

# JazzBluesNews

## Interview with John Armato: Beauty is its own reward: Video, New CD cover

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**Jazz interview with jazz drummer John Armato. An interview by email in writing.**

JazzBluesNews.com: – First let's start with where you grew up, and what got you interested in music?

**John Armato:** – I’m from Kansas City, Missouri, where jazz also grew up for a time, thanks to people like Count Basie and Charlie Parker. Pat Metheny is from the area too and my hometown is home to more world-class players than I think people realize sometimes.

But that’s all stuff I learned later. As a little kid I just loved banging on anything I could. My folks had this great old Magnavox console with a small but terrific record collection in it, so I grew up listening to Dave Brubeck, Nat King Cole, June Christy, soundtracks to musicals, light classical stuff, and popular stuff of the day like Anthony Newley and Sammy Davis, Jr. I have most of those records now, including an original Decca 45 of Sammy’s “Birth of the Blues” that still swings harder than just about anything else I’ve ever heard.

Ultimately, though, I can’t really point to any one catalyst. I just always loved music and always wanted to play drums.

**JBN: – How did your sound evolve over time? What did you do to find and develop your sound?**

**JA:** – I have to admit I wasn’t very intentional in developing a sound or style, initially. I just loved what I loved and tried to sound like the people I most enjoyed listening to. Early on I gravitated toward mid-century jazz and mellow moods. I remember asking my mom to buy me brushes not long after I started taking lessons – I wasn’t even a teenager yet – because I liked the way they sounded on the records I was listening to. These days I’m in constant astonishment at the “light touch” players like Jeff Hamilton and Peter Erskine. That’s the direction I want to take my sound.

**JBN: – What practice routine or exercise have you developed to maintain and improve your current musical ability especially pertaining to rhythm?**

**JA:** – There’s a saying among drummers that we spend the first half of our lives trying to add notes and the second half trying to take them out. Especially as I get older and realize there is only so much time left to develop myself, I’m becoming much more selective about where I put my practice attention and that’s back on the basics: making my time more solid, supporting other players with a reliable groove, being precise in my note placement, choosing my patterns with musical intent, and those sorts of things.

I’m addicted to warming up with an exercise from Joe Morello called the Table of Time, which is simply playing sub-divisions at slow tempos from groups of ones, then twos, then threes, and so on, typically up to 11s or 12s. It does wonders for establishing your confidence in where the quarter note is and the flexibility and evenness of your hands at different rates of speed.

**JBN: – How to prevent disparate influences from coloring what you’re doing?**

**JA:** – Imitation is an important way to learn and I think disparate influences is actually the key to creativity. But the challenge is to find ways to connect the dots on those influences so that they become something reflective of you and not just a mirror of the original source. As simple as it may sound, one of the things that has helped me the most is simply to stop *trying* to sound like other people. The musicologist and critic Ted Gioia wrote in his book “How to Listen to Jazz” that music is “... a type of polygraph test, a source of insights about its creator....” It really struck me that, especially if you stop trying to sound like other people, you can’t hide. It actually helped me come to grips with the idea that I don’t have to compare myself to other players or aspire to some standard that doesn’t come from my heart. In fact, that quote helped give me the conviction to record [The Drummer Loves Ballads](#). I’ve found that the more I focus on playing what I love and what makes me happy, the more I sound uniquely like myself.

**JBN: – How do you prepare before your performances to help you maintain both spiritual and musical stamina?**

**JA:** – I’ve learned the hard way that preparation has to be constant and permanent. There’s nothing you can do the night before a gig to suddenly be better. To be honest, I have to re-learn that lesson too often. You can’t fake facility. So, ongoing practice is key. Beyond that, nothing good comes from tension, anxiety or self-doubt, so mindset is everything. My latest “meditation,” if you will, on all of this comes from something Jeff Hamilton says that I think is absolutely profound. He says that nervousness is selfishness. Brilliant insight. His point is that if you’re self-conscious or nervous about your playing on the bandstand it’s because you’re focusing on how *you* sound, when your job as a musician is to help *everyone else* on the stand sound as good as they can. As soon as you shift your attention you listen better. As soon as you listen better, you play better. It’s an incredible truth.

**JBN:** – **What do you love most about your new album 2021: *The Drummer Loves Ballads*, how it was formed and what you are working on today.**

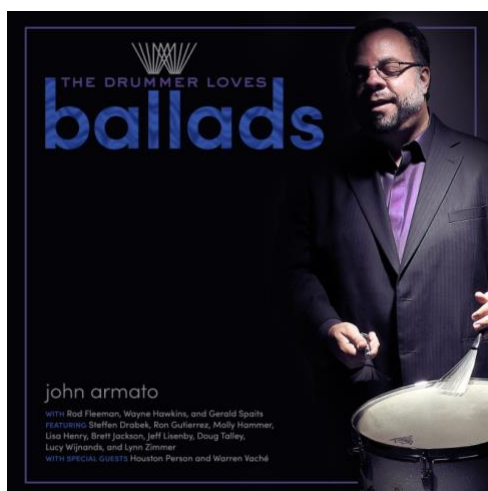
**JA:** – Thank you for asking that. There are four things I love about *The Drummer Loves Ballads*:

First, it is deeply personal in the story that it is rooted in and in the ideas it expresses, but it is the result of a huge collaboration. Two dozen top musicians and nearly 40 people overall worked on this album in some way. It became an ode of gratitude to so many people I appreciate and admire in my musical life.

Second, it includes an original I wrote with Wayne Hawkins, the piano player on the album, called “At the Trocadero.” It tells the story of my parents and their favorite jazz club in Kansas City when they were dating in 1955. They got to hear a rough cut of it, but both passed away before the album was released. It means the world to me that I got to use music to thank them for the gift of music they gave me.

Third, while it goes against all current trends toward singles and playlists, streaming and shuffling, the album – as intended – really is a unique full-album listening experience. It is at its best when listened to in sequence, beginning to end, with one tune flowing into the next. The narrative interludes provide a continuity you don’t get with a pick-and-choose approach to listening. As a kid I loved putting an LP on, laying on the couch, reading the liner notes and letting the whole thing play out around me. I wanted to create that same experience and I think we did.

Fourth, there are no guarantees when you trust an idea to take you on the journey from inspiration to execution. Now that it is done, I can finally listen to it for pleasure and not for evaluation, like you do when you’re editing, or mixing or mastering. And you know what? I like it. I not only made the album I wanted to make, but thanks to my buddy John Cushon, who produced it, and all the other folks who worked on it, I made an album that actually surpassed my hopes.



**JBN: – And how did you select the musicians who play on the album?**

**JA:** – For the most part it's all about relationships, old friends, and connections with people I love. Wayne Hawkins on piano, Rod Fleeman on guitar, and Gerald Spaits on bass are all guys I worked with when I was "coming up" as a sideman in Kansas City in the 80s playing casuals. I've been gone from Kansas City for nearly 20 years, having moved to New York in 2004 and then Sacramento, California, in 2008. Going back both literally and figuratively was a huge part of my desire in making this album. I wanted to work with, shine a spotlight on, and express gratitude to players who inspired and motivated me early on.

Most of the guest artist are also people I have deep roots with, like Doug Talley and Lisa Henry, who guest on "At the Trocadero." Warren Vaché and Houston Person are, of course, legends and I simply wanted their sound! I had played a couple of gigs with Warren in New York but had never met Houston. A mutual friend made the connection.

Lucy Wijnands is the daughter of a dear high school friend and I believe she is the true rising star of the project. Her vocals on "The Shadows of Paris" are well beyond her years in timbre and storytelling.

A few folks were new to me but came through recommendations of other friends and every single one of them made me smile with their performance. I could go on and on, but this would become a roll-call instead of an interview. Each person on the album has a full bio on the website with personal commentary by me. I hope people check them out.

**JBN: – What's the balance in music between intellect and soul?**

**JA:** – Well, smarter and better musicians than I have observed that the purpose of technique is to enable passion, and I think that's true. Trying to express something from your soul without having the tools to do so can be extremely frustrating – I've certainly felt that more often than I'd like to admit. Having great ability but nothing to say is, to me, just juggling sticks – or keys, or strings, or whatever else your instrument may be. It may be impressive on a certain level, but still leave you cold. Music is an ecosystem of expression that requires both intellect and soul, skill and passion.

**JBN: – There's a two-way relationship between audience and artist; you're okay with giving the people what they want?**

**JA:** – Well, honestly, I'm a people-pleaser by nature, so inherently I think the answer for me is "yes." But it's not quite that simple. When it comes to the arts, I think creativity should be selfish, but the delivery of the created thing should be selfless. In other words, I quite literally made *The Drummer Loves Ballads* for an audience of one: Me. I mean that in the same sense that writers are often told to "write the book you would want to read." I made the album that was missing from my collection, so to speak. But now that I've made it, I want to promote, market, perform and present it in a way that makes it as inviting and accessible and understandable to as many people as possible.

**JBN: – Please any memories from gigs, jams, open acts and studio sessions which you'd like to share with us?**

**JA:** – You mentioned jams, so in the context of *The Drummer Loves Ballads* I can't help but mention it was a jam session in 1981 that gave birth to the entire idea of the album. I deliver a spoken-word introduction on the album, accompanying myself on drums, that tells that story better than I can retell it here. I even had an animator turn it into a [video](#). It's pretty cool and my favorite jam session story. Maybe people can watch it for my answer to this question.

**JBN: – How can we get young people interested in jazz when most of the standard tunes are half a century old?**

**JA:** – I’m really torn on this topic, because I’m an old-soul when it comes to tunes. I still love the standards. That’s mostly what you’ll find on my album. But there’s certainly no shortage of artists creating all kinds of new music loosely within the jazz genre that defy the notion that the art isn’t moving ahead. I love Melody Gardot and Antonio Sanchez and Tamir Hendelman – all of whom are creating wonderful new music. And I think folks like Jon Batiste and Robert Glasper are reaching younger audiences.

To me the key is not how old the tune is, but what you do with it. John Cushon, who helped guide me the entire way through the creation of *The Drummer Loves Ballads*, would routinely ask, “If you’re going to do it like it’s been done before, what’s the point?” It was John’s wife, Oleta Adams, the well-known singer, who urged me to write an original, resulting in “At the Trocadero.” I like that we took chances with changing the groove on “Poinciana” and taking an overdub approach to my solo. I like that we did “For All We Know” as a bolero and that I moved the dominant voice of the bolero from the drums to the cymbals. I like that we mixed spoken word with music. Are these big innovations? No. But I think they keep things fresh. And I think keeping things fresh and being open to new influences is a part of what will attract others into the music.

**JBN:** – John Coltrane said that music was his spirit. How do you understand the spirit and the meaning of life?

**JA:** – Oh my. That’s a lot right there. I don’t think I know much about the spirit and the meaning of life except that I think people should try to be of profound use to each other, and I think we think we have time we don’t actually have. So, if you have a gift of any sort – creative or otherwise – I think you should offer it to others as fearlessly as you can. The only thing John Coltrane and I have in common is our first name. Otherwise, I’m just a grown-up kid from the Midwest who feels endlessly grateful for having a chance to wade even a little bit into the ocean of music and decided to toss something back into the surf in return. I don’t think my contribution will turn the tide, but it’s what I can offer, and that’s all any of us can do.

**JBN:** – If you could change one thing in the musical world and it would become a reality, what would that be?

**JA:** – I think the music world is just fine. I think the music business is pretty broken. Creating *The Drummer Loves Ballads* has given me a tiny little glimpse into the machinery of music distribution and marketing, and I think it is a system that undervalues the artists themselves. Other, more informed and articulate people than I, have written extensively about this, so I’ll leave it to them to expound.

**JBN:** – Who do you find yourself listening to these days?

**JA:** – Well, I’ve got a pretty serious vocal crush going on Melody Gardot. Thanks to my buddy John Cushon I realized how late I am to digging into Brian Blade, so I’m starting to listen to him more seriously. I’ve been rediscovering Duke Ellington and Johnny Hodges as well. Far East Suite always blows me away.

**JBN:** – What is the message you choose to bring through your music?

**JA:** – Beauty is its own reward.

**JBN:** – Let’s take a trip with a time machine, so where and why would you really wanna go?

**JA:** – I would give anything if I could have seen Sammy Davis Jr. live in his heyday. That guy could flat out swing.

**Interview by Simon Sargsyan**