

Interview
with
Peter Saltzman
composer/author of
Blues, Preludes & Feuds, A Musical Memory

Where did you get the idea for your *Blues, Preludes & Feuds* hybrid album-ebook app?

Seemingly, it happened by accident, but it wasn't. I started writing my memoir about four or five years ago. I kept feeling the need to write down for myself how I got here, evolved as a musician and why. It was a total exercise in self-understanding.

I thought of it being an ebook that would include my music. I had started a blog (pianodiaries.com) about my improvised solo piano work and then did a one-man show two years ago. This hybrid album app brings the two projects together—my piano diaries and one-man show, which led to my writing the memoir.

I envisioned the project as an app, where music and story are seamlessly connected, both telling the story. I started to design it in August 2014 and realized how it could become a unified work.

But as an artist, it took me these past 15 years of seeking ways to platform my music in a more meaningful way. A way that reflected my musical values, not random choices of some tech companies, like Spotify or iTunes .

I'd long felt the old ways of the CD, etc. had become irrelevant. I saw iOS and Android—today's platforms of yesteryear's LP/CD—as being more viable for presenting music vs. cloud streaming in whatever order people chose. I mean, it's fine for people to create their own contexts, make their own playlists, etc. But for me to produce a truly cohesive work of art, I need a platform that allows me to create my artistic context to present the music as I envisioned.

And I like thinking in larger formats, so this *BPF* album-ebook app really represents an encapsulation of how I see the music, technology, and writing coming together.

The fusion of technology and art is a cornerstone to your *BPF* work. What's behind that?

I've had a longtime interest in technology and art—spending a great deal of time investigating the ways technology and music interact. Not just about the tools we use, such as synths, digital recording/editing, cloud streaming. But the more fundamental implications of how all of these technologies change the very nature of what we're creating and how we present it—for example formats, platforms, etc.

And that has more to do with why I wanted to release *BPF* as an app vs. in a regular digital format with an attached book and the music by itself.

I had a startup technology company about seven years ago whose product was called the Virtual Album. The idea was to create a rich and dynamic online platform for music that replaced the CD/LP. But the product was too complex and not generic enough for most musicians—and just didn't work.

So I turned my focus to creating online formats that work solely for my artistic needs. That's why the technology developed for this *BPF* app will be the basic platform for my future work.

Let's talk about the music you created for *BPF* . . . Parts 1-4 are all your solo piano work.

Yes, it's mixture of highly structured and improvisational music--often in the same piece of music. Since piano was my first personal connection to music—and for a long time, my only one—it was important to make this hybrid album-ebook centered on live solo piano work.

Actually, it wasn't until my first year in high school that I played in a band with other musicians, experiencing the piano (and electric piano) in a context other than just me and my piano. And it wasn't until my mid-20s that I began singing. So really, other than music I specifically composed for other ensembles, the first quarter century of my life in music was intimately and solely connected to the piano.

As later segments of *BPF* are released, they may reflect my musical development over those stages of my life by including some larger ensemble tracks.

You've intentionally gone with a more stripped-down production for *BPF's* initial Parts 1-4—why's that?

I wanted the recording to be stripped down to the fundamental—me and the piano. There is very little editing and practically no effects (not even reverb) on the piano. It was done in my home studio's customized recording environment to ensure there was an organic flow between the music and the text. My goal was and is to push forward and understand the true implications technological trends have on art and vice versa.

I wanted it that way for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to be able to perform the music on the album live without it feeling as if the music was being diminished in some way because there were elements missing.

Secondly, I feel that we musicians tend to rely too much on production tricks to cover up for a lack of *real* musical ideas. I am by no means a tech luddite—I take advantage of all of the modern digital recording techniques and am knowledgeable enough about it to have developed and taught courses like *Technology for Musicians* at Columbia College Chicago. I don't want to go back to recording on tape or releasing albums in LP format.

But I created and recorded this music within the framework of understanding what a truly musical idea is vs. a technical trick. Now, technical tricks are nothing new. Musicians were using technical tricks long before "high" or digital tech was in existence. I'm always wary of it in my own music, so this album is my way of avoiding those kinds of traps.

Your music-memoir fusion—did the memoir influence *BPF's* music or vice versa?

When I started the process, it was kind of a free-for-all. I might have a piece of music for a show or some other situation that I wanted to use, so I'd try to see how it could fit into a story. Other times, I'd have a story and try to find or set a piece of music from the Piano Diaries or some other situation—kind of like setting lyrics in a song.

Quite frankly, I wasted a lot of time trying to make pieces fit together, quite a few of which simply didn't belong. But the creative wasting of time is actually an important part of the process, particularly when you're trying to create new forms. A lot of experimentation is necessary—flailing around in the dark, as opposed to having a clear plan from the get-go.

In the end, though, I found the story needed to dictate the structure. There is a simple and practical reason for that. Words and stories have a stronger—or a more clear-cut—narrative than abstract instrumental music. The narrative is there in the music, but you'd be hard-pressed to define it in words. The story helps give structure to the music and guides it along. The music follows the narrative, and the story structure makes for a unique musical structure that is certainly unlike anything I've written before.

When I play through the whole thing, the individual pieces feel increasingly more like chapters in a continuous story. It feels like I'm playing my autobiography. Improvised musical ideas introduced in one piece bleed into and affect the outcome of the next.

Improvisation is integral to the piece—not just there to prove I can do it. The musical side of the story changes, evolves each time I play it, as if I were in a sense rewriting or reinterpreting my memoir as I play it.

This is a wonderfully liberating feeling as a player, improviser, composer: I get to rewrite the story in real time, even though the basic structure stays the same.

Can you flush that out a bit for us?

I've taken fundamental ideas (in case of the piano). There are two great traditions, everything from Bach to Debussy / Bartok to the great jazz tradition, which is fundamentally my language.

Jazz and blues are my fundamental language for speaking. There are other traditions that have affected me, like pop, but not so directly from a pianistic standpoint. The melodies and song structures in pop, yes. But not the piano styles. Frankly, most pop piano is lame. The good stuff in rock—like Elton John, Billy Joel, Jerry Lee Lewis—comes from gospel and blues.

For me, it's about taking the language from blues and jazz, then applying some of the compositional techniques from Bach, Beethoven, and others. When I was 17 or 18, I'd read a lot of musical biographies. I read how Bach could improvise very complex fugues—as did Beethoven improvising sonatas—well or better than ones he wrote.

Bach's and Beethoven's keyboard work are some of the most—if not *the* most—important work of all time for piano.

In my memoir, I have this fundamental war within me. It's between the American side and European side—my grandparents were from Europe. I recognized that fairly early, loving both sides, but never completely comfortable in one or the other.

For me, it's always been about trying to merge the qualities that are in both, not superimpose one onto the other. I believe there's a tendency to superficially impose classical technique onto jazz to create what is normally called third-stream music. I don't think it works, and I don't like it.

I'm trying to find a fundamental musical truth that underlies both. They're not separate traditions or separate things at all. I think there is something fundamental that underlies how they are put together. That's what I'm shooting for. That's what most artists need to find.

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