

Joey Calderazzo

One of the finest pianists of his generation, having recorded thirteen albums as a leader, Joey Calderazzo has traveled the road from child prodigy to in-demand session musician to elite member of the finest ensembles in jazz. He's accompanied the music's geniuses, from Michael Brecker and Branford Marsalis to Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland. Throughout his journey, Calderazzo has boldly explored his own psyche and his place in the world, as a composer, improviser, band member, and leader.

Calderazzo's long running trio, which recently recorded *Live From The Cotton Club Tokyo, Volume I*, is his place of relaxation and exploration, where improvisation is key, freedom is the norm, and swing is absolute. Joined by bassist Orlando Le Fleming and drummer Donald Edwards, Calderazzo examines original material and choice cover renditions in a live performance inspired by his prodigiously broad approach to jazz.

Early in his career, after groundbreaking records with saxophone legend Michael Brecker and solo recordings on Blue Note Records, Calderazzo experienced an epiphany that affected his piano playing and compositional direction.

"In 1997 I made a shift," Calderazzo recalls. "I found another dimension to my playing. I can't say why and I don't care to figure it out. You sit at the piano six, seven hundred hours a year, something's going to happen. And I'm always restless. I think, 'Why am I playing that again?'"

"It was right around the time I recorded *Tales From The Hudson* with Michael Brecker," he continues. "Then [pianist] Kenny Kirkland died and I ended up in Branford's band (where he remains). I found a looser time feel, different kinds of rhythms, and a more lyrical side to my playing. It was less of that McCoy Tyner-driven sound. My touch got better. My piano sound got better and it continued to get better. I started paying more attention to the sound of the piano."

Calderazzo, originally a classical pianist who turned down a scholarship to Berklee College of Music and dropped out of Manhattan School of Music, dove headfirst into the history of jazz piano and its heroes.

"I studied Art Tatum, Chick Corea, Jelly Roll Morton, Herbie Hancock, Brad Mehldau, and Glenn Gould and Brahms. A whole bunch of different things. Then I recorded *Haiku* [2002] and *Amanecer* [2006] and began studying more solo piano. I wasn't a hundred percent certain exactly what I wanted to do playing solo piano. I sifted through it all and figured out what was realistically going to work for me."

Calderazzo's breadth and depth as a pianist is astounding. A single solo, either with his trio or Branford Marsalis' Quartet, can allude to myriad generations of jazz piano giants, filtered through his keen, hard-swinging lens and joyous touch.

"Back when I was coming up, I wasn't able to play so freely and draw on different eras because I didn't think it was acceptable," Calderazzo reflects. "I was too cool to do that because 'I'm hip' and 'I got to be me.' So what does that mean? I can't play a medium tempo jazz tune and swing a couple of courses and have some fun and get out?"

With experience comes knowledge, with patience, wisdom. Calderazzo embodies swinging blues and post-bop, traditional jazz and boundary-exploring improvisation.

"Now fast forward with Branford," Calderazzo says. "We'll go out and play an Ellington tune, and I look at it differently. I don't look at concerts and records as this end-all musical statement. It's like, we played all kinds of crazy stuff, our language, then we played some swing. But in the lightest, most fun moments or when we play a slow thing or a couple standards I really love playing, like 'I've Never Been in Love Before,' we might swing it or play it real fast."

Calderazzo's perennial trio has recorded multiple albums, including 1993's *The Traveler* (with John Patitucci and Jay Anderson (bass); Peter Erskine and Jeff Hirshfield (drums)), 1997's *Simply Music* (Sylvain Gagnon, bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums); 1999's *Joey Calderazzo* (John Patitucci, bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums); 2011's *Live* (Orlando Le Fleming, bass; Donald Edwards, drums); and 2015's *Going Home* (Le Fleming, bass; Adam Cruz, drums). *Live from The Cotton Club Tokyo, Volume 1*, extends Calderazzo's relaxed persona and focused musicality.

"I play 'I've Never Been In Love Before' in my trio with a slower, more deliberate swing feel," states the 53-year-old. "When you play a standard like that faster it allows you to play outside stylistically and with modern lines. When you play it slower, the same lines don't sound good at that tempo. So with my trio I just let it go and have fun. People tap their feet and dig it. As I've gotten older the musical statement that I'm trying to make is 'I can play a little bit of this and a little bit of that. I got my own thing. I steal other stuff and have some fun. I hope you enjoy it. Good night.'"

Joey Calderazzo grew up in New Rochelle, New York, in a musical family. He began classical piano lessons at eight, jazz piano lessons at 14, and by his high school years was already performing with saxophonists Frank Foster and Dave Liebman in New York City.

"I was practicing classical piano for five hours a day," Calderazzo recalls. "I didn't love it. I was pretty good at playing Bach and Chopin Etudes. I wish I'd been forced to continue playing classical music but as soon as I found jazz, I just I was done."

Jam sessions and gigs were plentiful during high school, and when his friends enrolled in Berklee, Calderazzo was awarded a scholarship. But his father died when he was 17—he wasn't emotionally ready for the rigors of Berklee. Instead, he'd join impromptu sessions at the Boston college, where he would interact with the musicians, then students, who would eventually define the sound of '90s New York City jazz: Branford Marsalis, Jeff Tain Watts, Kenny Kirkland, Donald Harrison, Wallace Roney, Marvin Smitty Smith.

Like many young and advanced musicians, Calderazzo was already playing solo piano, cruise ship gigs, and weekend hotel work. One such gig changed the course of his life, forever.

"I was playing a house gig at the La Reserve Hotel in White Plains New York," Calderazzo says. "We had heavy cats on the bandstand. Frank Foster and Jeff 'Tain' Watts did the gig. Michael Brecker had heard of me and played the gig to check me out. I'd met Brecker at a clinic he was doing at Long Island University in Brooklyn. We played a couple of songs. He came and did a gig with me at the hotel."

When Michael Brecker's then pianist Kenny Kirkland left to join Sting, the famous session player and tenor icon invited Calderazzo to join his band. Brecker had just released his 1987 debut on Impulse! Records with a cast including Pat Metheny, Charlie Haden and Jack DeJohnette. The sky was officially the limit.

"I'd only been playing jazz for seven years when I got the gig with Mike," Calderazzo says. "I thought that was pretty amazing. Nobody knew who I was. It was the perfect storm because it's the long-awaited debut solo record of Michael Brecker. And it's a great record. We're touring and here I am, everyone is like 'who is this kid?' Within a year all the record companies were coming after me."

Brecker produced Calderazzo's 1990 Blue Note debut, *In The Door*, and enlisted the young pianist for every recording thereafter until his untimely death. In 1998, Branford Marsalis asked Calderazzo to join his quartet. Their association continues to this day.

"Where I have been so blessed is especially with Branford and Mike," Calderazzo recalls. "With Branford, Jeff 'Tain' Watts, and James Genus, we developed something special, a way of playing. Mike would go out and do other projects, but Branford's project is his quartet. I got spoiled. We play as a group and in jazz there aren't a lot of groups. This is special.

"All these experiences I've had help me with my trio," Calderazzo says. "I wanted to keep the trio as a real improvising outlet. We play songs. Nothing's hard. That's what I like. We can play anything and improvisation is key. That's good for that."

Joey Calderazzo Discography

In the Door (Blue Note, 1990)

To Know One (Blue Note, 1991)

The Traveler (Blue Note, 1993)

Secrets (Audio Quest, 1995)

Our Standards (Gowi, 1996)

Simply Music (Lost Chart, 1997)

Joey Calderazzo (Columbia/Sony Music, 1999)

Haiku (Marsalis Music, 2002)

Amanecer (Marsalis Music, 2006)

Songs of Mirth and Melancholy (Marsalis Music, 2011)

Live (Sunnyside, 2011)

Going Home (Sunnyside, 2015)

Live from The Cotton Club, Tokyo, Volume I (Dot Time, 2018)

Selected Sideman Discography

Michael Brecker *Now You See It... (Now You Don't), Tales from the Hudson, Two Blocks from the Edge*

Branford Marsalis Quartet *Contemporary Jazz, Footsteps of Our Fathers, Romare Bearden Revealed, Eternal, 4 MoFos Playing Tunes, The Secret Between the Shadow and the Soul*

Håkan Broström *Refraction*

Jeff "Tain" Watts *Bar Talk*

Jerry Bergonzi