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Ross Adams: The Moment of

Author Bio

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Ross Adams: The Moment of

Stephen Lin

“Why do we tune?” he asks. Silence fills the room, each player in the ensemble holding their rest. “Anybody?” More silence. “No? It’s because we care.” Ross, wearing his classic Viking helmet, shuffles across the room to a tune that only he can hear. He throws us a follow-up question: “Anyone know who said that?” “Hendrix,” I respond. “It’s Mr. Jimi Hen—Yes! Very good.” The routine continues as a freshman braves his horn. “Wicked shawp,” says Ross.

Ross Adams lives in an alien world that everyone wants to be a part of, whether it’s the music he hears that we don’t, the music he can play that we can’t, or the impressive level of chill that he has cultivated over his career. Since studying at Berklee College of Music (’70), he has been a presence on the Boston music scene. Ross understands the music language inside and out: from arrangements to composition, from performing to recording, this man lives music. Most respected men are said to be the ones you want to have a beer with, but Ross is the type you’d want to jam with. He is a bodhisattva of sorts, and he has lines of people waiting for him to lead them to music-nirvana.

Each player sounds a hopeful note trying to match that of the piano and please the music god. He adjusts each horn by microscopic increments till the entire band meets his high standards. From a manila folder stuffed with an enormous stack of manuscripts, he pulls out his master chart. Another note on Ross: he refuses to recognize the charts by their actual name.

“Take out Hey Halsey.” A chuckle ripples throughout the band (Halsey is our trumpet player) as they rummage through their folders.

Ross’s office, a music history exhibition, is filled with old amplifiers, guitars, posters, music magazines, and recording technology. Cautiously, I plot out a piece of land to sit on, finally finding a place equidistant from the tottering columns of music and the litter of instruments. He reclines in his swivel chair, seamlessly blending in with the antique-filled room, a history book left open. I ask about the chapter on childhood. “Terrible. Horrible,” he responds immediately. Ross grew up in Jackson Heights in Queens, New York in a house full of Holocaust survivors. They were “flipped out, fear-based people,” and yet somehow, the man who sits before me is the defini-

tion of relaxed. Perhaps Ross was adopted, or maybe the man was destined for something far greater.

Two saxes bicker in the front row as Ross snaps his fingers, locking in on his tempo. The clock keeps ticking as time slips through his fingers. Ross, however, remains patient; sound comes after silence. He toots the white gym whistle, directing the traffic of voices towards the music. Then he counts off, "A-one, a-two, a-you-know-what-to-do." A cacophony of harmonies floods the room; such a small space isn't built to contain such vibrations.

"It picked me; I didn't pick it," is the classic response all musicians give, but Ross claims he's wanted to play music his whole life, "basically ever since I was born." The amusing image comes to mind of a baby holding a guitar twice its size. That was Ross.

"How did you know?" I ask.

"Well, I had an affinity for playing the guitar, and I practiced all the time without being told; that's how you know," he says. So, in high school, he began studying under Sal Salvador, studying the art of the jazz guitar inside and out. Thus began a legend.

Substituting for our flu-struck guitarist, Ross begins his solo. His fingers churn, producing the smooth sounds of America; it is buttery. With the brass supporting Ross, I respond with four measures of light flourishes on the snare, cymbal scratches and syncopation. We continue the call-and-response called "trading fours," where the soloist holds a sort of conversation with the drummer; I present a counter argument to each argument.

"Role models?" he asks, "What kind of role models? Like musical role models?"

"Anyone inspiring really," I suggest.

"Well there was this guy, George Bien, B-I-E-N, who was a monster, player inspired me to play hard."

I shrug.

"And, of course, there were the recordings. You know, Wes Montgomery and people like that."

"Ah."

"My father was a rather prejudiced type of person, and I was listening to all of this 'black music,' Art Blakey and Miles Davis."

"No good?"

"No. I was this white Jewish guy listening to Wes and my father was not very happy about that. My father wasn't very happy about anything."

"And you still did it anyways?"

"You know one good thing he gave me was a work ethic. He was a hardworking guy. The only...the only..." Ross trails off in a nervous chuckle. He recomposes himself. "The only guidance he ever gave me was this: he

said ‘pick a profession that you love, and being paid for it is even better.’ So I said ‘all right, maybe I’ll be a musician’ and he freaked out.”

Nineteen sixty-six swings around and with “the blessing” of his father, Ross leaves New York to study at Berklee School of Music in Boston, the only school that offered guitar studies. “It was the only school I could apply to, so I went.” Ross was on the soul train of fate.

His father provided Ross with a stipend each year until he was a senior in college. “Just remember,” Ross mimics, in a nasally tone, “when you’re a senior in college, that’s it. No more money.” But by junior year, Ross had already begun working. He was a student by day and player by night: recording, playing in pit bands, jazz clubs; you name it, Ross did it. “Back then, every street in Boston had at least two bars on it that hired at least one band apiece. So there was plenty of work. There was tons of work and you could be working all the time. I was,” Ross recalls. In the next forty years of his career, Ross would never celebrate New Year’s without playing in a gig.

Bwaaaahh. The horn wails and Ross closes his eyes, deep in concentration. The band struggles to match the sound he has envisioned: the notes have color and shape; each sound has life and energy. My heart races to synchronize with the pulse of the band. The bass thumps to my kick drum; my right foot leads the waltz. The trombone misses his entrance, disturbing Ross’s dream. *Tweet.* He ignites his whistle.

“Hold it! Hold it!” The band falls apart and dissipates, the notes scatter all over the floor. “Guys, we have to practice our parts; that’s a B-flat on measure thirty-seven. Let’s take it again, from the top.”

Practice is everything when it comes to mastering an instrument. Portraits of music icons like Jimi hang above us as Ross recounts the thousands of other Rosses he had met in his lifetime. He throws in a plethora of big jazz names, band mates, and teachers like Carl Rowan, Victor Babelov, and “that guy named Horowitz,” all of whom were an inspiration for him.

The one thing they had in common: “They’re all crazy people,” who practiced ten hours daily. After Berklee, he continued to study jazz with Charlie Minakis, guitar virtuoso. “You could practice twelve hours a day between lessons after seeing Charlie, come back the next week, and you still wouldn’t have covered everything he gave you.”

I inquire about the highs and lows of the sixties and seventies and upon hearing the word “regret,” Ross grows very solemn.

“You ever heard of Tony Williams?” he asks. I shake my head.

“No? Well Tony Williams was a vicious jazz drummer who played with guys like Miles Davis, Ron Carter, and Wayne Shorter,” he stops himself. “Tony Williams was separated from his mother too early.”

“Why’s that?” I ask, and Ross exhales and recounts a harsh reality:

“When you’re on the road for nineteen plus hours with nothing to do but twiddle your thumbs and get to the next venue, if you’re not disciplined you get lost. There’s a numbness and a boredom that can come over time if you don’t have spiritual practices or you’re emotionally unhealthy; that’s where the Amy Winehouses in the world come in.”

The silence sinks in for an uncomfortably long time. Finally, I venture, a man on the wire.

“How’d you stay straight-edged?”

“I learned my lessons the hard way,” Ross sighs. “After a while it was obvious, you know what to do. I wanted to get ahead. It’s a straight and narrow.”

The tenor sax begins his solo and a sweet nostalgic aura washes over the chaos. Ross lowers his head with his eyes closed, and whispers the unheard words that the melody traces across the empty space. I wonder what kind of insight that forty years of music can bring to your ears and out your mouth. He speaks a completely different language. I close my own eyes and attempt to listen. I listen to the melody, the supporting harmonies, and search for the hidden messages that the composers of the past transcribed. I find nothing and Ross grows very distant.

“I have this cousin,” begins Ross, as he completes a spin maneuver with his swivel chair, “seventeen years older than me.” He snickers. “He’d tell me I was the ugliest baby, but that’s not the point.” His cousin was a classical guy. “Season tickets to the philharmonic, a big deal.” This cousin held a conservative view on music and concerned himself with only one thing. “I’d occasionally show him the stuff I listen to, stuff that’s more out there, and he’d ask me, ‘Where’s the melody?’ but that wasn’t all there was to it.”

I nod, pretending to understand.

“He’s an intellectual, whereas I’m more of a street guy. I’m more funk. Funk is a feeling, so I can relate.”

“Funk is a feeling?” I question his diction.

Ross presses on, “It’s not just the notes; there’s something behind the notes. Music says things to people that words can’t. There’s something else going on with it, and I think you’ll understand this too.”

Finally, I surrender and ask the big question: “So, what is it? What’s the point?”

Ross smiles; he lets the question burn in my mind for some time before responding.

“What are we trying to do? We’re trying to connect emotionally, or even spiritually, with each other,” he says.

The truth sinks in slowly, and I try to reason through what I’m

hearing. Surely Ross is messing with me. Ross recalls a concert where Stevie Wonder asks the famous question, “Are you with me?”

“Whether you’re in Symphony Hall, or whether you’re in a bar someplace, listening to a great band; are we connecting? That’s what it’s about, man. You feel the energy.”

That’s what it’s all about: the words behind the notes, the foreign language I’ve been trying to decipher. Music goes way beyond listening or playing; it is the people.

Ross allows me to sit in contemplation for a short time before continuing.

“Good music is of the moment,” he says.

“Just the present?” I ask.

“You can’t be anyplace else. Of the moment is the whole game.”

I struggle with this. “What about the past? Where would we be without Beethoven, Mozart, the classics?”

“Well, that’s exactly it,” he says. “You are taking things from the past that you connect to and those educate you to do things in the spirit of the moment.”

I am still skeptical, like a child clinging to Santa Claus.

“The issue is,” Ross persists, “we as humans have a hard time being of the moment because that means you have to let go of the past and that the future hasn’t occurred yet; of the moment is not going any place, but be here right now.”

“Be. Here. Right. Now,” I repeat slowly.

“You’re not going anywhere, and yet you get someplace.”

The words finally settle in my mind. The fruit falls from the tree.

Colors and harmonies ripple throughout the room, disturbing the ocean of silence, as the melody soars above the tide. My hands move by themselves, reacting and cooperating with the band, an organ in the body of music. The tune is lost in crashing waves, but in it, I find meaning. Ross, his eyes clenched, holds his hands up, reaching, trying to grasp this one moment. Melody resonates; she is ascending to the heavens. We sustain the final chord, lost and found in this one moment of pure harmony: connection. His hands drop. “That’s enough for today.” I open my eyes.