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The Jazz Man

Music has always been a major part of UW Director of Jazz Studies **Johannes Wallmann's** life, and he is determined to see wider LGBT representation within his genre.

I'M A JAZZ PIANIST AND COMPOSER, and a jazz studies professor at UW-Madison. You may have heard or seen my bands at local clubs, on the radio, at Jazz at Five or at the Isthmus Jazz Festival. Or maybe you recognize my husband Keith and me as one of the plaintiff couples from the ACLU's lawsuit that brought marriage equality to Wisconsin (we were honored to play a very small part in that suit when a few couples were added to the original plaintiffs as part of a legal strategy that sought to turn an expected legal win into the most comprehensive ruling possible).

Today, there are still very few openly gay musicians in jazz, but I hope that my story helps

more young musicians believe that they can be themselves and have a place in the music that they love.

I was 13 years old when I heard jazz for the first time. I still remember the day like it was yesterday. I must have heard some jazz on the radio before then, but this time, the music struck me like a thunderbolt and change my life.

I had been playing classical piano for seven years and classical guitar for a year or two, and my mom had even enrolled me in an early-childhood music program when I was very young, so I've played music for longer than I can remember. I liked playing classical piano, but I didn't love it. Practicing in particular seemed like a necessary evil to get to the fun part of playing, but wasn't really enjoyable in its own right. When I was growing up in Germany, my mom and dad loved classical music and often listened to classical music radio and to their own record collection. My friends and I mostly listened to whatever was popular on the radio in the '80s: A-Ha, Erasure, Pet Shop Boys—a lot of British pop, with a smattering of American R&B and Rock 'n Roll. Later, my parents divorced and I gained a third parent when my mom married my Canadian stepfather. We moved to Vancouver Island, where I discovered Def Leppard, AC/DC, and Guns 'N Roses.

JAZZ AWAKENING

I was waiting for a guitar lesson at the local college's community music lesson program while two very mature-seeming college boys were hanging out, playing music for each other on a boom box (this was the '80s, after all). But the music they were playing sounded unfamiliar and unlike anything I heard: complex, urbane, with a groove much deeper than any of the music I knew, and a seemingly endless supply of cool. After a few minutes of eavesdropping, I got up the nerve to ask the college students what they were listening to.

"Man...that's Miles Davis."

Even though other musical genres have long been safe havens for LGBT musicians, jazz, for reasons not clear to me, has often not been a welcoming environment for LGBT players.

I didn't know what to say, but listening to Miles's music on the students' boom box I knew right there and then that this music would become the focus of my life. That week I got my mom to drive me to the record store and in the jazz section I found a large selection of Miles's albums. This new world of jazz was a large one, and without anyone to guide me, I picked two albums with striking covers, the 1958 classic *Milestones* and Miles's current release *Tutu*.

Within days, I was back at the record store for more, and I soon discovered Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Chick Corea, Oscar Peterson (the Montreal-born pianist was a national icon in Canada), Charlie Parker, Dexter Gordon, McCoy Tyner, and many other artists who came to profoundly influence my life through their recordings.

My high school had a very good jazz program and soon there was an opening on piano. I didn't really know how to play jazz yet, but my classical background allowed me to easily read the written parts. The more experienced players helped me out, and anything that required improvisation (which in jazz, is almost everything) I figured out through trial and error. It wasn't until much later that I realized that the countless hours I spent at the piano in those years improvising and "figuring stuff out" were also called "practicing." Good thing I didn't know, or I might have not wanted to do it.

Interactive art and artists



ERIKA MONROE-KANE, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
MADISON MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

An exciting development is the direct interaction taking place between museum visitors and the living, working artists with exhibitions on view. At MMoCA several recent exhibitions invited visitors to engage with the artists while they work in a studio inside the gallery. In some cases, individuals have actually contributed to the creation of an artwork. Our upcoming exhibition, "Natasha Nicholson: The Artist in Her Museum," will provide several opportunities to talk with the artist. This exhibition is a rare look into not just the work of an extraordinary artist, but also into her world through the recreation and installation of her personal spaces.

The (local) artist experience



MICHAEL VELLIQUETTE, INDEPENDENT ARTIST

Madison museums often import their exhibitions from outside the region. While these shows keep a vital dialogue open between us and the larger art world, it often feels like the work being made here gets overlooked. That's why it is such a breath of fresh air to see that several exhibitions this fall highlight artists who also live and work in Madison—"Natasha Nicholson: The Artist in Her Museum" at MMoCA (see above); "Squad: The Calling of the Common Hero, Photography by Faisal Abdu'Allah" at the Chazen Museum of Art; and "Harmonious Spaces: Wei Dong and Feng Shui Culture" at the Ruth Davis Design Gallery.



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This was music I loved, and it became the focus of my life. I loved playing in my high school's big band, and I formed a quartet that won some awards. Performing was fun, and even rehearsing and practicing was a blast! All that "work" got me a scholarship to go to music school in Boston, and that's where I really doubled down and started thinking about wanting to have a career in jazz.

LOOKING FOR AUTHENTICITY

During high school and most of college, it never bothered me that there seemed to be no gay jazz musicians. I hadn't figured out yet that I was gay, so I just didn't give it much thought. In hindsight this seems absurd to me, but the couple of moderately successfully relationships I had with girls allowed me to ignore the crushes I had on guys—as far as I or anyone else knew, I was straight.

The great jazz composer Duke Ellington titled his autobiography *Music Is My Mistress*, reflecting both his deep love for music, but also the enormous personal sacrifices of a life lived on the road and the challenges of maintaining a family. I haven't spent much of my life on the road—most jazz tours these days last a few days to a few weeks—but any serious aspirant pursuing a career in music spends many hours in the deeply solitary act of practicing their instrument. Add to that the days in college classes, afternoon rehearsals, evenings on the bandstand, nights in recording studios, and "the hang" with fellow musicians (important for building professional connections), and before I knew



In the U.S. immigration law is federal jurisdiction, and DOMA meant that Keith would be barred from sponsoring me for a green card, even if we were to get married.

it, putting romantic relationships on the backburner seemed like a rational and even virtuous decision. Especially when I had feelings I'd rather ignore.

After college, in 1995 I moved to New York City, ostensibly for the graduate school that also provided the student visa that kept me legally in the U.S., but really with the intent to become a professional jazz musician in the city known as the "Jazz Capital of the World." It worked out as I had hoped: within a few months I was regularly performing in third- and second-tier venues (later getting some higher-profile engagements), and by keeping my expenses low during a time when the outer edges of New York were still hospitable to a musician's budget, I was able to pay my bills just by playing jazz. I had become a professional jazz musician!

Life in a new city also gave me the freedom to define myself anew, make new friendships and seek out new experiences. I acknowledged to myself that my crushes on guys weren't going to go away, and I started trying to make gay friends, for companionship and possibly romance.

I also started coming out to some of my musician friends, who were surprised but—to my great relief—supportive. I told my family, and they were wonderful. Pretty soon, I had a difficult time keeping track of who among my friends knew and who didn't know. I didn't like asking my friends to keep secrets on my behalf, and while I didn't have a boyfriend yet, I also didn't want the future Mr. Right to have to deal

PHOTO BY MICHAEL R. ANDERSON

with my lingering coming-out drama.

So on my 22nd birthday I made the years-in-the-making snap decision to just tell everyone. Most of my friends and musical acquaintances were accepting and supportive. I hadn't been sure what to expect: on the one hand, we were all young artists in New York who generally shared progressive beliefs. On the other hand, in the mid-1990s, young men still worried that having gay friends would make people suspect that they were also gay. Ellen hadn't fully come out yet, public LGBT role models were almost non-existent, and anti-gay politicians were using the devastation of the AIDS epidemic to attack gay men as over-sexualized threats to public health.

I started to notice that the jazz world had few role models for a young gay musician like me (any of my female colleagues should greet this with a big yawn, as women continue to be woefully underrepresented in jazz bands from high school up to the pros). Among the hundreds of jazz musicians I knew of, only two were openly gay (since then, the list has grown a bit, but not by a lot). There were some others who were rumored to be out to their musician friends, but since I wasn't in their circle, I could only consider these to be unsubstantiated rumors.

I also heard stories about older, established musicians who were openly anti-gay. Jazz is a gigging economy where every musician is a freelancer who depends on one or often many bandleaders to hire them. I knew that some musicians not wanting to work with a gay pianist could still be okay for me, as long as there were enough other bandleaders for whom it wouldn't be an issue. But rehearsal hall and post-gig banter wasn't all that encouraging as offensive jokes about gays were common. Those jokes stopped around me when I came out, but to what degree they continued behind my back and maybe about me, I don't want to know. Even though other musical genres have long been safe havens for LGBT musicians, jazz, for reasons not clear to me, has often not been a welcoming environment for LGBT players.

I didn't know where to find gay mentors to help me navigate this new challenge. However, I discovered that as a bandleader, a role I had always enjoyed, I had more control over my destiny, so I kept booking gigs for my own group, which consisted of a rotating group of musicians I liked to work with and whom—presumably—also liked working with me. The gigs kept coming, and as I formed close musical relationships with some great New York players through my own gigs, I also became more confident in my ability to find a place in this music.

Even though it created some obstacles in the career I had worked so hard for, I never regretted coming out when I did. I opened myself to the possibility of finding love, and a couple of years after I came out, I met my husband Keith, a classically trained singer who has since become a yoga instructor who now travels the world to train other yoga teachers. We have been together for almost 17 years now, and are celebrating our 8th wedding anniversary this month.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Over time, my career has shifted from mostly performance-based to primarily academic. That first experience with graduate school led to an adjunct position teaching jazz piano at NYU. I discovered that I really enjoyed teaching students to play the music that I loved, and that I seemed to be good at it, too! After a few years of freelancing in New York, I went back to graduate school to earn a PhD in Jazz Studies.

It wasn't only my love of teaching that led me back to grad school. I had lived my entire adult life in the U.S., but as a Canadian citizen on a continual but ultimately unreliable series of student visas and work permits, there was no "path to citizenship" available to me. Freelance work and even part-time teaching at my university wasn't going to qualify me for a green card. Jazz, which originated in the Af-

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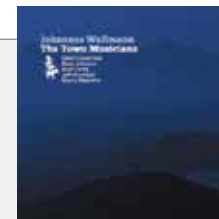
rican-American community, has spread around the world and become a global music, so many of my friends and colleagues were immigrants in similar situations. But they knew that if they were lucky enough to meet their future spouse, they would be eligible for a marriage-based green card. For Keith and me, the so-called Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) made that an impossibility. My home country, Canada, began legalizing same-sex marriage in 2003, and a few U.S. states started following suit soon after, but in the U.S., immigration law is federal jurisdiction, and DOMA meant that Keith would be barred from sponsoring me for a green card, even if we were to get married.

But my doctorate did open up all kinds of new teaching opportunities for me that eventually led to my first full-time, tenure-track position at Cal State East Bay, a university near San Francisco. I got the opportunity to build a new degree program in jazz studies. I also finally had the job that would sponsor me for a green card, so Keith and I no longer had to worry about immigration-status uncertainty. We got married in my hometown on Vancouver Island just before we moved to California, and within a few months of our move, California began recognizing marriage equality. There were some Proposition 8-related legal hiccups, but for most of those years, we were recognized as a married couple not only by our friends and families, but also by the State of California.

Three years ago, Keith and I made another big move, when I joined the faculty of UW-Madison's School of Music as Director of Jazz Studies. We did a lot of research on Madison and thought that the city would be a good home for us. On campus and in music, yoga (Keith's work), and ice hockey (my passion away from music), we have been welcomed with open arms, and we have made many good friends.

Incidentally, I later learned that Cecil Taylor, a musical giant and an iconoclastic innovator of the free jazz movement, taught one of the first jazz courses at UW-Madison as a visiting lecturer in the late '60s. In the '80s, Taylor was the only openly gay jazz musician of any stature, before a small number of others joined the gay jazz ranks in the mid-'90s.

As a teacher/academic, I continue to perform, compose and record. I recently released two new recordings I'm very proud of: a small group album with some of my New York friends (who are among the very best jazz players in the world now), and a big band album featuring many of the top jazz musicians in this region (we really do have some great players here!). As a teacher, I'm constantly looking to learn more about jazz and to improve my musical practice—exactly what I would be doing as a performer anyway—and to share those discoveries with my students. I know how lucky I am to be playing music with great colleagues, composing, and teaching passionate students in a welcoming community, and I can't imagine anything I'd rather be doing. ■



WALLMANN'S MUSIC On *The Town Musicians*, Wallmann's fifth small-group album and his first for the Fresh Sound New Talent label out of Barcelona, the pianist-composer joins harmonic complexity with infectious groove, and melodic introspection with playful exuberance. All the compositions are Wallmann's own, except for a rare instrumental treatment of "I Could Have Danced All Night" (Fredrick Loewe's hit song from *My Fair Lady*).

Always Something (2015) showcases Wallmann's newest ensemble, the Sweet Minute Big Band, with a contemporary, innovative take on jazz's big band tradition. The hard-grooving, 16-piece band consists of top improvisers from the Madison and Milwaukee scenes.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE Each year, the UW-Madison Arts Institute brings major artists from around the world to Madison for its Interdisciplinary Arts Residency program. This fall, UW School of Music Professor Johannes Wallmann, together with the First Wave program, host Afro-Cuban musician **Juan de Marcos González**, the acclaimed musical director and producer of the Afro-Cuban All Stars, Buena Vista Social Club, Ruben Gonzalez, Ibrahim Ferrer, Sierra Maestra and many others. For a full schedule of public lectures and concerts during the Cuban music star's first residency at a U.S. university, visit artsinstitute.wisc.edu/iarp-upcoming-fall.htm.

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