

Jeremy Monteiro: The King of Swing

by **Perera, Audrey**, written in August 2010

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Each time his audience feels that he has reached the pinnacle of professional success, Jeremy Monteiro confounds them again by scaling a new height. But in spite of the illustrious company he has kept since he first began as a performer, his beginnings were simple, his passion for jazz inherited and his career kick-started by what he calls "...synchronicity. There is no such thing as coincidence".

"I had a unique growing up experience. My grandfather used to play all kinds of music on the piano — Western, Chinese, Malay — and my grandmother used to sing. My dad, who was a Singapore Harbour Board policeman and then a marketing executive, used to moonlight as a Hawaiian guitar player and as a jazz guitar player, playing stuff like Barney Kessel and Herb Ellis. Dad had records of Joe Pass with Oscar Peterson and Ray Brown without drums, and Jimmy Smith. He played country music too, Floyd Kramer. Mum played the piano and loved Irving Berlin-style ballads. Music filled my home, and I was lucky to have been exposed to so many kinds of music, interesting music that was entering my consciousness by osmosis from a young age."

"I had a China-made toy piano, and I started playing melodies on it immediately. My dad bought an organ, and then a China-made Blessing piano when he realised that I had a talent. I started learning classical piano at a young age, so I was not initially interested in jazz. But three or four years into classical training, I began to hate the lessons because they were based on scales and passing exams, learning and practising the same four pieces till they were perfect. I remember it as an abusive time, of strictness and getting my knuckles rapped."

"Once I was good enough on the piano, Dad would ask me to jam with him, and by the time I was 14, I knew that I wanted to be a jazz pianist," he says, adding that he was drawn to jazz because of its spontaneity. He was also influenced by friends who were earning extra money performing in Chinese nightclubs.

Jamming

His father's jam sessions made a strong impact on Monteiro. With family and friends gathered in their homes, first in Jurong and then in Pasir Panjang, he remembers that at first, there were only

guitars, which gradually expanded to include the organ, drums, bass guitar along with an amplifier. “The sessions would last about an hour or more and after that everyone would stay for dinner or *mahjong*. It was a very social environment because my parents used to invite lots of friends over. I used to listen and ask ‘what’s this?’ and ‘what’s that?’, an observer taking it all in. These sessions were a very important part of my input.

“Dad loved certain records and he’d tell me about the artistes, how their styles differed and so on, letting me listen to lots of recordings – I believe he must have had about 500 records at home, from mass appeal pop to classical, to vocal tunes by Dean Martin, Perry Como, Shirley Bassey, Engelbert Humperdinck, The Platters, Matt Monro, The Four Aces and The Beatles. Dad’s brother was a rock fan, so I listened to Jimi Hendrix too.

“I became conscious of sophisticated music, not just jazz. We had a good hi-fi system so I always heard really quality sound – this made a difference because I went on to become a producer who needed to know about good sound.”

Some of the artistes he listened to and admired were to feature in Monteiro's later life. “It’s very interesting because I’d heard The Four Aces at a very tender age and never dreamed that I would play with them, and I did. It was the same with Matt Monro and Sammy Davis Junior whose music I love!”

Teachers of Influence

It was during the time spent in Kota Kinabalu where his father was posted that he met a teacher who was to change his whole orientation to the piano. “It was in the early 70s, and we had been in Sabah for about three years. I met my most influential piano teacher, Mr. Tan Tze Tong. He was the only teacher I’d had who could play whatever he taught me. One of the first few people in Asia to get a Master’s degree in piano performance, he could talk about emotion, and show me what he meant, the difference between technically-perfect playing, and playing with emotion. I suddenly realised that I was not playing right.”

“Before he came along, I had hated lessons. I remember once when I was 11, I turned on my dad’s motorbike, let it heat up and purposely singed my leg so that I wouldn’t have to have my lesson. It backfired – mum tended to the burn and told me I could practise without using the pedal! She always made sure I kept up my lessons.”

Under Tan’s tutelage, Monteiro experienced a renewed interest in playing the piano. “He made me remember why I loved the piano, and I no longer needed to be told to practise. I stopped watching the clock and became more self-disciplined. He taught me about fingering; because I have small hands, I had to use my hands differently. He taught me how to get tone out of a piano, big sound versus loudness, many small ‘tricks’.”

When the family moved back to Singapore, Monteiro’s mother took up lessons again, learning from a teacher named Mr. Gabriel. By then, Monteiro had completed Grades 5 and 6 with Tan. “I used to sit in my room and watched fascinated, as Mum had her lesson. I was mesmerised by his way of playing, and like Mr. Tan, he could also play whatever he was teaching. He was the

one who skewed me towards contemporary music and jazz.” By then – 1974 – Monteiro was in secondary school at St. Joseph’s Institution, and was listening to a lot of jazz, and buying books on jazz piano.

There was to be another inspirational teacher in his life. Close to St. Joseph’s Institution was a store called City Music. Owner Willy Ho was one of the few people at the time who could play the Hammond organ. “I used to play on his pianos, and he offered me free lessons. He taught me how to harmonise my left and right hand playing, inversions and so on. He was one of the most important teachers I had.”

Between Willy Ho, playing in the school band and a schoolmate named Hilarion Goh who lived near school and had a piano, an organ and a drum set on which he discovered he could play drums, Monteiro had lots of inputs.

No Coincidences, No Looking Back

The big break came through his mum. “At one time, she was a private nurse and had gone to nurse a Jewish gentleman by the name of A. J. Isaac, who had just undergone some serious surgery. They got to talking and she told him that I was a jazz piano player. He owned a jazz club, and he told her to send me there for an audition when he was better. So at 17, I auditioned and got the gig as a piano player and band leader performing at Club 392, where Palais Renaissance now stands.”

This was an early taste of operating as a professional musician – playing and managing a band at the same time. “It wasn’t easy, especially because the band members were in their 30s and 40s!”

Driven by his passion for jazz music, Monteiro spent the next 30 or so years playing in local clubs as well as performing at international festivals such as the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. He has played with a range of fellow jazz musicians, including saxophonists James Moody and Ernie Watts, Eldee Young, Paul Martin, and Shawn Kelly.

Along the way, he composed the national song *One People, One Nation, One Singapore* which he wrote in 1990 and which won him the silver medal at the International Radio Festival in New York; in 1990, he was admitted, at the same time as singer Natalie Cole, as a voting member of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (organiser of the Grammy Awards), voting at the Grammy Awards from 1991 until 2010, and was the only Southeast Asian to hold a vote for many years.

In late 1992, he produced the album *Stand Up* for Grammy-Award winning Ernie Watts, joining an illustrious alumnus of Ernie Watts’ producers, who include Quincy Jones, Creed Taylor, Don Grusin’, and Gilberto Gil.

Besides leading his own straight-ahead jazz bands and being a member of Terumasa Hino’s Asian Jazz All-Stars, Monteiro formed his ethno-fusion jazz band, Asiana, to play as the opening act for a 1993 Simon & Garfunkel concert, and also played keyboards for the duo at the same

concert at the Singapore Indoor Stadium. Asiana went on to perform at Caesars Palace, Las Vegas.

Other jazz luminaries Monteiro has performed with at concerts or in studio recordings are James Moody, Jimmy Cobb, Toots Thielemans, Marian McPartland, Bobby McFerrin, Michael Brecker, Ernie Watts, Matt Monro, Cassandra Wilson, Lee Ritenour, Herbie Mann, Paulinho DaCosta, Charlie Haden, Leroy Jones, Vanessa Rubin, Carmen Bradford, and Simon & Garfunkel.

In 2001, he was appointed Artistic Director of the Singapore International Jazz Festival, and in the following year, launched the album *Swinging in Chicago*, which was released in Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan and Japan. On June 18 and 19, 2003, Monteiro performed with legendary harmonica player, Toots Thielemans, together with the members of his NYC Trio, bassist Jay Anderson and drummer Adam Nussbaum at the Victoria Concert Hall as part of the Singapore Arts Festival.

Also in that year, his CD, *A Song For You, Karen*, a jazz tribute to the music of The Carpenters recorded on the SACD format for American label First Impression Music (FIM), was recognised by respected American audiophile magazine *Soundstage*, as being one of the three best-sounding high resolution albums in that year. Among the other CDs given this prestigious recognition was the re-issue of Bob Dylan's album, *Highway 61 Re-visited*. "It's not the ideal The Carpenters jazz tribute but it's something that I worked really hard on and I was so surprised when *Soundstage* magazine voted it as one of the three best-sounding high resolution recordings of the particular year. You never start off thinking it will end up as one of the best-sounding recordings – how did that happen?"

A 2005 release of a duet album with top Chicago saxophonist, Greg Fishman, called *Only Trust Your Heart*, was followed in 2006 with Monteiro's first album of all original compositions. The album, which was the latest in his discography of more than 20 albums, entitled *Homecoming*, was recorded in Los Angeles and released in HDCD format on the Jazznote label.

"Technically speaking, *Homecoming* is my only album of all originals because although I set out to do an album of all originals with Charlie Haden, Ernie Watts and Al Foster in 1989, *Always in Love*, we decided at the last moment to jam on a lesser-known Charlie Parker tune called *Segment* and included it on the record. So the record doesn't qualify as an all original album, even though that is really a bonus track."

In 2007, Monteiro celebrated his 30th anniversary as a professional jazz musician. He has more than 20 jazz albums as leader and has played on numerous other jazz albums by other artistes.

The following year – 2008 – he was featured on the legendary pianist Marian McPartland's NPR radio programme *Piano Jazz*, joining a long list of eminent guests which have included Bill Evans and Oscar Peterson, two of Monteiro's heroes. The show was broadcast all over North America and beyond and the edited version of the programme was delivered as a Podcast to over 100 million people around the world who use iTunes software.

Following on that was the inaugural Singapore President's Command Performance in 2009. Monteiro was one of the honourees who performed at this concert at the Esplanade Concert Hall on 5 April 2009. Then came the 2009 APEC Summit which was held in Singapore, at which Monteiro and his trio performed to an audience which included Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and Hu Jin Tao.

Seminal Moment

To know when his international career took off, though, one needs to return to 1988 when Monteiro played on the main stage of the Montreux Jazz Festival with his group Monteiro, Young & Holt, together with original Ramsey Lewis Trio members, bassist Eldee Young, drummer Isaac Redd Holt, saxophonist John Stubblefield and guitarist O'Donel Levy. The band received a three-minute standing ovation in a concert that was televised in many countries. *Swing* magazine of Switzerland called him "one of the best exponents of jazz piano" and Claude Nobbs, legendary founder of the Montreux Festival, described the concert as "an unforgettable concert of the first 22 years of Montreux."

"I was playing in the Saxophone Club in Singapore when Claude Nobbs met up with Fabrice de Barys who owned the club. He came and heard us play and Fabrice introduced us. Later I gave him my band Jeramzee's album, *Faces and Places*, which featured Eldee Young and Redd Holt. He heard it and said, 'Wow! Eldee Young and Redd Holt! Why don't you come to Montreux with them?' He'd had them there in 1968 so we went.

"We did the show and it was just amazing. The audience was great, the sound was great. Ten cameras were shooting for the BBC and it was broadcast all over Europe 'live' and later it was shown in America and Australia. After I finished I just couldn't believe I'd been there. Eldee and Redd had breakfast before the next show and they were getting hugged and kissed and congratulated, and I went to be by myself somewhere. I sat down and thought, 'Did that just happen?' I kept pinching myself, I was in a daze. It was very surreal and still is very surreal for me."

"It was really good for my career, you know, at least I wasn't a stranger anymore in many places and it also reminded people about Eldee and Redd who had such a great earlier career with pianist Ramsey Lewis. It was a great promotion for all of us and a wonderful time. We released the album *Monteiro, Young and Holt – Live in Montreux*, and although the album didn't do so well sales-wise, it was a great calling card. Whenever you sent it to potential gigs, you know, *Monteiro, Young and Holt – Live in Montreux*, how could you get a better calling card than that?"

Besides running his own production house Showtime Productions Pte Ltd, and his own label, Jazznote Records, Monteiro is also the Director of Composers and Authors Society of Singapore Ltd (COMPASS), an organisation which administers music copyrights. "I was one of the five founders of COMPASS in 1987/88. We now collect \$14 million a year in royalties from broadcast and performing rights and distribute it to composers who are Singaporean as well as to people whose music is played in Singapore, no matter where they are from."

“We used some of the money to promote music and sometimes supply scholarships or bursaries. I believe that we are leaders because of our transparency and competent governance, with one of the lowest administration-to-distribution rates in the world. The world accepted ratio is 25% for administration and we only spend 16%.”

Monteiro is Visiting Chair of Jazz and Professor at LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts in Singapore, the first Singaporean to be appointed professor at the institution since Joseph McNally founded it in 1984. He is also a Fellow of the London College of Music which is part of the Thames Valley University in the UK, and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) in the UK, under the patronage of the Queen. This accords him the right to use the letters FRSA as a suffix to his name. Past fellows of the RSA have included Benjamin Franklin, Charles Dickens and Yehudi Menuhin and current fellows include Nelson Mandela and Stephen Hawking.

Monteiro, who has composed or produced over 700 pieces of music to date, has been mentioned in more than 400 press articles in publications around the world, including *Billboard* magazine and *The Washington Post*. “People know me as a jazz musician and I’ve played on 18 of my own albums, produced about six, recorded about 25 albums and played on about 40- 45 albums by other people. But I played on more than 300 pop albums when I was a session musician with EMI in the 1970s. Although I put so much into being a jazz pianist, pop music has been a big part of my musical life.”

In more recent years, Monteiro has also been performing more often as a vocalist than he used to. The Sept/Oct 2005 issue of the *Chicago Jazz Magazine*, in an article by Judy Roberts had this to say about his singing, "Monteiro has an appealing and expressive voice...[]you don't expect such a technically dazzling pianist to have such an intimate and wistful vocal sound...Monteiro is a consistently excellent vocalist."

Influences

“My favourite piano players are Oscar Peterson, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, and now Brad Mehldau, who is the most amazing guy out there. He is able to break all the barriers between jazz and classical. It’s just great music. There are jazz elements, there are classical elements, when he swings, he swings his butt off. He plays the blues and then he’s got all this Schoenberg, Rachmaninoff, Ravel stuff there and it’s just great music. And the two-handed approach, being so independent like that. Another piano player I really loved was Michel Petrucciani who died too young, and the country player Floyd Kramer.”

Quote

“I’ve always felt I was lucky, I got to listen to who I needed to listen to and I got to hang out with who I needed to hang out with, and get good advice from who I needed to get advice from at the right time for my personal growth as a musician and as a person.”

Awards

2002: National Arts Council, Singapore, *The Cultural Medallion Award (Music)*

2003: *Lifting Up The World With A Oneness-Heart* Lifetime Achievement Award, Sri Chinmoy, late leader of the Interfaith Peace Meditation and leader of the International Peace Centre.

Compositions

1986: *Back to Basics* (Jeramzee & Friends (Eldee Young, Redd Holt, Leroy Jones & Charlie Gabriel & others)

1988: *Faces & Places* (Jeramzee)

1989: *"LIVE" At The Montreux Jazz Festival '88* (Monteiro, Young, & Holt and friends)

1990: J. J. Jazz Sampler (Various Artistes)

Always In Love (Jeremy Monteiro with Ernie Watts, Charlie Haden & Al Foster)

Blues For The Saxophone Club (Monteiro, Young, & Holt)

1993: *My Foolish Heart* (Compilation) (Jeremy Monteiro)

1995: *Lucky Green Blues* (Jeremy Monteiro Trio (with Tama Goh & Belinda Moody)

1997: *Songs My Dad Taught Me* (Jeremy Monteiro Trio (with guest Dave Packer)

1998: *Dedicated To Jazz Lovers* (Jeremy Monteiro & friends)

Feelings (Jerome Etnom (pseudonym for Jeremy Monteiro when he records easy listening non-jazz albums)

Stand Up (Jeremy Monteiro (Producer), Ernie Watts, Lewis Pragasam, Paul Martin, Farid Ali, Richard Lane, Lady Rebecca, Eugene Pao, Bani Farook, Tama Goh, Maniam, The Raffles String Orchestra)

1999: *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes* (Jeremy Monteiro Trio)

2002: *Endless Love* (Jerome Etnom (pseudonym for Jeremy Monteiro when he records easy listening non-jazz albums)

A Song For You, Karen (Jeremy Monteiro Trio (with guests Jacintha, Two For Brazil, Eric Schneider)

Swinging In Chicago (Jeremy Monteiro & friends)

The Girl From Ipanema (Jeremy Monteiro & friends (featuring Eden Atwood)

2004: *With A Song in My Heart* (Rani Singam, Jeremy Monteiro (Producer, Music Director), Belinda Moody, Shawn Kelley, Greg Fishman, Mohammed Noor, Ron Feuer)

2005: *Out of Nowhere* (Anne Weerapass, Jeremy Monteiro (Producer, Music Director), Belinda Moody, Shawn Kelley, Mr Saxman Koh, Mohammed Noor)
Only Trust Your Heart (Greg Fishman & Jeremy Monteiro)

2006: *Homecoming* (Jeremy Monteiro)

2007: *Live at the Living Room* (Shawn Kelley) (Jeremy Monteiro (Executive Producer), Shawn Kelley, Taurey Butler, Therdsak Wongvichien)

2009: *Blues For The Saxophone Club* (Monteiro, Young, & Holt)
My Ideal (Eden Atwood (with Jeremy Monteiro Trio - Produced by Jeremy Monteiro)
My Romance (Matthew Quek) (Jeremy Monteiro (Producer), Andrew Lim, Christy Smith, Tama Goh)
Singapore Swing (Jeremy Monteiro & friends)
Groovin' At Groove Junction (Organamix)

2010: (Inaugural Vol 1) (Compilation) Jeremy Monteiro & various artists
Teresa Teng Forever (Jeremy Monteiro & His Orchestra)

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