

# Jordan Klemons - Long Bio

I suppose it all started on a trash pickup day, when I was ten years old. I'd been asking my parents for a guitar since I was about eight. My mom was driving down the road and spotted a guitar case in a trash bin on the side of the road to be picked up by the garbage men. She pulled over and put the case in the car. Inside was an old, beat up, classical guitar. It was covered in dirt and rust and only had about two and a half strings on it. My parents brought it to the neighborhood music store and had them fix it up. They cleaned it, put new strings on it, and even sold us a Mel Bay beginner guitar book. I flipped through the book and quickly stuck it in the bottom of a drawer. But the guitar? I couldn't get enough. I played it all the time. I didn't have a teacher, but I would come home from school every day and just mess with it. I would put on whatever my favorite CD was at the time, hit play, and the second I heard the first note I would pause it, rewind, and play it again. Over and over. I would just listen to that one note until I got the sound of it stuck in my head. Then I would pick up my guitar and try and figure out how to make the same note. I would check every note, one by one, until I found the right one. For several years I did this and learned whatever I could from friends and magazines. I was hooked.

When I was 13, I became obsessed with building guitars. I did a ton of research, reading books and magazines, and calling any guitar builder whose phone number I could find. I spent a year researching, drawing up cardboard templates, and planning the project from start to finish. By the time I was 15, I completed my first guitar. I made it look just like Jerry Garcia's famous guitar. I was obsessed with the Grateful Dead back then. They were really my first encounter with musical improvisation, which would later lead me into the world of jazz. It was also around this time that, as fate would have it, I was sort of dragged to a masterclass with the legendary jazz guitarist, Jim Hall. This was an eye-opening moment for me, and really my first experience of falling in love with the world of jazz. Though it wasn't until college that I really had the courage to try and figure out what was going on in that world. It was around that same time period in college when I spent a summer in Vermont living in a professional luthier's backyard and apprenticing with him. This was when I built *Bell*, the archtop guitar that I currently play.

During college, I studied both music and economics. When I graduated with my two vastly different degrees, I was plagued with the question. What to do? Do I put the econ degree in the desk drawer next to the Mel Bay book and pursue a life of music? Practicing and playing everyday to keep myself playing at my highest potential so that I can express what's truly within me, but always having to play the music asked of me to earn the paycheck of whoever is hiring the band? Or do I buy the suit, get the job at the bank and earn a decent living so that I can protect my music? Do I separate my finances from my creativity so that I can play only what I want when I want, but in doing so lose all of my valuable practice time, and therefore the ability to express myself at my fullest potential?

I chose door number three. I moved to Perth, Western Australia. The most isolated capital city on the planet. Exactly a 12 hour time zone difference from home. I couldn't have gone farther away in any direction around the globe without circling back around and getting closer on the other side. I lived there for about half a year before life started to make things pretty clear. The answer became obvious like the clarity and balance found when the buzz starts to wear off. I

moved back to the States and knew I had to devote myself to the music. No matter the cost or consequences.

So when I was 22, I came back to North Carolina and quickly was asked to join *The Afromotive*, a 10-piece afrobeat orchestra, by my friend who played drums in the group. I spent about a year with them touring all over the country. I learned so much about music, the role of the guitar, composition, and frankly just about the real-world experience of being a professional musician. We played at tiny holes in the wall up and down the east coast. But we also played sold out sets at 1000 person venues, two sets at Bonnaroo and were invited out to California to perform at the Joshua Tree Music Festival. We were written up in national magazines and really were starting to make a name for ourselves. We had Jeff Coffin (DMB, Bela Fleck and the Flecktones) sit in with us and even attracted Erykah Badu's attention, who came to check us out and hopped up on stage to join the band one night after her set finished when we were playing in the same city. It was an amazing experience. Unfortunately, while we were on the road basically every week year-round, we were only making about \$100 a month per guy. And it sort of got the best of us. People just couldn't afford to be in the band. We were all working side jobs just to pay to go out on the road. Eventually just about everyone had to quit.

After my time with them was over, I was approached by *The New Familiars*, an Americana, country, southern, grunge rock group. One of their members decided to leave and they wanted to replace him with someone who knew a lot about theory and composition and arranging - someone who could bring a new element into the band. They wanted to fuse different styles together to head in a new direction. It sounded really interesting to me, and I took the gig. I spent about six months with them touring as heavily as I had with *The Afromotive*, as well as working on a studio album and on a live recording that was released from one of our performances. This band gave me the chance to learn some new instruments (banjo and lap steel guitar) and to try and find a way to use my love of jazz and improvisation in a very rootsy, singer songwriter type of environment.

My last tour with them was a two week run through the southern states out to Colorado and back through the northern part of the country. It was pretty evident on this trip that it was going to be my last tour with them. A lot of issues were starting to come up, and I could sense that things weren't going to continue for much longer. It was during my time in Colorado, while enjoying the beauty of the Rockies, that I realized it was time to stop being a sideman, and to stop sacrificing the music I heard in my head for the sake of playing the music other people were hearing. It was a revelatory moment for me, and I knew that it was time to take a big leap of faith. During this time in the Rockies, while sitting in the back of *The New Familiars'* van, I composed a new tune. Really I just heard it singing to me, and I wrote it down. I called it *New Road*, and it would later become the title track to my debut album. It was not like most of the other music I write, but it really summed up the moment that I was in, and it was a big moment for me, my life, and my music. The moment where I decided to step up to the plate.

After my time with *The Familiars* was over, I settled back down in North Carolina. No touring. I called two of my good friends, Ron Brendle (bass) and Curtis Wingfield (the drummer who got me the gig with *The Afromotive*). I told them about what was going on and they were really supportive, they jumped right on board. We started getting together every week and playing. I was writing a bunch of music and really stepping up for the first time as a band leader. It felt great. It was a lot of responsibility, but it was the most rewarding thing I'd ever done as a

musician. As we got comfortable with the new material, we began gigging and, eventually went into the studio to record what was my first album as a leader, *New Road*.

It was also during this time that I fell into playing a lot of local jazz gigs with some of the older cats in the area. I was really lucky to be hanging with them, and I learned so much. Playing a single gig with them, I often felt like I'd learned more than all of my time studying music in college and touring combined. Just trying to keep up with those guys without getting in the way and still finding substance to bring to the table. Between those gigs, and all of the work I was doing as a band leader with my own trio, I knew that releasing *New Road*, and all the other strides I was making, was not the finish line to this new path I'd taken, but was only the start of it. Something within me told me that I had to make a move to get to the next step, another leap of faith was on the horizon and would be necessary to take. After a lot of contemplation and soul searching, it became obvious that the next step was to move to NYC and to continue studying music.

I applied to some masters programs and was accepted to New York University for their masters of jazz studies program. It was exactly what I was looking for, so I saved up as much money as I could, I sold my car, I sold or gave away most of my stuff, and I headed to the big city to start what would turn out to be the most incredible two years of my life.

During my time at NYU, I was able to study and work with many of my favorite musicians. John Scofield, Peter Bernstein, Jean-Michel Pilc, Stefon Harris, Alan Ferber, Brad Shepik, Ari Hoenig, Mark Turner, and many others. It was truly eye-opening for me. Not just studying with these guys, but getting to know many of them and becoming friendly with them. And even to get to perform with some of them at venues like The Blue Note and ShapeShifter Lab. It was truly a once in a lifetime experience. It also gave me the opportunity to take my teaching to the next level as I was able to spend two years working with undergraduate college students as an adjunct instructor.

It was also during this time that my musical focus shifted from the smaller guitar trio sound that I had spent the previous five years exploring, into a larger view. Both through studying large ensemble composition and arranging, and through hanging out and playing with fellow students on all types of instruments, I became super curious about exploring larger ensembles for my music. Specifically, the nonet. This group would give me the stability of the guitar trio at its core, but now I would be able to add to that sound the piano and a 5-piece horn section. This more expansive instrumentation allowed me to take the music I heard and loved, and to explore it further by creating more textures and dimensions within it. This became the inspiration for what will be my follow-up recording to *New Road*. It will be an album of original compositions that will be written for nonet.

While living in NYC and working with living jazz legends as I was earning my masters degree helped me grow and mature in ways I never could have dreamt, at the end of the day, who I am, what I love, and what my deep musical goals are really hasn't changed ever since that day in the Rockies. I love music. The way I love my heart's ability to pump blood and my lungs' ability to breathe air. It's in my bones. I've tried to leave it behind and ignore that several times in my life, and I'm always pulled back into it. I love traditional jazz and really just the ever-evolving tradition of great music, going all the way back into the far reaches of classical music with Bach, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and so many others. But I also am not stuck in the past. I have always loved and admired musicians who were standing at the edge of the tradition and pushing

forward. Rooted in the past, but looking to the future. My deep musical goals are to always keep one of my feet planted firmly in the tradition and the lineage while using my other foot to kick down the door of whatever is next in the evolution of music. I seek to put together groups that flawlessly bring the old-school essence of swing and straight-ahead jazz into the 21st century. To delve into the deep end of the intellect and to rip open the emotions of the heart to produce compositions and arrangements of jazz standards that create entirely new universes and unique territory within which my groups and I can naturally and playfully explore. Like Scofield once said to us (after hearing Mulgrew Miller say it to him), "It's all just singing and dancing." And I'm here to sing and dance my song. Ever since that one trash pickup day when I was ten years old.

Within a month of graduating from my masters program, I became very sick and ended up in the ER. I was promptly admitted to the hospital where I stayed for almost two months. During that time I was diagnosed with cancer and a seemingly undiagnosable, but potentially fatal, issue with my brain. This forced me to stop playing guitar altogether for about six months. I quickly went from the top of my game musically, having just spent years studying with my heroes, to almost starting completely over. It's been a struggle to relearn how to play again, but fortunately, I learned a lot about patience and persistence through the many months of my sickness. I am looking forward to getting rid of my bad habits and focusing down on relearning only the elements of my playing that I want in my music. It should be a challenging experience.