

Vail 14th Annual Jazz Party

Behind the scenes

The Airport:

This part of every road trip is the worst part. I had to get up around 5 AM. I live one hour from Philly Airport. Philly airport is one of the worst in the entire world. My flight was a four hour flight from Philly to Denver and you have to be at the airport two hours ahead. I had my guitar on my back, a computer bag and a small luggage cart on wheels. As soon as we arrive I open the door and am immediately told by the airport police “ Move it! Move it!” I hadn’t even put my foot on the ground yet or checked my luggage. My wife, being used to this scene, just drives away with a wave and a hand signal to call her. My two band members, Craig and Webb Thomas, had not arrived yet. I was going to wait for them outside but I took one look at the never-ending check-in line and decided I had better get my ticket in order.

I took my place at the end of a very long line and after 20 minutes I was escorted to a kiosk where you put in your credit card. But since the ticket was paid for by the Vail people, this didn’t work. I was pointed to another long line and had to see the ticket agent. She is immediately annoyed because she has to look up my info. Then she wants to know why I didn’t pay for my own ticket. In the meantime, the strap on the gig bag is digging into one shoulder while my computer bag is inching its way off my other shoulder to the floor, catching the wheels on my luggage. Right about now I want to go home.

I finally get my ticket in order and pay \$15.00 for my one carry-on bag. You cannot use cash. I guess the airline isn’t taking any chances of their employees pocketing the cash. Then comes more shuffling of bags to get at my wallet and credit card. I head outside to wait for Webb and Craig and to smoke several cigarettes. I am totally bugged and disgusted at this point but I know the worst is yet to come – The Dreaded Security Line – OH NO!

After three cigarettes Craig and Webb arrive. They have to go inside and do the same thing. After about twenty minutes they come out all mad and aggravated. After one more smoke we head in and go toward the security line. The juggling of luggage, carry-on, boarding pass and driver’s license begins, not to mention the removing of the shoes. You have to do all this simultaneously. Oh, I forgot, you also have to take out your laptop and cell phone.

The security line is wrapped around two or three times in a maze of ropes and straps. Everyone is dragging their stuff. After 20 more minutes I get to the trays. I pull out a tray and put it on the table. The lady in front of me puts her shoes in it. I grab another tray. Now I’m holding onto my tray along with the rest of my gear. I put my shoes in it and off it goes. Next comes the laptop, my jacket and finally the guitar and suitcase. I walk through the metal detector and an alarm goes off. Now I have to

take out everything in my pocket while still holding the boarding pass in my teeth. The boarding pass is now getting wet from me drooling on it. They find the cause of the alarm – my house keys. But now they pull me out of line and I get the wand treatment. I stand there and watch all my stuff going through the x-ray machine. By the time they are done with the wand treatment, my stuff in all three trays is now banging against the end of the table and the TSA is shouting, “ Whose stuff is this?” “Mine” I shout. The TSA is not happy with me. I try to put on my shoes, hold onto the boarding pass, my keys and get my stuff out of the trays. By the time I get through, I’m exhausted and want to go home again. I look for my gate and as usual it is the farthest one from where I am. Next I have to think of a reason to board early so I don’t get hassled about the guitar. I use my old stand-by: knee surgery. Here’s the tricky part. Before I approach the gate agent I have to wait for the perfect moment when she is slightly distracted and a little overwhelmed by people coming at her with dumb questions. I stand off to the side of the line and then it happens. A woman with an infant and a baby carriage approaches the desk and asks a question. Right in the middle I interrupt, “Excuse me, but I just had knee surgery. Can I board early?” Here, it is important to hide the guitar as much as possible. I put it on my back using both straps so it looks like a backpack. Without looking up she waves me through. I get to my seat and put the guitar in the overhead. Beautiful! I got the guitar on!

Fortunately, the plane ride is uneventful. I learned a long time ago to never talk to your fellow passengers; you may get involved with an east coast director of sales for bolts that are used on baby carriages. This guy went on and on about the different models of baby strollers and how they all use different bolts and all his problems about selling to the various distributors etc. After about 15 minutes I wanted to jump out of the plane. Root canal would have been preferable to listening to this guy. But I digress.

It is truly an amazing trip when I actually see my luggage appear on the carousel as well as Webb’s and Craig’s. We head nowhere, each of us looking like we know where we are going. We are looking for our travel to Vail from Denver. Each of us has different info as to what we’re supposed to do. Finally, we see another musician, looks like he is carrying a sax. We follow him for a while only to find out he is not part of the Vail jazz musicians. We laugh and bump into someone with a card that says “Vail Musicians.” We are led to a seat and told to sit there and wait for the van.



Webb and Craig waiting for the van.

The guy says it will be here in about 20 minutes. After an hour a guy shows up and we put all our stuff on a baggage cart marked 120 and we head out the door. Suddenly Craig goes nuts. "Where's that little black bag, where's that little black bag?" It seems he has his insulin and stuff in there. We all head back to the desk marked Rocky Mountain travel services. One of our assistants had put Craig's medical bag on cart 121. Craig gets his bag but is still screaming about the stupidity of it all while a whole bunch of airport help look on and just shake their heads and then my altitude sickness kicks in. I feel nauseous and light headed and it is difficult to breathe. We load our gear onto the van while 7 other musicians arrive and do the same.

"Jimmy Bruno, Jimmy Bruno," I hear someone yelling. It's Tony Monaco, the organ player whom I've never met but talked to once on the phone. He immediately goes on a rant about gigs we could do and tunes we should record. A really great guy and a wonderful musician, but my head is spinning and I don't want to yak so I light a cigarette and so does Tony. Now I really feel like shit. We pile into the van for our two- hour ride to Vail. At first I don't know any of the musicians except Tony. After a few minutes we all introduce ourselves and find out we all know who each other is. Next there's the usual "I love your work man" "You're a monster," "Love your playing." That lasts about 20 minutes and then we all fall asleep with headaches.

We stop at a rest station half way to our destination. Everyone slowly gets out of the van and heads into the store. Tony Monaco and I have a smoke of course. Tony is still talking about gigs and I really notice the altitude. I'm feeling worse by the minute. I never go into the store. It takes about 20 minutes to get everyone back in the van. We are all feeling sick, even Tony, but he's still talking. After another hour we arrive at a very beautiful resort. I remember my doctor's advice about drinking lots of water and to not drink any alcohol, so I head to the bar and order a Martini and a large glass of water. The whole entourage is now at the bar drinking heavily.



This doesn't last long, as after the 1st drink we are all wacked. I think to myself it is a good thing that I don't have to play tonight. My first hit is tomorrow, Saturday, at noon. My guest soloist is Terrell Stafford, a marvelous musician and trumpet player. I wonder what we will play. I start to make a list, which I immediately lose. (I think I left it at the bar when we headed to dinner.)

The Shows

Terrell Stafford

You never know what to expect at these events. I've experienced amps with blown speakers, sound guys who only do rock shows, stage monitors, no monitors, good sound bad sound, the list goes on. The people at Vail really know how to do it. All the shows are in a giant ballroom. Sets are limited to 50 minutes with twenty minutes to change the stage for the next band. The stage crew is wonderful. They ask where I want the mic, do I need a stool, water or towels? "How's the sound?" the lead sound person asks. His name is Mario and he is terrific. We play a blues in Bb and after a few adjustments we are all happy. The sound is superb. Usually at the performance the sound changes drastically and you wonder why you did a sound check in the 1st place. Not so at Vail

My band arrives thirty minutes before the hit. Lewis Nash is playing drums with the Clayton brothers. They are tearing up. I don't recognize the tune. The whole band sounds great, but Lewis Nash is superb! How I am I going to follow that? I see Terrell at the musicians' table. After a few handshakes and a few "What have you been up to's?" I ask, "What do you want to play?" Terrell says, "I don't know, anything is Ok with me." I hate this response, but it is normal. After a few tune ideas go around, I decide to play two tunes and then bring up Terrell. He likes this idea. We decide on the tune "I Love You". We only need one tune to start off and we'll figure it out from there.

My trio walks on stage. The first thing I do is tune up then check the amp settings. I'm playing through a Fender Twin that is in good shape but is my least favorite amp. I click the pick on the strings to make sure I'm in the monitors. I can also hear my guitar reverberating in the house. All is well. I turn to Craig and say, "blues in Bb." I figure this is safe to start out with; I know we will start and end together. This is always a little nerve wracking; I hope we can all hear each other and that it sounds Ok in the house. I count off and play "Eggplant Pizza." After one chorus of the head I feel good. I can hear just fine and the guitar sounds good to me but has a little too much high end. Right before I solo I reach back and turn down the treble to around 3. I launch into my solo. After about two choruses I try some outside playing and the audience seems responsive to this. My solo goes in and out of tonal playing. I stop the band and play a few choruses unaccompanied and it goes over really well. I can see I have a sophisticated jazz audience. We end the tune. When the applause starts I begin thinking about what ballad to play. While I am talking on the mic, introducing the band and telling a joke about the high altitude, "Polka Dots and Moonbeams" pops into my head. I introduce the tune and play the 1st two A sections unaccompanied and the band joins in at the bridge. Time to bring up Terrell.

I introduce Terrell. He looks great as usual. Terrell has always been a snappy dresser. After a short intro we head into the tune. I let Terrell play the melody, then I take the first solo. I keep it short so I can feature Terrell. He plays so good it's scary. The crowd is very pleased and responds with a long applause during which I get an idea to do a duet. I say to Terrell, "How about Satin Doll, just me and you?" We've never done this before but Terrell is up for it. At this point I don't know what to expect. We start and it sounds gorgeous to me, very quiet; you can hear a pin drop. Terrell's sound is beautiful. After a half of a chorus Terrell goes into this Louis Armstrong vibe with an old-fashioned time feel. I adjust to his feel and the audience gasps. They get it! After his solo, I play unaccompanied in the same style. We take the bridge and go out. The audience rises to their feet. We are both very pleased. Now, what to play next?

I look over at the stage manager and he holds up ten fingers with both hands. For you outsiders this means ten minutes left. That's a little show biz technical talk. At this point I figure we should go out with a fairly brisk tempo tune and let everyone stretch out. I start to play the first few notes of "Perdido." In no time at all, the whole band joins in. We all take extended solos followed by a terrific drum solo by Webb. He is so good at bringing the house down with his solos. We get a standing ovation and leave the stage. I immediately make my way out of the ballroom. I'm not one for standing around listening to the praise of fans. I do like talking to them, however, as long as it's not about music. I do appreciate the compliments but I never know what to say. The rest of the musicians and I are very happy with the way things turned out. Tomorrow, at noon, I have to do it again with just my trio.

Jimmy Bruno