

DRUMscene interview

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CIRQUE DU SOLEIL'S BJ

What is a groove based, multilingual, heavy hitting, deep thinking philosopher doing playing drums in a circus? Having a ball that what! I caught up with this open hearted and passionate musician while Cirque du Soleil's Quidam was on tour in Sydney. As my children watched out front, enthralled at the spectacle and brilliance of Quidam, I sat behind BJ (no full stops, no other names!) in the sound-proofed drum booth as he launched into a committed and joyful performance of a show he has played literally thousands of times. There was no hint of boredom, no hint of cynicism, just appreciation for being able to do what he does best again and again (an attitude many of us could learn from). In his words "I sometimes sit in drum booth and think 'how could I be so lucky?' " There is more to BJ than an impressive attitude. He is a composer, producer and sought after session drummer. Perhaps even more significant than this is his view of himself and all people as a 'human first' which goes to the heart of his expression as a musician and may be the reason he is so sought after. In the drum booth it is very busy. I occasionally glance out at the incredible artists amazing the two thousand five hundred strong audience with their impossible skills, great humour and feats of strength, but only occasionally. Watching BJ is also riveting. His energy, his diversity of responsibilities, his power all demand attention. He clearly treasures his interaction with the band. He sees relationships as the key to his life. Even his endorsers (Pro Mark, Sonor, Sabian and Remo) are termed 'family'. He has great pride in the fact that he has a personal, long term relationship with the manufacturers themselves. His humility belies the fact that he performs to 25,000 people a week - all year round.

Before we explore BJ's mind let me set the scene. We are sitting in what can only be described as the living room of a vast community. The kitchen at Cirque du Soleil travel with them, as does the venue (massive tents), their sanitation, their techs, artists, medical staff, child minders, parents and the list goes on. We sit talking amongst half made up clowns, stretching acrobats, chatting admin staff, stage managers weighed down with multiple communication devices and a variety of other people reading one of the newspapers from a variety of countries or surfing the net on the computers provided for their distraction. This hive of activity seems to revolve around BJ whose infectious charm and vigour spreads a warm vibe with all that enter for their pre-show fuelling. I get the impression that this gypsy family functions like a successful, multinational travelling

experiment. BJ is in his element.

Greg Johns: Why BJ?

BJ: It is much more digestible for people from different countries.

GJ: Tell us a little about your background.

BJ: I believe we all have the same background. We're human. We're born, we live, we try to make something of it and eventually we die. Its up to you to do as good as you can.

GJ: What about studying drumming?

BJ: I thought about it, then I thought I should do something more solid, so I started studying philosophy and literature. I did this despite the fact that everybody around me said I should be into music more. It is the opposite of what usually happens. The kid wants to be a musician and everybody, especially the parents, say 'no you shouldn't'. So I stopped studying although I read a lot still. That's my prime rudiment (laughs).

GJ: Were you a natural musician?

BJ: I did study drums for nine years through out me school life, all the rudiments and drumkit. I didn't go to university. Back then there weren't all these drum schools around like there is now. I learnt in the good old-fashioned way with the Agostini method and then onto swing music, big band stuff....it was very old-fashioned. When I came up with the concept of wanting to be a drummer I didn't understand what that might require; I just wanted to play! I mean was young, I was six. I though it sounded cool! I had no idea how to get there, but obviously the teacher my mum took me to thought I had some talent. So off we went. I don't know why I was interested in drums. I guess I just was hitting things, even cushions sound cool when you hit them when you're six. Hitting something, I guess that's what it is. Drumming is the most rooted instrument there is, rhythm is it. I guess when I was six I was into rhythm not so much drums.

GJ: So after your school studies what then?

BJ: Well, when I was seventeen I took a year off from playing. I was fed up and not inspired. Then I got some money from some relatives as a gift and I went to a drum shop and bought some drums. Then I started playing again.

GJ: Professionally?

BJ: No, no, no. I come from, a small town in Germany.

GJ: You went to uni at the same time?

BJ: Yeah. I had a great passion for knowledge. I think that's why I studied philosophy. Then I realised what I was interested in they were not interested in.

GJ: Tell me how you got into Cirque du Soleil. Was it a natural progression from what you were doing?

BJ: Well yeah. I never really pursued anything with too much stubbornness other than being a drummer. I saw an ad about ten years ago from German show, similar but smaller than Cirque du Soleil. I went to the audition and got the job. In the show there

were two artists from Cirque du Soleil guesting. By the time the show was over I was friends with these guys and they told me about Cirque du Soleil. I got a phone number and sent them my stuff and four years later they called me up. Four years later there was a need.

GJ: What were you doing for those four years?

BJ: Mainly band stuff, some studio work. I got into writing and learning other instruments, guitar, piano. I read a lot and drank a lot of Guinness. I was travelling a lot. My fate is that every time I think I should do something and get educated and do something useful with my life, like at this time when I decided to go to one of those drum schools in Los Angeles, a gig always comes up. I must have done something right because I keep getting asked to do things.

GJ: Would you say that your influence has been the people you play with?

BJ: Yeah, and the records I listen to. From a technical point of view its all unspectacular music that I listen to. I love the good old music, Pink Floyd, Dire Straits, Stevie Wonder, Seal, Miles Davis whatever. I'm not very picky as long as it touches me in some way I can make it work for me. I've never understood where all these categories come from like country and western, rock and pop. If its good music its good music.

GJ: Maybe the categories are from marketing?

BJ: The same people who try to tell us that everyone buying the same music is good.

GJ: Are there particular artists who you see as your mentor?

BJ: Definitely the one's I played along with at home. We all played along with records I think, I don't know if they still do. I was heavily into Nick Mason Pink Floyd, Bob Siebenberg Supertramp, Phil Gould the first Level Forty Two drummer, you can't really go past John Bonham, Ian Paiste these guys you just across them. Its not like you spot them out to become better as a drummer, you don't seek your inspiration they find you. I must have done something right because I found Jeff Porcaro and that's kept me occupied pretty much until now. Manu Kache and a lot of drummers nobody knows from bands nobody knows. You see a fill and you think that was cool so you go home and try to work it out. I think playing to records is the best way to learn. Trying to sound like them, play like them; tune the drums like them. Then try hard enough to sound like John Bonham until everyone is fed up with you trying to sound like John Bonham then you try to sound like someone else - Jim Keltner. Then when you've done that with enough people your influences start to blur and seemingly out of nowhere a mould starts to form from which you can express your own character.

GJ: Did you audition for Cirque du Soleil?

BJ: They were in a rush to get a drummer. I assume they had a problem with last minute negotiations with the other drummer. In any case they were desperate and I was in Germany, Quidam was in Germany - it was a combination of luck and things. All the things you not supposed to count on. I did have to audition though. I assume I got some references from the Artists I previously did the season with. I passed the audition and I quickly packed my bags and left. That was four years ago.

GJ: Tell us about the Quidam band.

BJ: It's a seven piece group. Singer, band leader - keyboards, second keyboardist/sax player, guitar, violin, cello and me. I play a variety of things as you will see when you see the show. Its a lot for the brain! (Indeed BJ is busy with multiple trigger pads, kit,

effects, bells, click track etc.)

GJ: Is it a repetitive gig?

BJ: It is to a certain extent and, with the work that we do, it is good that it is! There is heaps of possibility for surprises at any time in the show. The music follows the action, so we have to react very fast. If there was no routine it would start to overkill. It is good to know that there are certain spots in the show where you know what is next. I have a surprising amount of liberty. Occasionally I get the 'look' from the leader. I have great respect for the composer and he likes what I do. As long as I don't go too far with my exploration. I don't have a big ego, if someone spots something that they don't like I have no problem changing things. What counts in the end is the music. I am glad you will be sitting with me because it is very hard to explain what happens during the show.

GJ: Is the circus like a family?

BJ: Very much so. We experience all the things a family does. We travel around the worlds and the only thing that changes is the venues and cities. We stay within this family day in day out and go through thick and thin together and busts and fights and lots of love. There's a lot of love here - it sucks you in. I don't have a great desire to leave at the moment but I've seen those who have and in the last week before they leave they realise what they've done.

GJ: What is your travel schedule generally?

BJ: When the show travels between two cities we have about a week to ten days off depending on how far they have to travel. At those times I either play drums or do nothing, which I haven't done in a long time. Recently I have done a lot of production work for people. I have produced and recorded a project also with some of the guys from this show. It has nothing to do with the show, we want to keep this strictly separate. We don't want people to recognise this record because we all work for Cirque. It is our own music and another composer who used to be with Cirque. We get together for a week and try to get as much down as possible. We do things quick because we don't have a lot of time to do things. We do a minimum of eight show a week usually it is ten. In Australia it is ten.

GJ: Where and when do you move to from this?

BJ: I haven't really set myself a time frame. At the moment with all the things I've done outside of the show so many opportunities have been created. There will a time when I have to make a decision. I have to turn down so many sessions its insane and it tears me apart every time. And there will be a time when two things possibly happens either I take a call and say 'OK, I'll do it_ and leave the show or I'll turn it down and the calls will stop because I'm not available. So before that happens I need to make a decision.

GJ: Do you work on your chops much?

BJ: I play so much. Every show is a rehearsal for the next one. And in the time I may be practicing chops I could easily just read a book or go out with friends and have a life! If you're a musician and you don't have a great deal of inspiration that comes from life experience you have nothing to say in music. Your emotional vocabulary as a human is nothing. So you need to go out there and live! By that I don't mean the rock and roll lifestyle, I don't mean you have to party and take drugs. I mean you have genuinely live; meet people; talk with people; expose yourself to life in general. Go to places go through relationships on all sorts of levels, you know, get into emotional situations that give you something to musically digest. To me that's the best way of

keeping your 'chops' up. Sometimes I play certain things where technically I feel 'square' so I work over that until I solve that problem. Its a very goal oriented approach. Other than that I don't believe in just doing the work. I'm not a plumber, I'm an artist. I make art, you know. People keep forgetting what they do. You can even look at the job of a plumber as 'art'. I can't do what he does and he needs his chops and technique to do it. But if all he has is technique he will never put together two pipes! I've been to lots of gigs where the musicians are amazing and they make me cry and question everything I know about drums and go home and never touch drumsticks again. But where do they play? What do they do? Where are the clubs that they do, you know? Do they play significant music or do they contribute to the consciousness of rock and roll history? I don't feel that, I don't feel that happening. I'd much rather listen to someone who can only play one rhythm, and not even very good, but they contribute to something greater than themselves. You look at Neil Young and Crazy Horse. They're not great musicians but they contribute to a consciousness of music that is so much brighter and better than the individual can actually play. You will never achieve this through doing your chops eight hours a day. You'll never get there, you have to go out and live.

Even in a show like this people may think I'm the session animal. When you hear what we play and how we work you will pick up on a lot of technology and structure behind it. But even the more so I have to be the musician to break out of that and still get music across to the audience. Because an audience doesn't understand 'dots' you know? If you are very proud of the parradiddle you can play the audience doesn't give a shit! They don't care. If it doesn't sound good they won't buy it! If the drum fill gets too fast and complicated they lose interest, its too much for them. Its all about how meaningful you can make it! So here I am playing this gig and I'm not a chops animal. And I don't ever want to be one! If someone came to me and said 'Hey, your chops are way above average' I did something wrong!

I'm not saying you should not have chops, I'm not saying you should not rehearse - you need this to keep in shape - but in a much broader sense. Certainly you have to keep in shape as a musician! You have to keep yourself lubricated.

GJ: Its more what you do with technique rather than whether you have technique?

BJ: Exactly. I'm especially interested in moments which come from a deep spiritual consciousness, a deep human consciousness. Drums are old! Drums are so old!! They've been used for healing, for communication for virtually everything. They're certainly not to be programmed and to be used to impress fourteen year old girls or sell records, its a disgrace. But these old guys like Keith Moon and Bob Siebenberg from Supertramp and all these guys when they recorded albums, the concept of the term that we all use now 'groove' - which means really tight and you can't stop bobbing your head - they didn't have the term, they didn't know that they were groovin' they were just playing! They were just expressing themselves and I don't think Keith Moon had chops at all, he just played what came to his head. You know there is a lot of times where I hear he played a lot of shit. But you would always forgive him because right around the corner he would play something so amazingly beautiful that it was worth all the wait. The greatest compliment you could pay me is if someone would say 'sometimes he plays like shit but you gotta forgive him because sometimes he's just amazing!' you know? When you touch somebody with what you play thats what you should go for, that's why you're a musician. If your a musician for any other reason go mow a lawn, go pack up your stuff. Leave space for somebody who does it!

GJ: What are you reading at the moment?

BJ: I tour far too many books! Naturally I read a lot of German literature, a lot of Kafka, Goethe, Suskind. I also read a lot of biographies because I'm interested in how other people 'did it'. I recently read a series about Einstein also Beethoven, Mozart. I

think Mozart was the greatest punk rock star who ever lived and I think Beethoven would've defined heavy metal in a new way. I mean if you listen to his ninth symphony that's just heavy metal, it blows your mind. If you put it into a historical context with what he had at the time - that's heavy metal. I've read several books on Ghandi who was just an incredible human. At the moment I'm not reading much cause I'm working so much on music. But if I find a good book I'm hard to get off it. When you're interdisciplinary, when your view of something is much broader than just staring at it from one angle, then it can become art. I just stumble through music and I discover new stuff everyday and I'm really excited. I'm just like a kid in a toybox, I discover all these exciting things the I get into it and then I want to do it and then I see how far I can push it. That's how I do stuff, so my sandbox at the moment is the bigtop!

GJ: What are you exploring now?

BJ: I'm starting to discover all the groove you can create with a didge (didgeridoo). I'm highly intrigued by that and I think Australia is a really full continent. I do see the fact that on no other place on the earth more animals can kill you and have the intention to do so. I would love to go to Cuba and hang out with those cats. They are heavy hitters when it comes to groove! They play a groove in a certain way. When you listen to the Bueno Vista Social Club there is a groove in there that you cannot scientifically analyse; you cannot. But it resonates with your heart and your soul. There is way of subdivision within loop of the groove, they slow down, they speed up, they slow down, they speed up within one bar that creates this amazing emotion and feeling that is incredibly alive and real genuine groove. You can't explain that with science there is now way! Don't waste your time trying to explain it just go for it! Do it! Previously I tried really hard to do a shuffle, the (Bernard) Purdie shuffle. A good solid shuffle. For as long as I tried to learn it I never could. Then shortly after I gave up it just came into place. I was listening so much to Jeff Porcaro at the time then it came into my playing. But when I was thinking too much about it, it wouldn't come.

GJ: Have you explored other artforms?

BJ: I write music quite a bit. I'm a little clumsy when it comes to sculpting, that isn't really my bag. The art of patience, the art of conversation, the art of learning other languages for communication; the art of life. Everything is an art if you do it right, from the right angle. The key is developing yourself. Again I never said don't rehearse, I never said don't train, don't practice. Just don't overestimate what that can give you. If you're a technically amazing musician but a poor human no one wants to work with you!

GJ: What are you listening to?

BJ: I recently have been listening to the Blues singer Keb Mo, I've been trying to get a little more into the delta blues, I listened a lot to Seal's latest release. I've been trying to figure out why people are listening to these new rock bands where they have five names on the booklet under the category of pro-tools engineers. They all sound the same with straight forward, massive sounding drums with a couple of power chords and they all have the same message with the same clothes and the same attitude and they're all the same type of rebel. they're all the same type of individualist. I have no interest in this and it gives me nothing. I'm really stuck with my old music, every once in a while something cool and new comes out but I'm stuck with my old stuff. Listening is the key in every sense to being a musician.

GJ: What do you think about sponsorships or any comments you want to make?

BJ: I do 360 shows a year and I do recording on the side and I don't use nearly as much equipment as drummers doing much less than me just because I don't overstretch. I call when something's broken or call to replace my spares. The

sponsorship families I have Pro Mark, Sonor, Sabian and Remo, provide for me all over the world. Those people who get depressed by reading the same stuff, by looking at all these instructional videos and thinking they're no good, who lose their interest in actually creating music. Just sit in a rehearsal room with a couple of buddies and make as much noise as possible. These people need to be encouraged, they need to know that with this attitude you can land the big gigs. This gig is huge, without bragging, who plays to 25,000 people per week? The reputation you get from it, the amount of recognition you get from it and people listen to you. You have to be good but there are different levels of being good at something and with my attitude you are perfectly suited to getting a gig like this. I think because the way things are promoted too many people are interested in what clinical artists do instead of what they should be interested in which is the actual artform. My favourite analogy is the painter. Its all about how beautiful the picture is, not how fast they painted it! Michelangelo took ten years to paint some things. Its all about having a vision about what you want to create and to do it as artfully, as meaningfully and deeply as possible. If you take all the attention away from the soul and the spirit of the artist and you give it to the brush manufacturer you're going to miss out on the picture! I'm glad I got this off my chest.