

JAZZ HIHYO ~Issue No. 149, May 2009~

\* JAZZ HIHYO is a jazz critique magazine sold throughout Japan.

## Doug Gurwell

I have been fortunate to interview many brilliant musical artists over the long history of my regular column, and I'm sure many of our readers had already known most of them. However, since I've resumed my interview section after a long hiatus, I'd like to use this space to introduce musicians who, despite being less known or even obscure, have distinctive musical gifts. So, with that I'm pleased to introduce the first musician for the rebirth of this section, and I'm sure you'll be as impressed with his work as I am.

Doug Gurwell, as a trumpeter and pianist, offers an interesting combination of skills and influences. I was first made aware of him through the courtesy of a third party, and was privileged enough to have an opportunity to listen to his self-produced CD, amusingly called *The Cookie Jar*. At first listen, this CD doesn't seem to be what one would call straight-ahead jazz. It isn't fusion either, but instead something different. Despite that first impression, the sound of American jazz is the most readily discernible element underlying this heady brew of sounds. On the CD, Doug plays not only keyboards but also the trumpet and bass guitar, and with those instruments he has crafted a unique acoustical signature. The effect is immediately mesmerizing, and so I decided it was essential to meet the person who had made this music. The following interview took place during my visit to Doug's home near Redondo Beach, California, in late 2008.

(Interviewed by Toshiya Taenaka)

--- First, can you tell me something about your background?

Doug: I grew up in a town close to Bakersfield, which is located in central California. I lived there up until I moved to Los Angeles for college. My hometown wasn't a big city, and country music was quite popular there. In fact, I'd say it was something like a California version of Nashville back then. So, I had the perfect musical environment.

--- Are there any musicians in your family?

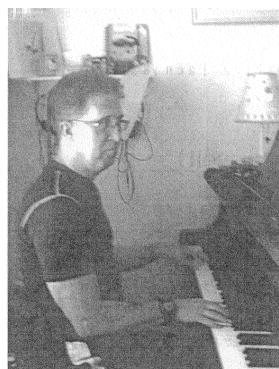
Doug: My father is a professor who teaches English at a university, but he also plays the cornet. My mother is a piano teacher. My older brother teaches music at a junior high school, and he's an accordionist. My wife is a ballet pianist. So, I think I'm in very blessed to have such musical surroundings, just as I had when I was growing up.

--- I was absolutely impressed when I first listened to your CD, particularly since you produced it yourself. Normally, a musician creates his own sound after absorbing the styles of various well-known musicians. However, each of your songs has a unique melodic character, and that quality has been captured on this CD. What's the source of the sound you've created?

Doug: I think it came about because I had always listened to all kinds of music without prejudice, not necessarily binding myself to any specific style or genre.

--- I assume that many listeners often tend to determine that "this musician is influenced by such-and-such musician or band," or "this style is the style of so-and-so," especially when it comes to the work of obscure musicians. As a result, they tend to fit such musicians into tightly defined categories. I may be one such listener, too. But when I listened to your CD, it wouldn't allow me to do that. I guess I'd simply have to call it "Doug Gurwell music."

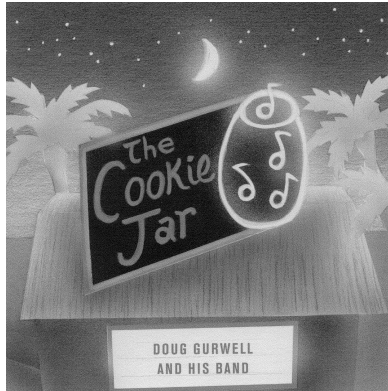
Doug: Certainly I grew up in a town filled with country music, but really I listened to a wide range of music--everything from jazz and gospel to R&B. I also loved music by people such as Donny Hathaway and Roy Ayers. When I was learning the musical instruments, I was far more influenced by vocalists such as Sarah Vaughan and Angela Bofill than I was by those who played the instruments I did.



--- There would seem to be a wide gap in the respective styles of Sarah and Angela. Didn't you care about genres or types of instruments?

Doug: No, I didn't care about that.

--- But you had formal education in music at university, didn't you? In other words, you've acquired knowledge of music theory.



Doug: Yes, that's true.

--- When was your first gig as a professional musician?

Doug: It was when I was 16 years old, before I moved to L.A.

--- What type of people have you played with since you moved to L.A.?

Doug: I do quite a lot of studio work, as well as recording sessions with musicians from nearly all genres. In fact, I do that kind of work regardless of any particular music genre it might be, such as jazz. For example, I've worked on CD projects with Great White (a hard rock group) and Jack Russell (a musician who formed Great White with Dante Fox). I've participated in sessions with the composer Elmer Bernstein (a film music virtuoso who passed away in 2004). As for jazz, I've played with the multi-reed player Bruce Eskovitz for six years or so. I've also provided songs for his CD projects in addition to playing on them. Along with that, I've played with a local band as the opening act for Tony Bennett, as well as for George Benson. I've even played in Ollie Mitchell's Big Band for some time.

--- Your self-produced CD contains a pair of vocal tunes, which are performed by the male vocalist Billy Trudel. His voice is really something. You wrote lyrics for these two songs. So you write both the music and lyrics.

Doug: Yes. I enjoy writing lyrics too. I write lyrics based on my personal experiences in life, or by observing things in daily life, or I'll be inspired by certain events in which I participate. I hope that someday Japanese vocalists will sing my songs.