.

I have never seen such a blatant plagereistic time in my whole life. But the fearful company's will only put something out if it sounds like something else that seems successful to them. It's tough on everybody.

I've tried from the beginning of my life and career to be as honest as I can in my music & to myself.

You know, following that Montreux story, I literally didn't work for 2 years. Then one morning I got up, sat at the piano, wrote something, said, "man. this is it. i got it" & called my manager and attorneys, and was ready to go. I had something new.

Of course nobody believed me until after it came out & went through the roof.

S.J.; How about this last sabbatical?

J.K.; I have been on the road and recording and touring since I was

just about 11-years

old. The business part can be really grueling. My success had become more intense than I ever thought it would. If I'm going to live and last I had to stop, and back then was a perfect time to stop as it seemed to many I was at peak in my career plus I could easily afford it.

Actually for the rest of my life if I wanted.

The sabbatical ended up being longer than I thought it would be due to things like my

parents passing away and other life things like that that needed focus & attention & can be distracting to your work.

Well. Anyway when I decided to

resurface the whole music business was radically different making things difficult. But what I do during

these sabbaticals is that I never stop composing, practicing & creating, writing day & night, either physically or

in my head. I'm really more of a composer than a player.

S.J.; I saw a quote where you said you consider yourself more of a composer

and conceptualizer than a player.

J.K.; Yes. I sit at the piano & synthesizer almost 24-hours a day. I live and breathe it,

and I always have. I always love it when I create, on the piano etc., something that is a new kind of direction for me. I love how I have to then

learn to play what I just composed. Not just the song, but also the whole environment and style of the music. That helps to keep me moving

forward. I have some great things on my new recordings, as well as things I've recorded but have not released yet. I've always tried to be honest with myself. There comes a time when I not only can't keep doing

the same music anymore, but I don't want to do the same music anymore. I

just know I need to move in new directions to protect myself and grow.

For lack of a better word, I need to have the guts to do this. It's just part of who I am. Some people don't need to do this, but I do.

On top of all that, when I'm taking breaks, I like to have fun living life & be just a normal person doing stuff.

I can bring all that back to the music.

S.J.; The Classic John Klemmer Songbook came out a little while ago. Instead of your tunes just coming in fake book fashion, you chose to have the music come out in fake book fashion with an accompanying play-along and enclosed CD, making it more than just the run of the mill fake book.

J.K.; We had fun doing that. I have a keyboard player friend who took the piano parts off of the records and played them down. We talked about how we could loop certain sections to help people develop their solo styles in the best manner possible. That way students can hit the repeat button on their cd players to get certain sections to repeat over and over in order to work on their own solos etc. I'm proud of the book and CD.

S.J.; What inspired you to offer the material in both written and play-along form?

J.K.; Anytime I do anything I always say to myself, "Okay, what else can I do here that nobody else has done?" I just thought it would be a fun thing to do. That way students can go further than just a book, and especially with those particular songs, which are very simple modal songs. I thought this would be a nice platform to ease someone into having fun in playing improvised solos as well as a melody, that is perhaps recognizable to them, and have the fun and thrill of playing and stretching out in the songs as well as just playing the melodies along with a rhythm section.

Hey. I think I might take on some private students. What do you think? I think I want to do that.

Anyway It wasn't a business move.

I had to talk the publisher into it. You know, it seems I'm always having to talk someone into something when it's connected with the business end of my music & even musician's as well. Connected with that, Cry was actually recorded a year and a half before it was released. I snuck out of town to Tucson, Arizona in a new recording studio in the middle of the desert &

recorded it.

Actually since my parents had then moved to arizona & you know, you only live once, I had them come & sit in the studio with the lights out with me while I recorded.

My mother said on playback, which was funny, in a great honest innocence, "hey, I would love to vacuum the house to that."

I knew that second I had something that would cross over & be very accessible. I then waited for the right time.

The record company kept saying, "It will never sell." Of course, it sold incredibly well and was a big hit, but I had to talk them into releasing it. I had the clout at the time because Touch & my other records were such massive hits & selling so well. I remember doing the first couple of solo saxophone concerts here at

UCLA. My manager was literally pacing up and down. The concert was totally sold out and people were lined up waiting to get in. My manager

couldn't make any sense of it it seemed. I told him to just sit down and enjoy the

concert, "Don't try to figure it out. The music just is."

S.J.; Before we run out of time I wanted to ask about I quote of yours regarding new music. You said, "I see and hear slowly emerging a completely new style of music that has yet to come together and be accurately titled." I am curious as to your thoughts as to where music is

going, being that you are one of the true innovators in jazz. This especially in light of your comment how when you came back after your

last sabbatical music etc. had changed so drastically.

J.K.; Yea. There's a new hybrid coming. I can hear it & see it all in my head. I hope I am the first to do it & make it happen.

When I came back after the last sabbatical I realized that while the music had changed, it was really the music business that had changed it.

Society had also changed. I'm still trying to figure out what the heck happened. What changed? I'm always bumping into people of different professions, as well as seeking out sociologists and researchers and asking them, "How did where we are at today evolve?"

It's the business that changed & even the entire mood of the times with people.

Where the music went was a definite response to how the business had changed and how business forced the music to change. For me, it wasn't so much the challenge of coming back to music in the fact that the music changed, but it's the business that is different. I have been asking around a lot, and I mean a lot, to try to understand the change that has occurred in all walks of life & in business. I believe the mood of society changed while I was doing my thing. I was preoccupied with a lot of other stuff during my sabbatical so I didn't see or most of all feel the change while it was occurring and I wasn't in touch with it which is out of character for me. I usually know everything that is going on around me.

S.J.; What do you think changed? I wonder if it didn't change in terms of greed?

J.K.; During this whole interview your questions have been right on the mark, and I'm glad you've touched on this. It's a very important thing to talk about. I've been in the business a long time and I've seen every kind of phase. Every day someone used to say, "Jazz is dead" or this or that. Every day someone said, "The music business is over." But this current change is the most profound change I've ever seen. I hear all people complaining about things in the medical profession and in other forms of business and walks of life as well. I think there was a sociological change because I felt a chill when I came back. I wondered, "What the heck was going on?" As I explored more and more I sort of came to that same conclusion, of that word that you used a second ago, greed possibly, and you know greed always breeds fear. But I was more fascinated by, what the heck brought that on? Was it a reaction to something else that was going on

in society? How did it evolve? I've observed a lot of players, and they seem much more interested in getting a record contract & being a celebrity than evolving their playing first. Which is okay. I like being a celebrity of sorts but it has to do with what are you bringing to the table? I think that being a public figure in whatever fashion is a great responsibility.

S.J.; Yes, absolutely. You got a record contract right out of high school, but

you deserved it. You worked tirelessly and earned your contract.

Today,

it seems nobody wants to work their way up in the business. They don't want to

apprentice in other people's band, all they want to do is make their own

CD, as if that is the formula for success.

J.K.; Yea. But on the other hand it sure is simpler today to make a cd and put it out say on the internet, but really, so what?

I have to share this next story with you. When I came to

L.A. I had already done two records for Chess in Chicago. Then Don called

and I came out to the West Coast and toured Europe, a went to Africa with Oliver for a summer. I was having a

lovely time with everything so new. I actually got a phone call at 3:30 in the morning one night

from the new president of Chess Records. Marshall would had just come back from the Rolling Stones label. I had forgotten I had a record

contract. I owed him some more records & forgot.

S.J.; Kids don't think that way anymore.

J.K.; Seems so. But realistically can they really be any different than they are in these times? Everything seems different. Some for the good perhaps some for the worse. But in some ways nothing ever really changes. Back in Chicago there was a time when I had the only jazz gig in

town, and people were lined up to see me and it was a blast. But during

this time I turned down a number of record deals before I took the Chess

offer, and I knew other guys who turned down deals for the same reason I

did - we didn't think we were ready. That has all changed. Maybe you and I will never figure out what happened in society that seems to have bred this change in priorities. Maybe we will have to just let it go. Sometimes there are sociological movements and stuff that just happens. Trying to figure it out may be a waste of time, just deal with that's all, like a loud busy Don Ellis band or whatever, but let's face it, this is not a phase and it's not going to go away. This is the end of an era & the beginning of a new one and the people who developed the past era of jazz have moved on, most of them, to another plane of existence. There are only a few of them left. Music, and art, is always a reflection of what's going on in society. All of the earlier styles of music were a reflection of society, both socially and socio-economically, of those times. Those influences determine what can or can not happen in art. The same is true now. Starting in the 1920s, sociologically, we see the country's economy expanding, sociological barriers were coming down, people were experimenting with new freedoms, there was a depression, W.W.II, etc., all of this bred a certain passion for living that's perhaps different now. The whole attitude towards living affected the attitudes toward music. This passion seemingly is not there any more or it's changed drastically and it won't come again. The only thing that can change what is going on now, I believe, is another world & life cataclysmic event. When 9/11 happened I thought that might be the event that would change the chemistry. Alarmingly so, it didn't. People forgot about it real fast. It was so funny because immediately afterwards people were driving around L.A. in big, shiny Ford Explorers, giant SUVs, with American flags flying all over them. I thought, "What a bunch of crap." Everyone was out selling flags on the street. There's a lot of serious sociological changes going on it seems to me.

Like all this high rate of divorce silliness. The divorce rate is too high like a lot of other things are seemingly out of whack in the music biz & other things, it seems to me.

Why would anyone, at the drop of a hat, want to throw away a life time of history & hard work suddenly on a moments notice? It's not smart or mature & it's self destructive.

It's the same principles in music & a career as in life, you gotta make a commitment, love something completely, work hard, have a vision, be really aware & on top of things & not run for the hills when you break a reed.

You break a reed you gotta just keep on playing.

Anyway. As an artist I'm always trying to pay attention to what is going on sociologically, either consciously or unconsciously, as well as musically.

Every great artist, if they're worth their salt, is tuned into that.

The guys that are playing now are very proficient & even more importantly, compared to the distant past, are living clean healthy non self destructive lives creating good families etc.

I like 'em man. I like playing with them. I want to see them given a chance to do even better. They can do it. I want to play with all of them.

Better yet I want to hire them & turn them on to all this new stuff & new directions I have sitting here that I feel is the culmination of a new hybrid developing.

What I experienced as I started to come out of my sabbatical, was that the rules had changed.

I can't fault these guys because everybody wants to survive and they're giving the record companies what they want. We all got to do the best we can to survive. We all gotta believe in whatever we are doing. But there always choices hopefully.

I bumped into Al Jarreau at our shoe repair store & we sat half the day in the shoe store,

like the old days in Chicago & Milwaukee, hanging out & talking all afternoon,

while the owners were snapping away pictures, with Al telling me what he was being put through.

Hell. I'm not that much in a different position myself.

You know, GRP/VERVE records is sitting on a VERY BEST OF cd with a bunch of newly recorded bonus tracks right now that give a hint to some of my new directions. Why?

Hey. I know what. Everybody write to Ken Drucker, Ron Goldstein & Tommy LiPuma at GRP/VERVE in New York about that cd.

Oh man they are gonna kill me (laughing) but they are all really great guys just doing their jobs, the best they can, doing what they feel is best & trying to survive just like all of us, but, yea, everybody go ahead and write them if you want.(More laughter.) Oh man.

Oh yea. The Verve GRP Records site has some digital downloads of some of my more difficult to find records.

More being added I think and they are adding more at itunes & others all the time.

My Touch Records new special projects will be available at itunes & all the digital stores shortly too

before another major label release.

Yep. It's a new era. Everything changes. Yet in a way nothing really ever changes.

Well. You know, I love to experiment but I confess I prefer great beautiful songs & melodies, hip rhythms, gorgeous new sounds, great musician's & great shows & reaching a ton of people. Nothing like it the world.

I'm excited about the new stuff I have to give. Might surprise a lot of people.

Anyway. I remember when I first came out of this sabbatical I was at Rheuben Allan's Sax Shop and a

young guy asked me for my advice to the question, "What should I do?" I

said, "Find out what you love to do & you do best, and then to heck with everybody & do that & if you got something, and you will, that is strong and committed, everyone will know it & hear it & they will come to you."

He had no idea what I was talking about.

Selected Klemmer Discography

Involvement

Cadet/Chess

And We Were Lovers

Cadet/Chess

Blowin' Gold

Cadet Concept/Chess

All the Children Cried
Cadet Concept/Chess
Eruptions
Cadet Concept/Chess
Waterfalls
Impulse!
Constant Throb
Impulse!
Magic Moments
(Best of Blowin Gold)
Chess
Intensity
Impulse!
Magic & Movement
Impulse!
Fresh Feathers
MCA
Touch
MCA
Barefoot Ballet
MCA
Lifestyle
MCA
Arabesque
MCA
Cry (Solo Sax I)
MCA
Brazilia
MCA
Nexus (for Duo & Trio)
RCA/Arista/Novus
Straight From the Heart
MCA/Nautilus
Mosaic (Best of Vol.1)
MCA
Magnificent Madness
Elektra
Hush
Elektra
Finesse

Elektra/Musician
Life (Solo Sax II)
Elektra
The Saxophone Player (Best of Vol.II)
MCA
Best of Blowin' Gold
MCA/Chess
Simpatico
JUC/Samson
Making Love (Vol.I)
Touch Records
Two Tone
Klemmer/Sample/Harris
Crusader Records
Music
MCA
Priceless Jazz
GRP
Irving Berlin Songbook
Derve
Magnificent Madness/Finesse
Wounded Bird/Elektra 2006
The Very Best of John Klemmer/New Bonus Tracks
GRP [TBA] 2006
Faith [Solo Sax Vol.III]
TBA 2006
Heaven On Earth/Live In Los Angeles
TBA 2006
Brazillia [Vol.II]
Untitled
GRP TBA 2007

Selected Solo Features

Steely Dan
The Royal Scam
MCA
Don Ellis at Fillmore
Wounded Bird/Columbia 2006

David Arkenstone
Return of the Guardian Narada
Craig Chaquico
Once In A Blue Universe Virgin
3rd Force Higher Octave
John Lee Hooker
Born in Mississippi/Raised up in Tennessee
MCA
Klemmer/Coltrane
Masters of The Saxophone MCA
Klemmer/Sample
Two Tone Crusader
5 Birds and a Monk Galaxy
Ballads by Four Galaxy
CURRENT FEATURES AS COMPOSER
Glass Dolphins
Ken Navarro-LOVE COULURED SOUL
POSITIVE 2006
Walk In Love
Manhattan Transfer-Pastiche
Wounded Bird/Atlantic 2006
Walk In Love
Manhattan Transfer-Live
Wounded Bird/Atlantic 2006
Lost In Love
Freda Payne-Lost In Love
UNIVERSAL 2005
Walk In Love
Acker Bilk-Love Songs
EMI

JOHN KLEMMER'S INSTRUMENTS

YAMAHA GOLD PLATED TENOR
SELMER MARK VI TENOR
YAMAHA SILVER PLATED ALTO
YAMAHA SILVER PLATED SOPRANO
SELMER MARK VI SOPRANO
ARMSTRONG ALTO FLUTE
YAMAHA C FLUTE
SELMER CLARINET

TENOR & ALTO

JOHN KLEMMER SIGNATURE ARB METAL MOUTHPIECE

SOPRANO

SELMER SUPER SESSION J

RICO PLASTIC COVERED 2 1/2 All Horns

COMPOSING, WRITING & RECORDING EQUIPMENT

ENSONIQ TS12/TS10

AKAI 2000 SAMPLER

AKAI MPC 2000

PRO TOOLS

LOGIC

MAC G4

ADAT XT

ADAT HARD DISC RECORDER

MACKIE MIXER

API MIC PRE

NEUMANN U67

MACKIE MIXER

LEXICON/ALESSIS REVERB/DELAY

ENSONIQ/ROLAND SOUND MODULES

SWR AMPLIFIER

BOSS/MAESTRO EFFECTS PEDALS

AKG SAX MIC

YAMAHA ACOUSTIC GRAND

FENDER RHODES SUITCASE PIANO