

IN THE HOT SEAT WITH LARRY LEBLANC



Industry Profile: [Larry Klein](#)

— By Larry LeBlanc (CelebrityAccess
MediaWire)

**This week In the Hot Seat with Larry
LeBlanc: Larry Klein,
producer/bassist/songwriter.**

Larry Klein strives to push beyond boundaries.

From touring musician to first-call session player to acclaimed producer to head of his own Strange Cargo label imprint, this scrappy, Los Angeles-based producer/bassist/songwriter has always turned away from well-worn territory to explore uncharted waters.

Last year Strange Cargo bowed in with the compilation release of noted Norwegian singer/songwriter Thomas Dybdahl's "Songs."

Upcoming for the label are album releases by Adam Cohen, British actress/singer/songwriter Rebecca Pidgeon, and a follow-up by Dybdahl.

One of America's most in-demand producers (despite being under the radar publicly), Klein has been behind the board of late with sessions with Madeleine Peyroux, the Gypsy Queens, Curtis Stigers, and Sweden's winner of Eurovision, Anna Bergendahl.

He has also been overseeing a pair of albums by his wife, Brazilian jazz performer/educator/songwriter Luciana Souza.

Klein's studio date book continues to be crowded with upcoming sessions with Portugal's Ana Moura; actress Michelle Dockery; as well as Decca's recent signing, 18-year-old keyboardist Ariel Pockock.

Klein, who grew up in Monterey Park in the west San Gabriel Valley outside Los Angeles, began working toward a musical career while in his teens. An after-school musical program at University of Southern California enabled him to develop his playing and compositional skills with university professors there while still in high school.

While still a student at California State University, Klein began to sit in with various local groups. Then he did nearly five years of touring as a sideman with such jazz luminaries as Freddie Hubbard, Wayne Shorter, Willie Bobo, Carmen McCrae, Joe Henderson and others before landing a high-paying year residency on the syndicated daily TV program, "The Merv Griffin Show."

As a session player, Klein appeared on innumerable recordings in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, working on projects by Robbie Robertson, Don Henley, Bob Dylan, Dianne Reeves, Bobby McFerrin, Neil Diamond, Tracy Chapman, Peter Gabriel, Warren Zevon, Bryan Adams, and others.

He has also appeared on a number of soundtracks including Martin Scorsese's "Raging Bull" (1980), and Allison Anders' "Grace Of My Heart" (1996).

Klein became famously connected to iconic Canadian Joni Mitchell after being hired for her 1982 album "Wild Things Run Fast." Romance ensued, and the two married Nov. 21, 1982. The couple worked closely together for more than a decade, including on Mitchell's 1994 Grammy-winning album "Turbulent Indigo" that chronicled the end of their marriage. Despite the split Klein helped Mitchell with her albums, "Both Sides Now" (2000) and "Travelogue" (2002).

In 1985, Klein had helmed his first solo production, Benjamin Orr's "The Lace."

Since then, Klein has overseen productions for Herbie Hancock, Shawn Colvin, Julia Fordham, Tracy Chapman, Melody Gardot, Walter Becker, Madeleine Peyroux, Mary Black, Holly Cole, Vienna Teng, Daphné, Raul Midón, and his current wife Souza whom he married in 2006.

Klein has won four Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year, and Best Contemporary Jazz Album in 2008 for Herbie Hancock's "River: The Joni Letters" which featured performances by Norah Jones, Leonard Cohen, Tina Turner, Corinne Bailey Rae, and Souza; and back-up by jazz powerhouses Wayne Shorter (saxophone), Dave Holland (bass), Lionel Loueke (guitar), and Vinnie Colaiuta (drums).

"River: The Joni Letters" was the first jazz album to win top album at the Grammy Awards in 43 years, and only the second in the award's history; the other was "Getz/Gilberto" by Stan Getz and João Gilberto in 1965.

How is Strange Cargo set up?

It's a very idyllic situation in that I don't have to go into an office. I don't have to do any of what I consider the mundane aspects of A&R. I have a great situation with (Universal Music Group International COO) Max Hole, who has been a friend for a long time. He said, "I like what you do almost all of the time. Chances are that most of the things that you come up with I will want to do." So Max provided me with an idyllic situation--that I am able to do what I do. I find things, like Thomas Dybdahl. Now Adam Cohen's record ("Like A Man") is coming out (Strange Cargo/ Decca/ Universal), and a record ("Slingshot") by Rebecca Pidgeon, who I've been working with, is coming out soon (on Strange Cargo/ Decca/ Universal). I'm going to be working with Michelle Dockery. I met with Ariel Pockock earlier this year, and we intend to do a record together.

Why have a record label?

I think that in this new paradigm of things, musically, one of the exciting things going on is that record companies are motivated now to get people who know how to make records to be part of the whole process of signing an artist, and being involved with all aspects of a career. To me, in some ways, that is like the final step of learning about what I do. It's always been the way for me. That's how I got into producing records, by learning. Trying to figure out how to learn from everything that I knew; and trying to figure out how I could make something beautiful, and get it out into the world. Sort of the final step for me is to be a part of the process--whether it's the artwork or the promotion or the marketing; to have a voice in that area that I never did before.

As a producer is this a golden era for someone with your musical scope?

It's very strange because things for me have kind of gone backwards in the sense that as things have disintegrated in regards to the music business overall; for some combination of reasons, things have gotten busier and busier for me. As far as what to attribute that to I think, perhaps, the center of what I am interested in working on musically has always remained constant. If I were to try to encapsulate what area that I am interested in exploring in regards to making records I would say that it's music and songwriting and records that sit in between other things.

You seem to pick projects with a "What can I learn?" attitude.

Absolutely. It is my way of educating myself. From the time that I started out listening to music as a child, I have always been interested in everything -- the complete spectrum of music. My parents had a really good record collection. So I developed an interest for all kinds of music. Even the areas I wasn't passionate about initially, say something like polka music, when I find out a little bit more about any kind of music, I get interested. Boom and I am down the rabbit hole exploring it; learning about it; and then discovering how, perhaps, I can do something in that medium that feels fresh to me; and that also embodies some of qualities and higher areas of that particular form.

When you began working in music production, did you need to learn different syntax in order to plug into a different part of the creative process? A producer has to deal with different egos, and not every artist knows what they want.

I think about this a lot for a number of reasons. One being that young people, aspiring to be record producers or work in the area that I work, often ask me for advice. I try to distill what the most important things are about seeking to learn to do what I do. It's very difficult because the job is different on each thing that I do. Depending on the artist, and what their strengths are. What their weak areas are. Where they need help. Where they need space, and no help. Where they need me to be just a sounding board. Where they need me to be an auteur. Where they need me to be a songwriter. Where they need me to be an arranger. Where they need me to not to be any of those things.

Producing is an interesting job for many reasons.

One of the things that is fascinating to me about it is that sometimes you are sort of a psychotherapist; and sometimes you are an interior designer for a person who has no idea of what they want to do. So you step in, and you say, "I am going to put you in this landscape, and this will work beautifully. What you do will shine set into this landscape." And (you consider) all of the gradations in between.

Most young people who aspire to become a record producer, they are attracted to the job because they perceive it as being a position of power and authority. They are attracted to the auteur aspect of the job. The part that they don't have any idea about is the silent part that is always going on. The part that is almost akin to the part of a Zen abbot or something. There is a very subtle aspect to the job that I have gradually learned over the years. I started out just stomping my way through things and making all sorts of mistakes.

Was your first production work with Joni?

I started producing little projects in L.A. prior to working with Joni on her records. I believe that probably the first released project that I co-produced was with Benjamin Orr.

As a session player, you worked with numerous strong-willed producers, including Mutt Lange and Daniel Lanois as well as artists like Peter Gabriel, Lindsey Buckingham, and Walter Becker who are known for having strong idea of what they want in the studio.

Oh yeah. In those cases, it's like to going to work, and playing tennis with John McEnroe or someone like that. It really is. It is such a stimulating experience to go to work every day, and work with people who are that talented, and that strong, and that fast. Those kinds of experiences are absolutely addictive to me. If someone called me tomorrow who I put on that list, I'd be hard pressed not to just drop everything and go do something.

Obviously, you'd like to work with Claus Ogerman.

Absolutely. Claus is someone that I would love to work with before I don't have the opportunity (Ogerman is 81). If the right thing came along for me to do with him, I would jump at the opportunity. I am a huge, huge fan. There are so many records that he's contributed to that are hallmarks to me.

[German orchestrator/arranger/composer Claus Ogerman is renowned for his work for the Drifters, George Benson, Barbra Streisand, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Astrud Gilberto, João Gilberto, and Diana Krall.]

How do you and Luciana handle your separate careers?

It's an ongoing puzzle to figure out. We are committed to one of us being at home at all times for our son (Noah) who is 3 1/2. He is still very young. Luciana, for the most part, really put her career on the back burner up until recently. From the time he was born. Still, she has been performing; doing enough to keep her foot in things--going here and there for performances, occasionally, but very little. Now that he's in pre-school, and things are a little bit less intense, she is able to start doing more.

[Souza grew up in São Paulo, Brazil, the daughter of renowned composer/guitarist Walter Santos, and poet Tereza Sousa. She is a graduate of the Berklee College of Music, and has a Master's degree from the New England Conservatory of Music.]

You two are working on a new album.

We are working on two albums actually, simultaneously which is kind of her way of saying, "I'm back singing." So we are doing one record which is "Brazilian Duos III" and then an album ("The Book of Chet") exploring Chet Baker

stylistically. More the spirit of (the late jazz trumpeter) Chet Baker than trying to emulate anything; or trying to create some kind of curio concerning Chet Baker. Something that is the spirit of what he did which was to both of us very important--and to Brazilian music, actually, very important.

American jazz musicians have a working knowledge of Brazilian music primarily from bossa nova recordings by João Gilberto, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Stan Getz, and Frank Sinatra. Being in the trenches producing Brazilian music...

I would put myself in that group to a certain extent--that I was aware of some of great Brazilian music that one would generally become aware of from being a musician and record producer who worked within the realm of pop and jazz music. But upon...

Of course, there are those great Tommy LiPuma records with João Gilberto.

The record he did with João Gilberto "Amoroso" (1976) to me is one of the few records, and I have told Tommy this directly, that "Amoroso" to me is like a diamond. It's just flawless. I love Tommy. He's the real deal. I'm a big fan of Tommy's.

Working with Luciana combining Brazilian and American jazz styles would be challenging. How did you two meet?

One of my oldest friends is Billy Childs. Billy and I went to music school together. I've known him since the time I was 14 or so. In 2008, he had a piece that he had written for the L.A. Philharmonic that was being premiered here. It was the first time that he had a piece played by the L.A. Philharmonic. He had let me know about this, and I was busy doing a million things. Fortunately, he called me and bugged me about it again. I said, "Of course, I gotta go." So I went to see the premiere of this piece, this incredible piece that he had written based on the poetry of children in concentration camps. In it were solo roles for both for a female voice, and a child's voice. Lu was singing the part of the female soloist. I was just blown away by what she was doing in this piece, and went backstage and we spoke. She was aware of the work that I had done. At that point, I was going back-and-forth between New York and L.A. writing a solo record with Walter Brecker.

And Luciana was then living in New York.

She was a died-in-the-wool New Yorker. I had to yank her out of New York (when we got together). It was a difficult thing for both of us. Once we got together we had to figure out what we were going to do. "Are we going to live in New York or L.A.? Or split time? We held onto her apartment in New York for awhile. She had a great place in a great neighborhood.

As a producer you are an internationalist in that you have recently been working with artists from Israel, Portugal, Sweden, and South America. Whatever is out there that is great might interest you?

Yeah. It's so funny because all of this has come serendipitously in a certain sense. It's not like I decide, "Oh, I want to work with an artist from Norway." These things just happen for me. I've always guided what I work on by trying to be aware of which way the wind is blowing. In that way I think quite possibly that I was influenced a lot by Joni.

Now if I think of the way that she has guided her life, her career, and her interests musically, she has always been that way. I think to some extent that I was like that before she and I met but certainly the time we spent together, I think, probably really deeply imprinted that idea on me. That the best way to find your way to fresh territory is to feel where things are going; not intellectually make decisions of, "Okay, I am going to do this. I'm going to go here and then here." All the way along listening to what is going on in the air and guiding your decisions by what smells fresh.

America attracts artists from around the world. A decade ago, Thomas Dybdahl came to live here, and he wrote "One Day You'll Dance For Me, New York City."

I love that, yeah.

[In 2001, 20-year-old Norwegian Thomas Dybdahl, one of Norway's most notable musicians, had rented an apartment in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood. By the time he returned to he had written "One Day You'll Dance for Me, New York City" that became the title track of his first #1 album in Norway in 2004.]

America is a musical magnet. Always has been.

America has always been a dominant force culturally. I would say even more so before than now. Through the 20th century, of course it was. People that were in South America were listening to Sinatra. They couldn't help but be affected by what was going on musically in the U.S. Whether they were in Jamaica or South America or wherever. But I think that the principal, if you try to distill it down to the germ of the idea, is that anywhere in the world people are searching for something fresh. Whether it was the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles looking over here to Chuck Berry and blues artists. Or if you look at Ana Moura, who is doing fado in Portugal, and trying to figure out, "I want to take this form beyond tradition. I want to figure out a way to do something new with this form. I love the tradition but I want to do something fresh."

Anoushka Shankar is also doing that.

I haven't heard this record ("Traveller"). She's an amazing young woman. Herbie (Hancock) and I worked with her on a track ("The Song Goes On") on his last record ("The Imagine Project" in 2010). I was profoundly impressed with her. You can get to know somebody really quickly. Boy, I felt within in five minutes, "Wow, this woman is going to do something."

With the internet, we all can be in a foreign marketplace in the sense of being able to discover music from anywhere in the world.

Well, that's right. Along with all of the negatives factors that have been introduced, to my mind, by the web which there are plenty of, the positive part of it is that any young person or artist of any ilk can have access to so much music, and to so many different traditions musically. So yeah, you get people who are curious about exploring that is so far from what they do. That is a pretty amazing way of setting up the mulch from which some new things can evolve.

Producers can also now hear artists developing from around the world.

Yeah, exactly. Using Ana Moura as an example. When her manager sent an email to me it was like, "How did that happen?" because I had been thinking about her for a couple of years, thinking, "This woman, her voice just thrills me. I would love to work with her." And boom, this guy gets hold of me out of nowhere. I sent a note back saying, "I can't believe that you are sending me this because I have been thinking about Ana and working with her for quite some time." In that sense, the immediate connections that you can make across so many miles and so many borders, both stylistically and geographically, are amazing. To be able to connect with people (with the internet), it makes things very small, and immediate.

Thomas' music sat on your computer desk top for awhile, too.

A very good friend of mine is David Naylor who was one of the biggest producers of music videos in the heyday of music video. He has a (video production) company called DNA. Now he does more work in commercials. He works with a great photographer Jean-Baptiste Mandino who is Paris-based. Naylor is always hearing things from all over the place, and snagging certain things that appeal to him in multiple mediums. Jean-Baptiste turned him onto Thomas Dybdahl, and then one day Naylor sent me a MP3 of one of Thomas' songs, "Love Story," with a simple little note, "Check this out; I think you'll like it." I was just floored by everything about it. The production. The song itself. The conversational writing style. It was really, really fresh to me. But I didn't know where it fit in my life. I didn't have time to chase down this guy's records. So it sat there on my desktop.

Time went by and, eventually, I found the right way to do a production imprint deal with Universal through Max Hole.

Strange Cargo.

Yeah. When I was presented with the opportunity to sign something to this imprint, the first thing I thought of was, "Oh, that thing on my desk top." I went back and listened to it again. Of course, it sounded great. So I started chasing it down. I had (my manager) Sandy Robertson find out who managed Thomas. It turned out that Thomas had just extricated himself from a record deal that he wasn't happy with, and was re-formulating what his plan would be. This led to this and that and before I knew it I was flying over to Oslo to see him play a concert.

[Thomas Dybdahl had released five albums in Norway and Denmark. The compilation "Songs" released July 12, 2011 on Strange Cargo is his introduction to American audiences. Dybdahl recently joined Tori Amos on the American leg of her "Night of Hunters" tour.]

You ended up releasing a compilation of Thomas' music.

Well, it was an interesting problem to have. Here's a guy five records into his career, and he had just released "Waiting for That One Clear Moment" (2010) that had gone to #1 in Denmark. He is established as a high quality artist with major audiences in Norway and Denmark. He's also got audiences in France, and Belgium. In the States anybody aware of him might have heard him on NPR a bit.

So this would be a new artist in North America.

I thought, "There is no way I can start off with someone in this position, and not try and introduce more people to this body of work that he has created for himself. That's so impressive. "Waiting For That One Clear Moment" had just come out over there. As much as I feel that it is a really interesting record, it's not a first record (for The U.S.). I thought that we had to bring people, or attempt to bring people, up to speed regarding what this guy does.

So Thomas and I wove together what felt like a really good thread that would lead people from the beginning to now. Then we made a plan to make a record together that would be the next new record. That is what we are in the process of working towards. In fact, we have been writing for the last two weeks toward his second record.

It was drummer John Guerin who recommended you to Joni as a session player. Did Joni come and see you play?

She might have come down because I was playing with John with gigs that he was doing with his own band, and we were playing dates around L.A. with (the late British-born vibraphonist/percussionist/pianist) Victor Feldman. I played with Victor's band for a number of years. Sometimes he would use Guerin and Roger Kellaway and different people. Sometimes he would incorporate his sons (Trevor and Jake) into the band. I believe that she probably did see me in one or two of those contexts. Then I got the call to go in and work with her and the material that she was working toward that became "Wild Things Run Fast."

[Larry and Joni's relationship reportedly developed over conversations while playing the pinball machines at the A&M studio in Los Angeles where they were recording "Wild Things Run Fast." Mitchell dedicated the album with this message: "Special thanks to Larry Klein for caring about and fussing over this record along with me."]

Mitchell told Musician magazine: "Larry and I listened to a lot of fads and we tempered them...Larry is a "sounds" man. His ear hears certain things and he'll point them out to me. So a lot of (the sound of the album) has to do with Larry's input. Credit where credit is due."]

Were you intrigued to work with Joni?

Oh God, yes. I knew of Joni's work. I probably knew two or three of her albums. I didn't know the earlier stuff as well. I was most acquainted with "Court and Spark," "Hejira," and Mingus." The earlier work I knew bits and pieces of in a more fragmentary way.

Herbie Hancock has said the same thing.

Before we did "The River" album, he had never listened to words all that much.

[For the longest time, Hancock admitted in a 2007 interview, he ignored the lyrics of the songs he played on.]

On February 10, 2008, "River: The Joni Letters" won the Album of the Year and Best Contemporary Jazz Album honors at the 50th annual Grammy Awards, surprising the music world. Were you surprised by it winning for Album of the Year?

I don't think that I have ever been more surprised. It was really a thrill. Doing that record with Herbie, Wayne (Shorter), and Dave Holland; and working on Joni's music, it tied together so many different threads of my life. It tied everything together for me.

I don't look back that much. Musically, I aspire to what Miles Davis would always say, "Let other people look back, and I will look forward." I am always thinking about what I am working on or what I am going to do.

But there are those pinnacle moments (in your life) that you come to hear. As much as awards are not the most important thing, and certainly not a reason that you do anything--for me anyway--there are those moments. And one of them was when we won the (Album of the Year) Grammy for "River." The other I would say was when we won (as co-producers) the Grammy for Pop Album of the Year for "Turbulent Indigo" with Joni.

For "River" you had two formidable taskmasters: Herbie, and Joni likely ready to yell, "What are you doing with my songs?" If she hadn't liked it, she would have told you.

Oh yeah. I wasn't talking to her about what we were doing because I could get off on the wrong track as well. But I had her voice in my head, of course. I was always thinking, "Oh God, this has to be a wonderful gift for her. It can't be something that she puts on and screams, 'What did you do to my music.'"

Joni can be very critical.

She's super opinioned. I had her voice inside me speaking to me all along.

When you finished "The River" did you send it to Joni or play it for her?

I played it for her. You know why? Because I had to get her to do a vocal on "The Tea Leaf Prophecy." I'll tell you, I was as nervous as hell. It was really nerve-racking.

But sessions for "The River" were challenging.

I remember being with Luciana in New York when we did the initial sessions of "The River." I would come back from Avatar Studios and say, "I can't do this. Here I am in the studio working with these guys who I have listened to in my bedroom since I was a 10-year-old, and I'm saying to them this is what we have to do in order to get the right feeling here. We need to do this and that. Dave could you please play a whole note in this bar, and do this and that here?"

It was a terribly intimidating situation to be in to be working with Wayne Shorter, Herbie, and Dave Holland and telling them how to interpret this music. I just had to steel myself every day (and think), "This is your job. You have been presented with the job of doing something new and something that is going to be a classic and honorable context for Joni's music. You have got to be in there, and do your job." It was tough.

These are hard-core session players as well as top-notch jazzmen.

Those guys are cut from the cloth of, "Okay, we did a first take. That sounds great." This was like taking these songs and adapting them to an instrumental or vocal jazz approach and really turning them inside out. It was delicate business. So I was sitting with my heroes, and I was saying, "Let's listen to this again. I'm going to give you a copy of the lyrics. Listen to what the song is about."

The award for "River" tied so many threads of my life together for me. The "Turbulent Indigo" (Grammy) award came at the end of what was one of the difficult years of my life--Joni and I making this record in the process of splitting up; testing ourselves as to how we can do as artists.

Neither one of you considered walking away?

I'm sure that she considered that, and I probably did as well. That would have been as difficult as going on with it in a way. We didn't split up in a state of disliking each other or in some of state acrimony.

Working on any recording is an artistic challenge, but it is also an artistic puzzle. That must have been difficult to solve in recording "Turbulent Indigo" given the circumstances.

That's right. It really was. I still love her, and I know that she loves me too. We have a familial feeling toward each other. When I talk to her, I have the same warm feeling toward her; and I certainly did during that time. There were different times when we were working...I had moved out (to Venice) and one day we decided to go down to the Beverly Centre, and both of us got a kitten to keep us company. But it was difficult, and the songs programmatically were about the dissolution of things between us. To be rewarded at the end of this difficult journey with that (Grammy Awards) was one those wonderful moments.

[When Larry Klein and Joni Mitchell won for the best pop album for "Turbulent Indigo" at the Grammy

Awards, Mitchell quipped, "Gee, Klein, considering we made this album in a state of divorce..." She also credited the cats they had bought to take the tension off the sessions. Klein thanked Mitchell, "for 10 years of instruction in the arts."

"That was such a warm win," Mitchell said later. "It was a sweet victory, it really was.]

One of the reasons your marriage with Joni ended was that you fulfilled a recording commitment after she had a miscarriage. So many people in our industry feel they only have so many years to work. Many later realize what is more important in their life.

You are now older, remarried, and have a child. Have your priorities changed?

Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

Do you regret that decision?

Of course, I do. If I really look thoroughly at the situation that was at hand at that moment, and what I knew after the fact or what I know now, I would have behaved very differently. I have to attribute the mistake to youth and being somewhat ignorant as are a lot of men to the depth, and the seriousness of what is involved in a miscarriage for a woman. I just didn't know about it; although my mom had multiple miscarriages when I was a kid. It was completely kept out of view.

[In 1985, Joni Mitchell and Larry Klein discovered she was pregnant. In her first trimester, however, Mitchell miscarried. Klein had lined up a recording date at The Wool Hall in Beckington-Near-Bath in Somerset, England that would be his first major production; recording an album with former Cars' bassist Benjamin Orr ("The Lace"). Klein delayed leaving until Mitchell said it was okay for him to go. Mitchell apparently came to view the decision as her husband giving his job a higher priority than her health. In 1991, their marriage fell apart.]

You learn from a first marriage. You learn to balance the personal and the work.

Yeah. I will be honest. I still wrestle with the complexity of juggling those things. But absolutely I always have to elevate family over work now. I have to say that it's hard. It's hard at times because things get tangled up where you think that, "This is going to move things forward in way where I will be able to provide certain things to my family in a better way if this works."

The decision process can get complicated in that regard. In the end, you really have to guard yourself against rationalizing things in favor of the work. For me, and for anyone who does what they love for a living, to some degree it is addictive. You are always itching to get back into what you are doing because there's some stone that you have just turned over; that you found something fresh to explore; and you are excited about it. You are anxious. You have ideas that you want to try to develop and what not. It's easy for one to make a case to one's self in favor of running off to some distant place and making a record; when, perhaps, where you should be is just sitting on the floor with your son and playing and doing something very simple.

Creativity is an endless string. It's "How long will you be in the studio?" "I don't know."

Did you see the documentary on (the late Turkish-American producer/arranger) Arif Mardin? You have to see it because it explores this area quite beautifully. Of course, his wife (playwright Latife Mardin, wife of 48 years) says the same thing. That Arif would say that maybe he would be done in an hour; and, of course, he's not. Then it's three hours later, and he doesn't exactly know when he's going to be home, and the impact of that.

[Arif Mardin died at his home in New York in 2006 following a lengthy battle with pancreatic cancer. The 2010 documentary "The Greatest Ears in Town: The Arif Mardin Story" chronicles the career of this formidable production figure, and label executive who produced innumerable artists including: Norah Jones, Barbra Streisand, the Bee Gees, George Benson, the Rascals, Bette Midler, Queen, Aretha Franklin, Anita Baker, Phil Collins, Roberta Flack, Chaka Khan, Melissa Manchester, the Manhattan Transfer, Modern Jazz Quartet, Willie Nelson, John Prine, Dusty Springfield, and David Bowie.]

As a teenager, you were listening to jazz and you saw pianist Bill Evans perform at the Playboy Club.

That's right. Bill Evans' album "Symbiosis," I know that (1974) record still by heart.

How were you able to get into the Playboy Club at 16?

Herb Mickman was a teacher who privately taught me bass and jazz harmony, probably from '71 to '75. He would arrange for me to get into the Playboy Club. I would pretty well go every night. I have been very fortunate to have several people in my life who took me under their wings and helped me become exposed to the right things. I was studying with Herb and he would either take me himself or arrange for me to get into clubs and go places to hear combinations of musicians that he felt would be really important for me to hear. He was an old friend of (jazz bassist) Eddie Gomez so I became a huge fan of Eddie's.

You later began to play in different bands around L.A.

I was in a program at USC called "The Community Schools at USC." I studied there from the time that I started 7th grade all through high school. What this program allowed a young person—if they tested into it—to do was to study with university level professors. And most of them were USC professors. All through high school, my mom would drive me over to USC, and I was able to study with these great teachers. (American conductor, pianist and composer) Michael Tilson Thomas would come in and do a lecture. That's where I met Billy Childs; and Patrice Rushen had (earlier) studied there as well.

Music education at a young age is so important for development.

Absolutely. You can't overestimate how important it is to have those teachers in your life who steer you in the right direction. Where you are at a point where you have so much energy. You have so much drive, and passion to pursue something, but you need someone to just nudge you in the right direction, and say, "Why don't you go and do this and this? And go over here and here."

Sometimes it's just an afternoon spent with someone; or sometimes it's a class that you take; sometimes it's a workshop or something that takes 15 minutes.

I was incredibly lucky in this regard. I had a teacher named Wayne Bischoff from Grade 7 through high school who was an extraordinary character. He was a clarinetist and a composer who had studied with one of (Arnold) Schoenberg's disciples. He wanted to turn the junior high in the high school music department into a college level music program. He was a real Mr. Holland kind of character.

Where did you grow up in L.A.?

In the San Gabriel Valley; in an area called Monterey Park which is now pretty much an entirely concentrated area with people that have emigrated from China or Taiwan.

[Ten miles east of downtown Los Angeles, Monterey Park is part of a cluster of cities in the west San Gabriel Valley with a growing Asian American population, making up 66.9% of its current resident population.]

My dad was an aeronautical engineer. For the most part, he was a management person on satellite projects and for a lot of space projects as well. He worked on the Viking Mars (landings). I used to go up to Vandenberg Air Force Base and see launches of satellites. My dad had security checks every year. They'd send guys out to interview our neighbors, asking, "Well, does he like to drink at parties?"

How did you land a job on Merv Griffin's TV show?

I had been on the road a lot with Freddy Hubbard, Carmen McCrae, Willie Bobo and those different bands. At a certain point, I was starting to feel that I'd had enough of being on the road. I also have to say that as much as I loved what I was doing musically that at time I felt a real narrowness in the jazz world.

There was always this attitude towards pop music or even within jazz where you had people trying to delineate, "This is real jazz. This is the real stuff." That sort of nonsense.

Creed Taylor was breaking down barriers with his CTI label with Freddie Hubbard, Stanley Turrentine, George Benson, Paul Desmond, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and others.

I love those records. For me coming up, and becoming of age in the '70s, the CTI records were unbelievably exciting records to me. Of course, I was listening to (Miles Davis') "Miles Smiles" (1967) and "E.S.P." (1965) and all

of the earlier stuff by those (jazz) guys. But the records that Creed Taylor was doing were really...I know that for myself, and for people I was growing up with, those were really exciting records too; and they sounded amazing. Looking back on them, some worked better than others.

But I really felt a narrowness in the jazz world; where people were saying, "This is the real stuff and what Freddie (Hubbard) is doing is commercial." And that's nonsense. "And what Miles is doing, he should go back to playing ballads." At that time I felt that there was more vitality in the pop world--that there were more things going on there that felt fresh, new and exciting to me.

What things were turning you on in pop?

I was always listening to pop and rock music. The first music that I got passionate about was the Beatles, the very early Beatles. I think that the first record I bought was a record of the Beatles backing up Tony Sheridan ("The Beatles with Tony Sheridan" on MGM, licensed from Deutsche Grammophon in 1964). That was probably the first album I ever bought. I started exploring what the Beatles were up to at that time with "Rubber Soul." At the same time, I was listening to my parent's record collection. They loved Nat "King" Cole, Frank Sinatra, and Wes Montgomery, and they had all of the musicals.

So your career took a turn?

I started veering toward wanting to stay put, and learn about songwriting. Develop my songwriting. Develop my abilities in the studio. And stay in L.A. I made a conscious decision to try and make things happen on that front. Then I started more session work in L.A.

It was right around the time that David Letterman's (TV) show became the thing. I think Merv (Griffin) decided, "Okay, we are going to have to young up." He had this band of great musicians; these jazz giants. Ray Brown was playing bass, (trumpeter) Jack Shelton, Plas Johnson, Mundell Lowe, and Nick Ceroli was playing drums. So the first person that they let go was Ray. Here I am this young kid, and I get a call to replace Ray Brown on Merv Griffin. It was surreal. I was around 22 or so.

Surely, the other musicians didn't welcome you with open arms.

No. Of course. I was the harbinger of doom.

Who hired you?

(Conductor/arranger) Mort Lindsey. He was Merv's musical director. It was a strange year of my life, but it was a great gig. I was able to stay in town, and the money was great. It was a steady thing, and I could send in subs. If I got a record date that I wanted to do or if I had to go out of town briefly, I could send subs.

Any cool guests?

Oh God yeah. During that time I played with Buddy Rich, George Burns, and anybody from Vikki Carr to Jerry Seinfeld. He was on as a young aspiring standup comedian. Orson Welles was on the show, it was surreal.

[Jerry Seinfeld paid homage to his early day-time, talk show experiences in "The Merv Griffin Show," the sixth episode of the ninth, and final season of the NBC sitcom "Seinfeld." In the episode, which aired on Nov. 6, 1997, Cosmo Kramer pretends that he hosts his own talk show using the discarded set from the Merv Griffin show, which he sets up in his apartment.]

When I looked back on it now, it was a good part of my development to have to do this kind of thing. Where I had to play behind everything from a magician to B.B. King to Sergio Mendes. It was a great experience but it became somewhat depressing after a period of time. We would spend long, long hours there waiting around. I was taping two shows a day. You are just sitting there, and listening to these things going on. It became kind of a depressing thing which motivated me to move on.

I have to say that my tenure as bass player on the Merv Griffin show was part of what motivated me to move toward producing records. It was part of the combination of elements that made me realize that being a bass player and doing studio work as a bass player wasn't going to be ultimately satisfying to me as the centre of what I do.

So I started branching out, and really trying to develop my skills in other areas.

Larry LeBlanc is widely recognized as one of the leading music industry journalists in the world. Before joining CelebrityAccess in 2008 as senior editor, he was the Canadian bureau chief of Billboard from 1991-2007 and Canadian editor of Record World from 1970-89. He was also a co-founder of the late Canadian music trade, The Record. He has been quoted on music industry issues in hundreds of publications including Time, Forbes, and the London Times. He is co-author of the book "Music From Far And Wide."

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