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Stanley Jordan: "My Spirit Transcends Gender"

The guitarist speaks out about freedom and authenticity

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Stanley Jordan

To say that Stanley Jordan turned jazz guitar upside down when he came to prominence in the mid-1980s is almost a literal truth. Emulating the piano, his first instrument, Jordan developed a "touch style" of guitar by fretting with both hands on the neck, opening another contrapuntal avenue for the instrument and setting a new standard of excellence for solo performance. Today Jordan often plays guitar and piano simultaneously, in his own projects and with bassist Charnett Moffett's NeTTwork, among other groups. His next album for Mack Avenue, which will follow *Duets* with Kevin Eubanks, is slated for release in 2016.

Lately Jordan has found an enthusiastic welcome on the jam-band circuit, sitting in with the Dave Matthews Band, Umphrey's McGee and Phil Lesh and Friends. He remains active in software development and music therapy. And along the way there's been a profound personal change: Jordan has adopted an androgynous "femme" look that he's spoken very little about until now. He's reluctant to label himself but happy to relate how his appearance, one of many aspects of his multilayered identity, has everything to do with his art.

Currently based in Sedona, Ariz., Jordan, 56, is rarely home. "They tell me it's nice," he says. After a three-night run with NeTTwork at Richard Bona's new Club Bonafide in Manhattan, he took off to Russia. Soon he'd be leaving for Luanda, Angola. But back in New York in early November to sit in with the Roots on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, Jordan was available for a wide-ranging chat about his personal journey, peppered with offhand references to Ohm's law, Gödel's completeness theorem, philosopher Ken Wilber, transgender activist Virginia Prince and more. In the end, Jordan's story speaks to issues of gender and sexuality that go far back in the history of jazz yet often go unacknowledged.

Tell me about your affinity for the jam bands.

I've always felt really comfortable with the jam-band scene. Long before they called it that I used to play rock with my buddies, back in the '70s.

Were you playing touch style yet?

I was just starting to, in '76 or '77. The whole concept of music as a happening, as a scene, going with the flow, improvising, was happening not just in rock but in jazz, and that was a big influence for me. I saw Herbie Hancock, George Benson, Stanley Turrentine-this was like 1970. I saw Prince Lasha, I saw the Charles Moffett band, and that's when I first saw Charnett, when he was 8. This whole idea that music is about freedom was a stamp on my psyche right from the beginning.

You did a video interview with Lee Hawkins for *The Wall Street Journal*'s website, and he mentioned in passing that you used to have an Afro when you started out. It's the closest I've seen anyone come to asking about your appearance in recent years. Can you discuss what brought about the shift in how you present yourself?

Art and life work together mutually. I've always tried to approach my life as an artist, trying to create beauty. A lot of things that make art special are the same ingredients that are the essence of life. Then there's also the idea that great art puts you in the moment, which is what the sages from the East have been saying for thousands of years, that to grow spiritually you have to be in the moment. Part of the reason jazz has always attracted me is that it's about making that amazing creative moment.

And yet as I progressed on the professional side, I started to realize more and more that there are some limits to that freedom. There were unspoken rules. And I started to notice that just by naturally being myself I was breaking some of those rules and I was starting to get flak for it.

As a player?

Even in my dress code. For example, I had some experiences with "Papa" Jo Jones, who for a brief moment took me under his wing and was showing me around the city. It was a wonderful experience, but I remember one time he pulled me aside and kinda told me off a little bit. He said, "I wear a suit, you know, and if you're gonna go with me you have to be respectable and wear a suit." So, note to self, next time with Jo Jones, wear a suit. I didn't even have a suit! [*laughs*]

[One night] I was playing [in my suit], and I was on break and someone came up to me and said, "I've seen you many times before, and I just have to say, I really think you play better when you're not wearing a suit." [*laughs*] I was devastated! What do you mean? Why can't I be one of these Young Lions wearing the suit? I found out later that if you spend a thousand dollars on the suit and you get it tailored, then that's a whole different thing.

So did your style start evolving from that point forward?

When I did the live tracks that came out on *Cornucopia* [1990], I hired a stylist for that. I was finally starting to explore the style aspect more freely. We had different looks: I had a really nice tailored suit, and then I also had a more hip look. Then we did a change and I had some leather pants. I was starting to see that to really be true to myself, I could not be stuck in one mold. There's no one image that really fits who I am. That was the beginning of dealing with that. I'd always kind of known it.

When I did *Friends* [2011] I took that idea to another level. By then I had evolved a lot and started to appreciate my own diversity as a person. And I decided that on this album I was going to cover a bigger range of expression, all the different facets of who I am. So I wore different things in order to get into the head of the different songs. And I found that the experience was phenomenally successful.

If jazz is about expressing who you are, you gotta really deal with who you are. And who am I? There's so many different facets. I'm a hippie, I'm a homeboy, I'm a girly girl, I'm an Ivy League academic, I'm a tech geek. [*Ed. Note*: Jordan graduated from Princeton University in 1981.] I'm *GQ*, I'm *Vanity Fair*. I'm an athlete, I'm a teacher, I'm a healer. All these things are really real to me. I started out playing classical music, I come from rock, I come from jazz, and all these things I did when I was really young. I grew up at a time when things were very open and there were a lot of musical influences intermixing, different cultures and stuff. And there was this feeling that through music you could change the world. That became part of the reason why I play.

So when you say "deal with who you are," you're talking about more than gender.

I'm talking about on every level. One of the big complaints I got is that I couldn't make up my mind what style of music to play. That was one of the big criticisms. I was like, "Well, who says that I'm even trying to make up my mind?" First, let's look at what my actual intentions are.

I don't fit into a mold that I'm aware of. I had to deal with that, and at the same time I had to transcend that. Because I had to realize that by manifesting the courage to be all these different facets of myself and overcoming the fear of the consequences of that-and it's not over, I still have fear; this is a daily thing-but by overcoming that fear I feel like I can maybe do some good and actually accomplish something.

Has the fear lessened in recent years with more and more public acknowledgment of LGBTQ rights? Do you find there's more of an open door you can walk through?

Yeah, I feel like there's been a gradual change. And I also feel like in my own little corner of the world I've helped to create a change. Virginia Prince said people are hardwired for the truth. If you just put your truth out there you can trust that people are going to have to deal with it, and sooner or later they probably will.

Do you refer to yourself as transgender?

I don't really know. I can't give you a word for what I am. The best label I can think of is "Stanley," honestly. I'm pretty comfortable with that. And by the way, [President Obama]'s mother was named Stanley. A lot of people don't know that Stanley can be a female name.

Let me tell you about a really pivotal moment in my life. I was in this remote place where I figured nobody knew who I was. And I passed by this dress shop. I saw all these great clothes, and I was like, "Man, look at the stuff women get to wear! My male stuff is just so drab and boring." So I decided, "OK, I'm going in."

When was this?

This was around 2010. This was one of the triggers that first got me moving forward. So I went in there and I told them that I was shopping for my girlfriend, which actually wasn't a lie because I found her some stuff too. But I found this really pretty floral brocade mini-dress with open arms. I got it back to the hotel and I put it on over my jeans and looked in the mirror, and, oh my God, it was a life-changing moment. Because this dress in combination with the jeans created a look that was very feminine, on one hand; there's a feminine aspect of my body, and it kind of highlighted my curves. And at the same time, because the arms were open, it doubled as a muscle shirt, and it showed my upper-body development. And I saw both the male and the female elements blended really harmoniously.

I was looking in the mirror, and for the first time-I was around 50-I saw me. It was not some partial version of me. It was the fullest representation of me that I had ever seen in my life. And in that moment I realized that my spirit transcends gender.

Are you interested in a full transition, or are you comfortable where you are now?

I'm comfortable where I am now, and as far as the future, we'll see. I like the body that I have, but what are the possibilities of what I can do with that body? It goes beyond the conventional thing that I've been led to believe. And this for me is a renaissance, a personal renaissance.

You mentioned your girlfriend. Are you still together?

Yeah, we've been together for 10 years.

So she's been with you through this whole process. Has it created any friction?

All relationships require work and have their ups and downs. But I'm blessed that she supports and loves me for who I am.

Has the change had a direct effect on your playing?

I feel like the expressiveness in my music has gotten deeper and my ideas flow more naturally because my heart's more open. In order to be authentic I have to express the full range of the parts of my identity. But it's not like there's this one look or that I've changed from Look A to Look B. It's more like I'm free to go with the flow. Like someone might wake up and decide, "Am I going to wear the red striped tie or the blue-and-green tie?" It's the same as everyone else, just with more variation. I realized I had to have more variation than the norm to feel comfortable.

In jazz we have double standards. The jazz world is very masculine, and it's not just that the leaders are usually male. The energy of masculinity is really highly prized. That's one of the reasons I got tired of going to jam sessions, because it's testosterone overload. It's all ego and no respect for the song, no concept of melody, no nuances. They play the head and it's like, "OK, we got that over with-let's blow!" Whereas the older cats didn't play like that. They had a relationship with the music. And that relationship is one of those sort of feminine qualities that I feel has gotten lost.

The masculine energy is powerful and compelling, but I feel that jazz has come to overemphasize it. There is a lot of banging away at the instrument and showing off what you can do. The feminine energy is more about being in relationship with the music and letting it guide you. It can be simple and beautiful-that's not selling out. It can also be complex, but only because the ideas are flowing, not because you're trying to prove how smart you are. Finding my true balance has deepened my music. Both energies are good, so every musician should be free to find the right balance for them.

Have there been negative consequences in your career?

Yeah, there's been some.

I noticed some ignorant comments on YouTube videos and such.

Yes, but usually when I've seen negative comments it was when my look was off, or I was having a bad hair day or something. You say that to women and they're like, "Hey, welcome to our world." They're judged by how well they pull off the look. So if you're going to enter into that world you're going to deal with those same issues. Over time I've gotten better at really putting my look together, and people are seeing what I'm getting at.

There's an interesting positive consequence too: For the first time I can move through the mainstream world and not be feared. I mean, that's a sad commentary.

You mean as a black man?

Yeah, as a black man. People don't fear me when my look is more femme. And I never really realized just how feared I was because it was so constant that I didn't notice. Like if there's a smell in the room, after a while you don't smell it anymore.

At the same time, sometimes I see people pointing and laughing at me. So I've grown from feared to jeered! But the thing you learn when you're different is that most people don't care. Yeah, there are times when I feel a little bit out of place. That could include in musical situations. But what I find is that I'm comfortable in my skin for the first time. It's worth it. You win some, you lose some. People say, "I see you've changed your look," and I say, "Yes, the difference is now I look happy."

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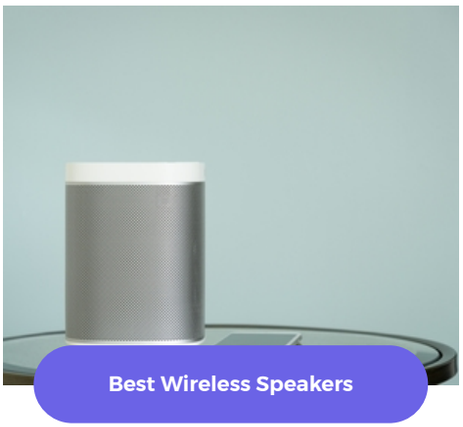

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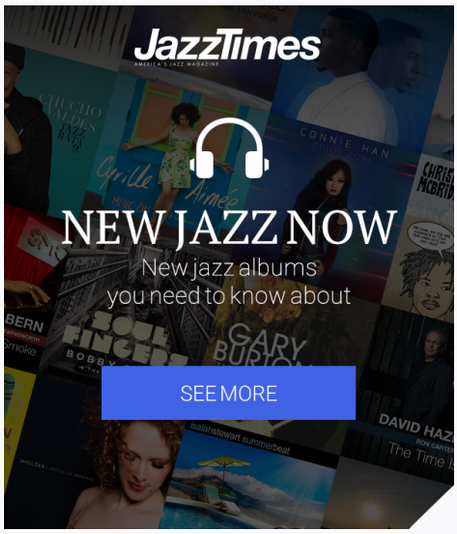

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