

Jazz Bassist Mark Lewandowski | International Student Blog

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English jazz bassist Mark Lewandowski talks about playing for celebrities in the U.K. before before diving deeper into music when he came to Juilliard

Why were you drawn to the jazz bass?

I began my musical training on piano and progressed to cello when I was at high school. I was drawn to string instruments by how beautiful they looked when I picked the cello. I didn't really have any idea at that point that I'd move on to the double bass and make the study of that instrument my life's work and my livelihood. I still think strings instruments are beautiful things and each one has its own distinct personality. Personally, I like feeling the wood of the instrument vibrate. One of my favorite bassists—the great Charlie Haden—once said when he played, he wanted to sound like a rain forest. I'm trying to get the most natural and "wooden" sound out of the

instrument. I guess that's why I prefer to play the instrument totally acoustically without an amplifier, and with natural gut strings rather than the steel strings that are much more common these days.



Mark playing with Wynton Marsalis, director of Juilliard Jazz.

How did you get involved with jazz? My dad is a huge jazz fan, and I owe it all to him basically. Apparently he used to play records with me on his lap when I was a baby when he was reading the Sunday newspapers. He's always followed what's going on in the U.K. and U.S. jazz scenes; he bought all the new records and took a keen interest in going to see as much live jazz as possible. [Still, I started playing classical music, and it was only after that] I started to get more and more interested in the bass. Partially out of rebellion. I never really gelled with classical music in the same way that I feel with playing jazz now, but at that point I wanted to play electric bass in a rock

band, and my parents took some persuading because they thought it might mess up my cello technique. I think at that point I actually really hated jazz. For example, a lot of family vacations were to jazz festivals in Europe at one stage, and I can remember watching some of the most incredible master musicians the music has produced and hating some of it. I remember being incredibly bored. I look back and kick myself now because I wish I had the ears that I have now for the music when I was watching these musicians as a teenager. It was at one of these festivals in the south of France that I had that light-bulb moment. I was watching the Wynton Marsalis Septet, with an incredible bassist (Reginald Veal) playing, and something about the sound of the bass stuck with me. It was after that moment when I really felt the pull to find myself a double bass. It feels great looking back because now, a few years later I'm getting to play with Wynton.

What made you want to come to the U.S. and earn your Artist Diploma?

I've wanted to come to the U.S. since I got started in music. I grew up in a medium-size city in England and then moved to London. That was a really big step as the scene in London is amazing. After studying at the Guildhall School of Music, I was quickly becoming a part of the musical community in London and getting to play with loads of musicians who I really admired. There are also many musicians I admire in New York, and coming here was always in the back of my mind. I've always acknowledged that jazz is an art form born in America from the stunning innovations of African American musicians. Even though that the genre has become an international music with people from all over the world playing, studying and enjoying the art form, I feel that it still has a special tie to America as its home. New York is the center of it all, and when you get deeply serious about something, the first thing you try and do is get right to the core of it. The Juilliard Artist Diploma course seemed like the perfect way to continue my studies in the company of like-minded peers under many of these amazing musicians I look up to. I would love to contribute greatly to the culture of New York City, which I find to be such an exiting and diverse place to live and play.

What is it about the Juilliard Jazz program that excites or inspires you?

I love the attitude of the students at Juilliard. Every one is so 'for real' about the music and the level of passion, seriousness and community is inspiring. I've had the opportunity to study with amazing teachers here and learn and grow in an environment that is totally dedicated to each of its individual students. Before I decided to apply for this program, I was convinced I'd never go back to school. I thought that that period of my life was over, but I'm so very glad now towards the end

of my time here that I took the step to audition and join the Artist Diploma programme. We're in very lucky position to have a faculty that cares about us so strongly, and because the program is so small, it really feels that people are interested in my personal development. I'll be sad to leave the school when I graduate in May.

After having an established career in Europe, did you have any culture shock or adjustment period when you first arrived at Juilliard?

Well, firstly it was a huge shock to be on the other side of the world. I left London with one suitcase and my double bass in this huge coffinlike hard case that was falling apart and covered with spiderwebs. Once I arrived in JFK it hit me that everything was going to change now. I didn't even have anywhere to live properly at that point and I was lucky to have some incredibly kind friends who put me up on their couches until I found an apartment. Actually, some of the most basic tasks took me by surprise. Everything from setting up a bank account, to getting a U.S. phone number was like a total fresh start. It felt totally different to the multiple times I'd visited New York before that. Musically it was shock to go from playing pretty much every night in the U.K. to looking at my calendar and seeing 365 empty boxes. I was totally starting from scratch. I was lucky though that I'd made a lot of friends in New York from visiting and from my time playing at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London, where I got to meet a load of amazing musicians who were on tour in the U.K. A lot of these people have really looked out for me and helped set me up as I've begun my new chapter over here. It's great now I've gotten more set up here, with many new and exciting musical partnerships that are growing all of the time.

London or New York City (and why)?

I guess the grass is always greener, but I've got to say New York. At this stage in my life, I feel so deeply inspired being in New York City. I'm constantly stimulated artistically, and feel the pace, energy and dynamism of the arts scene here is unlike anywhere I've ever been. I love how to-the-point it seems to be; there's a directness about New Yorkers that I really enjoy. After spending so many years dreaming of coming across the Atlantic, it's an amazing feeling to be walking around Manhattan realizing that it is music that has brought me there. I really feel that the jazz community has welcomed me, and I'm so excited about the musical experience I've had already and all of the experiences and challenges to come.

I do miss London though. I miss my friends, and colleagues and family and a lot of the music I used to play with people I'd had long deep associations with on and off the bandstand. The good thing is I do get to go back and play with people and continue this connection, and I'm constantly getting messages from British friends who are visiting New York and want to find a couch to crash on!

You've had some amazing honors. You were presented with the All Party Parliamentary Yamaha Jazz Award in London. What was it like receiving an award in the Houses of Parliament?

That was a brilliant experience. Receiving that award from the U.K. government was an honor. It was great to get to visit the Houses of Parliament and meet and speak with the MPs who were there. Many of them are huge music fans. I just hope that they are successful in helping the cause of the arts back home in the United Kingdom. With what's going on right now, like Brexit, I feel that the U.K. arts scene needs these people to stand up for them. We're a small island, but we have so many incredible creative artists who have a lot to show the world. I hope that the art lovers in the government realize how important this is for the country and do everything they can to help and support U.K. artists to allow us to create.

One performance highlight you noted on your résumé is playing for the wedding of Pippa Middleton, Prince William's sister-in-law, in 2017. To any American, that's amazing.

Again, this was a great honor. It was great to get a glimpse into that world for a second. We played while the royals and their guests were drinking champagne, right after the wedding ceremony. It was great to meet Kate Middleton, Prince William, and the kids and to see them dancing while we were playing! That was so cute. It was pretty surreal getting snapped by the paparazzi as I drove up to the house in my beat-up old car. The only thing that sucked that day was that all we got to eat was a chicken sandwich and a Twix!

You've played for celebrities like Sting, Bo Dereck, Guy Ritchie, and Roger Federer. How did some of those engagements happen?

I used to play in a band that played like Django Reinhardt's gypsy jazz music, which was incredibly popular for parties, and we found ourselves travelling all over the world to play these incredibly glamorous events for celebrities like you mentioned. We had such a good time playing and traveling for these events. It's nice to see some of these celebrities off camera, in normal social situations with their friends and families!

What do you hope to be doing in five or ten years?

In 5 years I hope to have grown as a person and as a musician. I hope that can get even further into my instrument and play with a deeply personal approach to the music. I hope to have had the opportunity to travel much more with music and see some more places in the world. This is a beautiful part of playing music, this year alone I've had the opportunity to visit some amazing places from China to South America. I'd like to be playing with my heroes that I haven't yet had the opportunity to make music with and continue my journey as a composer and bandleader.

Do you have any secret hidden talents we should know about?

Nothing particularly interesting, but I can name any world flag by sight. I've got a pretty good memory for things like this, and I've often challenged people to catch me out in bars as a way of winning a free beer!

Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

I'd like to recommend to any prospective students who were interesting in studying jazz at Juilliard that they should definitely audition. It has been an amazing experience here, and I hope that they can get the same out the course that I have.