



A Neon Jazz Interview with Kansas City-born, California-based Jazz Drummer John Armato

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Joe Dimino

Welcome to a new edition of the Neon Jazz Interview series with Kansas City-born, California-based, jazz drummer, John Armato. We had a wide-ranging talk about a great many things, like his 2021 debut CD, "The Drummer Loves Ballads." It's a wonderful listen, done with a veteran all-star collection of KC jazz musicians. It all started in Kansas City and he was an early member of Kerry Strayer's groups and the Kansas City Boulevard Big Band. And on occasion, he was a sideman for the jazz and tap duo, the McFadden brothers. He moved to New York City in 2004. It was a great experience, but he eventually made his way to Sacramento, California, his home now. He's got great tales, adventures, stories, and wisdom and joy.

Joe Dimino

Hey, John. Joe Dimino, Neon Jazz radio in Kansas City.

John Armato

Hey Joe. Nice to hear from you.

Joe Dimino

Nice to talk to you. How are you doing, man?

John Armato

Doing well, doing well. Yeah. Excited to chat and appreciate the opportunity to talk about the project.

Joe Dimino

Yeah. Hey, thank you for taking time out. Thanks for sending over the music. I had a great time listening to it. And it was funny because as I was listening to it, I was going down 71 towards the city and just the skyline opened up and you were talking about vignettes of Kansas City, and your first gig and all the jam sessions and all of that. So it was very cool for sure.

John Armato

Oh, that's a great story. I'm glad to hear that.

Joe Dimino

It provided the right texture for what was going on at the time.

Joe Dimino

So the first thing that we should do is get into your debut CD, *The Drummer Loves Ballads*. And I love that ballad story.

John Armato

Cool.

Joe Dimino

So talk to me a little bit about this long, long journey into an album that's coming out during a pandemic. That I guess the good part of this is that why music is starting to open up. Talk to me about that general feeling of this coming out right now.

John Armato

It's an interesting place to start. The album really started with a story of rejection -- that jam session where I said, "let's do a ballad," and that wasn't well received. But it became an album of reflection in the natural course of developing it. That's a part of what I think makes it a unique album in general. And also a part of what I call the full-album listening experience, because it was reflection, was kind of telling a story, whether it's the (narrative) interludes or the music itself.

John Armato

And I think that's what makes it familiar, because the ballads are certainly, a lot of them, tunes that people know, but I think it also feels fresh because of the way we approached it. But yeah, I mean to your specific question about this moment in time, I do think it ended up being sort of music for our moment. I've had people say, "this is just what we need to listen to these days," that sort of thing. There was originally a plan to include two tributes. So there's a tribute to Steve Patke and one to Kerry Strayer. And those are names that jazz fans in Kansas City might recognize. Steve was a wonderful woodwind player, mostly clarinet. We had Lynn Zimmer come in and play "Memories of You" as a tribute to Steve Patke. And then Kerry Strayer was a wonderful baritone sax player that I had worked with for many years.

John Armato

And we brought in Brett Jackson to play "Nightlights" as a tribute to Kerry. And that's kind of what it was intended to do at the beginning. But then on the way, I lost both my parents during the recording of the project. My mom to an aneurysm, and my dad to COVID -- and within an eight-month time period. And then after we had done all the production, but before we released, unfortunately we lost Molly Hammer, a vocalist on the album, to cancer. And

Jeff Lisenby, who played the accordion on "Shadows of Paris," to COVID. And just the entire vibe became this act of gratitude and appreciation and reflection on those folks.

Joe Dimino

What an answer. Of all the times that I ask this in relationship to COVID, this probably hits home the most. I mean, you really, this is a tapestry of that time.

Joe Dimino

Such a clean recording. It's such a powerful... I mean, I don't even know if clean the word for it. But it just feels like there was such a level of astute attention to detail going all the way throughout this. And I think the thing that struck me about this album too, is that it tells a story. You know what I mean? Jazz is mostly something that's void of vocals, but I think it's interesting that there was a story that went through this. So ultimately, what do you want the listener to get from this very powerful debut into the world of jazz for you?

John Armato

Well, let me answer. I hear two questions there. I mean, I'd love to comment on sort of the clean recording and attention detail, and then I'll comment on the takeaway.

John Armato

I'm a newbie to this kind of recording. I've done sessions, but never been a part of really driving my own project. And so this is where all this gratitude overflows. I have a good friend, John Cushon, who's a world-class drummer and been a buddy of mine for decades. And I asked him to produce -- and we argue whether or not he really was a producer -- but he was my guru, my Sherpa, whatever you want to call it. John knows how to make albums and has worked with producers all across the world and great recording artists and engineers. So he had a ton to do with the sort of sonic quality and the care and attention, decisions made to the recording. Justin Wilson was the primary engineer. And Justin is a part of a lineage of engineers that really sort of followed the ancestry of Ron Ubel who had Soundtrek studios in Kansas City, which of course was THE jazz studio in Kansas City for so long. Justin has the ears and had the physical space that was really right for a jazz recording, that had sort of a classic authentic sound, but with all the modern abilities to shape it.

John Armato

Howie Lindeman was the mix engineer, and he's a six-time Grammy award winner. He's worked with Roberta Flack and Natalie Cole and incredible musicians. Greg Calbi was the mastering engineer, another multi-Grammy award winning engineer, who's really legendary. So I just fell into the hands of some of the world's most talented people to ensure the sonic character of the album. And then, for my part, I had a pretty specific vision of what I wanted, and we weren't in a hurry. So we were able to take our time, do multiple sessions and make the album we wanted to make. And I love it that you can hear that. So I'm just really gratified at the question itself.

John Armato

In terms of what I want people to take away from it. I have what might be a controversial point of view on the creative process on this sort of thing. I made the album for me. There's old advice for writers, which is write the book that you would want to read. I wanted to create the album that was the album I wanted to hear, in my own collection. I wish I could pull this sort of thing out and put it on and listen to it. So it was sort of a selfish creative act. But then it becomes a process of how do you share that as unselfishly as possible and hope that it's relevant to other people. So I just was looking for myself for an hour of music that would let me reflect, relax, find beauty, and think about what's important, and just enjoying myself. And that would reward me for listening casually as well as for listening closely.

John Armato

And if others take away that same experience, then I'd be hugely happy.

Joe Dimino

You know, there's always that gateway drug, that flash point, that happens for people that love jazz. So talk to me about your beginnings, your childhood, and how this whole jazz experience became your world.

John Armato

Yeah. It's funny talking about this. Because I was literally thinking about that this morning. I owe it to two things, explain it through two things, I suppose. One is what my dad used to call the X factor. That just unknown part of your DNA that you can't really explain, but it's just there. We all see in little kids some impetus that turns out driving their entire life. For whatever reason, jazz just plucked my string as a kid. It just resonated internally. I have no idea why. I can't explain it. I don't really try to. But it's just what I responded to.

John Armato

And then secondly, my folks had great taste. My dad had no musical abilities but was a great musical appreciator. My mom had a great singing voice and had played in her high school band, and that sort of thing, but was not an active musician. She played a little piano. But they had great albums in the house. We had this big old 1960s Magnavox console with the turntable and the radio and the place to store the albums. And inside there was Nat King Cole and June Christy and Dave Brubeck. And I must've listened to Dave Brubeck, "Jazz Goes to College," which was pre-famous quartet. This was when it was Joe Dodge on drums, and not Joe Morello, and those folks. It was this live recording. I have listened to that album probably thousands of times in my life, starting when I was a little kid.

John Armato

And that's what I knew. That's what I loved. And that's what resonated. And I was the oddball kid in junior high whose friends were listening to ACDC, I was listening to Johnny Hartman or something like that. It was just always there. And beyond that, I don't have any explanation why.

Joe Dimino

So talk to me a little bit about your Kansas City roots. Just your roots and how that swayed you into not only your sound, but kind of your cognition of how you approach jazz.

John Armato

That's great. So, born and raised Kansas City. I'm 57. So I was born in 64, grew up north of the river in the Gladstone area. Solid middle-class family. Dad was a teacher and then a junior high school counselor. Mom was a stay-at-home mom and then worked as a bookkeeper for a local furniture store.

John Armato

I'm the youngest of five kids. Went to public schools -- Winnetonka High School. And I had always had this love of music and was fortunate that we had a pretty good public school system, North Kansas City public schools, at that time. Solid district with a good music education program. So I always had good music teachers from first grade on up, including Charlie Menghini, who was a well-known band director at Winnetonka High School, and created outstanding experiences for his students. So I was surrounded by music at home. I had a great public school music experience. Didn't really know the world of Kansas City until I got older. Because when you're growing up as a school kid, north of the river, you don't automatically get south of the river much. But went to one year at Mizzou for my freshman year of college, and then decided to come back and go to UMKC, and went to the conservatory, really got to know the city more broadly, started gigging with people like Kerry Strayer.

John Armato

And I think the influence that is stunning for me to reflect on now, is the realization that there really is a Kansas City sound. And I think at the time -- Kansas City likes to talk about Charlie Parker and Count Basie and being one of the birthplaces of jazz or that sort of thing. I always kind of thought, well, that's and convention bureau kind of promo talk, but I don't know. It just sounds like we're playing music to me. But then I moved to New York and then

I moved to Sacramento and I've had more exposure around the country, and I'll be dang. I mean, there really is a Kansas City sound. There's that four on the floor, steady swinging, and it's a pretty hard swinging sound. And I didn't really appreciate that, but I'm so grateful for it because it informed my sound.

John Armato

I think I swing pretty well, and people hear it in my playing. And even in the ballads, there's a swinging groove to most of them, I think. And I owe that to the people that helped me as I was coming up. The other thing I'll say about Kansas City is it was a friendly musician town. I was mainly coming up in the eighties. I played for about 20 years in Kansas City before I left town. I got to work with all the contractors, the society bands, Steve Miller, Vince Bilardo, and those folks, and worked for years with Don Warner. And I'm a side man. I just played whenever the phone rang. There were just so many great people who were willing to just tell you the stories and give you advice. And Kansas City was a wonderful place for me growing up, and it definitely influenced the way I sound.

Joe Dimino

What did you like the best about Kansas City, now that you look back and you've had a chance to kind of compare geographies, and all of that? What did you like best about Kansas City?

John Armato

I think having lived in New York City, I lived in Manhattan for four years. Absolutely loved it. I love being out here in California. But Kansas City I think is a perfect size city. I loved that I felt connected, eventually as I grew up, to almost the entire metropolitan area. There's always like, oh, I remember playing that festival over there. Or I had that cool school experience over there. I remember going on a date there, or that cool festival there. And it's just, you can feel a part of the whole town, and it's easy to get around and feel connected in it. Yeah, I suppose maybe that's true for anyone's hometown, but I can't go back and look at virtually any part of the city without having a flash memory of some sort and feeling rooted to it.

John Armato

Now a lot has changed. It's surprising to me when I go downtown and see the entertainment district, power light district, that sort of thing. It's almost disorienting because I've been gone now 17 years, almost 20 years. But I like the combination of, big enough to have a fair amount going on, but small enough to feel like you kind of knew the place. That's always lingered with me. And of course, Midwestern people are hard to beat, and it's just good folks. I definitely felt that as I moved around the country.

Joe Dimino

What was the first live jazz show that ever blew you away. That made you think, man, that's something I'd like to do?

John Armato

Oh, I saw... this is just what comes to mind. I'm not even reflecting on it, but for some reason jumps to mind. I saw Count Basie with Butch Miles on drums, at Crown Center. It had to have been sometime, I'm going to guess, mid-seventies, I'm just throwing a wild dart here.

John Armato

Oh my Lord. It was the first time I'd heard a big band like that swing that hard live. Now I'd heard some stuff on albums, of course, but I'm getting chills thinking about it. It just was the happiest thing I'd ever heard. I mean the Basie band, that was always my fantasy dream band. It's like if I'd had a parallel life and had gotten to play in some legendary pro band, it's like hands down, the Basie band would have been what I wanted to do. Of course, Butch Miles is a force of nature. And watching him play was an inspiration utterly unto itself, separate from the inspiration that came from watching the band as a whole. But I'm just sitting here smiling even telling you about it. Because it just gives me chills to even remember. Just sitting there, not even able to sit still in my chair, that band was just so amazing.

Joe Dimino

Yeah. It used to be really, really swinging back in the day. I've heard about a lot of shows out in that Crown Center area. Was it always music for you? Did you always know that you were going to be a professional musician, or were there other dreams?

John Armato

It was definitely always music. I think, like a lot of kids, I've had a variety of interests over the years, but I took my first lesson May 27th, 1972. That's a date that's as important to me as my own birthday or anything else. I was eight years old, one week past my eighth birthday. I had been begging my parents for drum lessons for literally years. And they couldn't find a teacher who would take somebody under the age of eight. So they just had to keep me at bay. I just had to wait until I turned eight. And one week after my eighth birthday, I went to my first lesson. Before that was pots and pans and toy drums and beating on furniture, and Lord knows where it came from.

John Armato

That's one of those amazing DNA things, who can explain? I don't know, but yeah, I always wanted to play drums. Now, what's interesting, to me anyway, is I think different people are attracted to different instruments for various reasons. And of course, drums are sort of on the surface in a way, boisterous and rowdy and loud and you're banging, and I'm sure there was some of that for me. But I was attracted to the totality of the music. And I remember when I first discovered Buddy Rich, probably on the Tonight Show or something like that. So it was not long after I had started to take lessons, I told my parents, I said, for Christmas, I want a Buddy Rich album. But I said, not one of him just playing a bunch of solos. I want one with him with a whole band. Which seems like a ridiculous thing to say now.

John Armato

I fell in love with drums... but I fell in love with drums in the context of music overall. That was always sort of key for me. I don't know how to explain it, but it was always there. Now, along the way, I had other interests. A couple of years later, I got really into magic and I did that for a number of years. I still sort of follow along that profession, but the music is the thing I have done longest in my life. And it's the way I self-identify the most. I think of myself as a musician, I've had a day-job career, and I've had other pursuits, but music has always, always been there.

Joe Dimino

What kind of culture shock was it to leave Kansas city to go to a place like New York and really say, all right, I'm in, I'm in the cauldron and I'm ready to go?

John Armato

Terrifying but exciting at the same time.

John Armato

So for context, I was working at an agency called Fleishman-Hillard. So my career has been as a communications executive in the public relations world. And so I had a job transfer. And I had my choice of some various offices and I chose to go to New York City just because, why not? That's the brass ring and it'd be an amazing experience. But I was 39 when I moved to New York and I thought, oh my gosh, this is what you do when you're 18 and you're scrappy and you're taking on a new city. I was set in my ways and kind of terrified about it. Within two weeks after getting there, I thought, perhaps I'd been born there in another life or something. It absolutely felt like home. Absolutely loved, even the stuff I hated about New York, I loved about New York.

John Armato

I absolutely loved that experience. And I went there not really expecting to play that much because the last thing New York City needs is a part-time drummer. And I was there for my day job. But I was super fortunate to make friends with Bob Kindred and Anne Phillips, right off the bat. Literally the first week I was there, I met them. And Bob has since died, unfortunately, but he was a world-class tenor player, he'd been on the Woody Herman band

and just an amazing player. And she (Anne) was a legendary vocalist who put out an album in the fifties, called "Born to be Blue," that kind of has cult status now. And she was a jingle producer and composer and arranger, did six nights a week piano singles, and all this sort of stuff. And she's just an amazing fount of wisdom and stories. And they both kind of just took me under their wing.

John Armato

They only lived a couple blocks away. And Bob started inviting me down to his Sunday jazz brunch gig at Cafe Loup, and I started sitting in. And then he took me a couple of jam sessions and put me out a few gigs. That's where I met Warren Vaché. I'm sitting there thinking this is unbelievable. Not only did I survive and not get killed the first day I walked into Manhattan, but I love this place, and I'm getting to play music, and I've met these amazing people. And for me, it was the most electric, inspiring, mind opening experience of my life.

Joe Dimino

Beautiful. So you've obviously, kind of been a geographical globe trotter here. You're now in California. Talk to me a little bit about how you've ended up where you're at right now and just kind of how that works in your timeline.

John Armato

Sure. So I was in New York for four years, and thought I was going to spend the rest of my life there. I loved it that much and was enjoying it that much. 2008, the firm I worked for said, we want you on the West Coast. And I kept saying, I don't really want to go. I'm happy here. And then eventually they said August 1st, 2008, you'll need to be in California. And unfortunately, this was when our economy was collapsing. And I thought, well, this is a really bad time to say no to your boss because I could find myself out of work and living in New York at a time when people are going to be losing their jobs, and it's not going to be easy to find work. Or I can go to California, start a new life experience and keep my job. And I'm a fairly risk-averse person.

John Armato

So I made the move. I had my choice of offices. We have locations in San Diego and San Francisco, Los Angeles and Sacramento. I thought, well, I've done the big city thing with New York. And I have a buddy who runs our office in Sacramento. So I'll go to Sacramento. But the truth is I've been here 13 years and I hated the first three because I was so busy resenting the fact that I had the transfer against my will. But once I stopped resenting it and made friends and really started working on getting into the scene, I've really come to love it here. And I've met wonderful musicians. Man, I'm in Northern California, you've got all that Bay area influence. Oakland is home to so much of the Tower of Power sound and all these great sort of soul R&B horn bands and incredible musicians up and down Northern California. And so there're all kinds of great players, I've had the opportunity to work with here.

John Armato

Now there are differences and listeners may find this interesting or not, but it may be about the passage of time or maybe about geographical differences. But when I was in Kansas City, like I said, it was strictly side man. You make yourself known, when somebody needs a drummer, they called their list of drummers. I was occasionally a first call for a few people, I was the second or third call for other things. But you get the call, you show up a half hour before the gig, you set up your axe and you play, and you're done. That's the way it goes. What I discovered in working with Sacramento is there's very little of that side man scene or the casual scene. It's very much entrenched bands. People rehearsing as steady groups and going out and trying to work on a regular basis as that unit. And so I had to kind of make a mental shift and get more accustomed to that way of working as a musician, but it's been great. And I've had a lot of terrific music experiences out here.

Joe Dimino

So if you look at your biography and you just read through it, you think, man, how is this guy that's been all over, played with all of these bands and people? How is he releasing his debut now?

John Armato

Well, clearly, I'm slow! Well, I mean, it is an interesting story. Well, others will determine if it's interesting or not. But it's interesting to me. I mean the origin story goes back 40 years. So the album itself and the story behind it is all about the jam session I played in 1981. And for those who haven't heard the album yet, the short version is, jam sessions are a place where a bunch of people are just trying to burn as fast and high and loud as possible to impress each other. And there's this little break and the sax player in charge turns around and says, "What do you guys want to play next?" And no one said anything. And so I said, "well, how about a ballad?" Because I've always loved ballads. And this guy looked at me like I was insane, and just turned around and kick off another burner.

John Armato

You don't play ballads at a jam session. What are you, nuts?

John Armato

And so literally for 40 years, I've had this in my mind, this idea of like The Drummer Loves Ballads, as almost a snark. The Drummer Loves Ballads? And I thought, so maybe we find that that's the basis for an album. And I've just carried that around for years, literally decades. And then I started thinking, I think there's something about aging. A few years ago I was just like... Okay, my clock is ticking. I've got more years behind me than I have ahead probably. And if I want to do this, I need to do it now. And I approached my buddy, Cushon, John Cushon. Man I said, if I were to do this, would you be my producer?

John Armato

And he said, yes. And that's the only reason it actually got done, because I needed an accountability partner. It'd be easy for this to just be an idea or a dream. But when you get somebody else on board and then say, okay, yeah, we're going to do it. Then you go like, well, I guess we should meet and talk about tunes, and timing, and personnel. And all of a sudden it was a real thing. Now, even at that point, it took five years. John and I had that first conversation at a diner in New York in 2016. We planned off and on throughout -- that was right at the end of 2016 -- we planned off and on throughout 2017. Sessions started in 2018. 2019 was mostly a loss with the pandemic 2019, 2020. And then we were able to kind of get back on track, finished the mixing and getting it out.

John Armato

So it's just one of those things that had percolated. And finally, because I got myself an accountability buddy, I was able to turn an idea into some action.

Joe Dimino

Perfect. Final question. Everyone has a perception or an idea of who they think you are. Your family, your friends, your fans, but ultimately, you're living your life. What's your perception of you? Who do you think you are?

John Armato

I think I'm a dilettante. And I say that because growing up, I always wanted to be a Renaissance man. I have curiosity about a ton of things. I'm fascinated by a lot of different things. I love exploring and reading and learning about different things. And I was enamored with the idea of those folks throughout history that have been referred to a sort of Renaissance men and women. The people who were polymaths, had command of a variety of disciplines, integrated different ideas from one part of their world and another part of the world.

John Armato

And I was like, that's what I want to be because I have all these things. I love literature. I love magic and theater. I love music. I love writing. I love public speaking. I love figuring out complex ideas, all these sorts of things. And in the end, I think I didn't become a Renaissance man, because I don't think I'm quite masterful enough of any one area to bestow that moniker upon myself. So I'm a happy dilettante. I do a lot of things and I try and combine those things. And so this album is really integrating my love of writing -- there's an original tune called "At The Trocadero" on there, that I wrote the lyrics for and Wayne Hawkins wrote the music for -- of storytelling and public

speaking, which comes across in the interludes. I was a graphic designer early in my career. I got to bring that to the packaging. And of course the music, first and foremost. But I think I'm a dilettante. My problem is I wanted to be everything. And I don't think that happened, but I do get to try a lot of things and it's fun to bring them all together.

Joe Dimino

Beautiful. John, thank you, for opening up. Thank you for the music. Good luck with everything, man. It's been a great joy to talk to you.

John Armato

Well, I sure appreciate it, Joe. And I'm delighted you took the time to do it.

Joe Dimino

Thanks for listening and tuning into another Neon Jazz interview. We give you a bit of insight into the finest cats in New York City, Sacramento, Kansas City, and spots all over the world. Giving fans all that jazz. Thanks to John for his time, music and class. If you want to hear more interviews, go to famous interviews with Joe Dimino in the iTunes store. Visit neonjazz@youtube.com and for everything neon jazz, all the time. Go to the neon, jazz.blogspot.com until next time, enjoy the jazz my friends. Neon Jazz.