

Interview

Chuck Sher — Creator of Educational Jazz Publications including The New Real Book Series

By Eric Nemeyer

The founder of Sher Music and creator of The New Real Book series shares his perspectives about music and business

JJ: Could you give us a synopsis of the driving factors that led you to create Sher Publications and the various New Real Books that you've published?

Chuck Sher: In the late '70s, I had an extended period of tendonitis which prevented me from playing for about a year. In order to make lemonade out of lemons, I gathered the notes I had kept from teaching bass and created my first book, "The Improvisor's Bass Method." So my becoming an author and publisher was an accident in a way, but my ability to organize a lot of material has always been my strong suit and it certainly comes in handy in writing and publishing books.

JJ: What do you see as some of the shortcomings and strengths in the arena of institutionalized jazz education - both in schools and in the area of private instruction? What suggestions do you have for improvements?

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While that has its benefits for the student as well as the teacher, my intuition is that it doesn't leave enough time to focus on helping students figure out how to access the music that is latent within themselves. I know as a teacher I try to get my students to play what they hear internally, above all else. I'll

show them licks to get them familiar with what certain scales or rhythms are capable of, but sooner rather than later I like to have them find their own voice, using the specific material at hand. This has seemed more and more important to me as time has gone on, because I find in my own practicing that this is the key to really enjoying learning. I've had some moments of real bliss lately just practicing the C mixolydian mode, for example, and actually hearing internally what I wanted to say before it came out of my fingers. Big fun!

JJ: How has the rise of downloadable and digital media affected your business? What changes have you had to make to survive and thrive in these changing times?

CS: Don't get me started! The phenomenon of people scanning our books and then illegally selling CDs with our books (and 40 other fake books



on them) on eBay, or putting them on sites where people can download them for free has basically put me out of the fake book business. We still sell our current books but I can't justify the expense of putting out new fake books if people will simply rip me (and the composers) off as soon as the book is released. So I'm in the position of not being able to afford to put out new fake books and the whole jazz world is the loser. Why would anyone participate in something so obviously unethical? One explanation is that people raised primarily by television sets have a tendency to have an atrophied sense of right and wrong, since TV programming certainly has no shame and people have unfortunately picked up on that as a role model.

JJ: Talk about the value of copyright and protecting intellectual property - i.e. in our case printed music, recordings - and the need to inform both students and people in our society of how it benefits them.

CS: As I wrote in my essay "On Piracy" (on the home page of www.shermusic.com), you wouldn't walk into Wayne Shorter's house and rip off his stereo, even if you knew you could get away with it, right? Well, ignoring any artist's right to benefit from their compositions (or sales of their recordings) is no different. On principle, I can see no other moral choice but to refrain from any use of someone else's work without their being compensated. In an ideal world, where money wasn't an issue, then we could all be creative and skip the benefits thereof, but that's just not the reality we live in, so I would recommend that people really think and use the Golden Rule before taking actions that affect others.

JJ: Talk about your own ongoing education - which started with lessons, continued on the bandstand as a performer, and then as an author and publisher?

CS: I am pretty much a self-taught musician and

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spent many years in the trenches playing every jazz-related gig I could. One thing I've learned in the 40-some years I've been doing that is that it matters what shape my internal world is in. I don't mean what mood I am in, but rather to what extent I have some internal presence, some internal mechanism that reminds me to be in the moment, to appreciate whatever life has brought me at this point in time. I have been fortunate to have been studying the teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff for several years now and it has really helped me see how things actually work in my world. I find it immensely useful to have some way to gain a broader perspective on things.

JJ: Why is it important for artists and musicians to understand business? And, what are a handful of the more essential aspects that will help ensure success?

CS: Artist or not, we all have to figure out how to keep body and soul together. Even though it may seem to be a distraction from being a musician, I try to live by the old saying, "Nobody can waste your time but you." From that perspective, all life is

art, all of it is music, in the broadest sense. So I try to have fun improvising my way through whatever tasks my daily scene needs, just like I would playing music.

JJ: What have you learned about human nature from being a musician and a business professional - and how have those discoveries impacted you?

CS: To me, human nature is immensely variable - from the greatest geniuses to the most decrepit, ruined lives. What an amazing range 'human nature' contains! For myself I know I have all those possibilities latent within myself, so as Santa says, "Be good for goodness sake!" The business world is not all that different from the music world - again a great variety of behaviors, from great to terrible. To me, the crucial thing is which side of myself I am putting out at any point in time - hopefully, more of the good than the terrible. One thing that I find to be very helpful in that regard is that, as time goes on I find myself being less judgmental of others, which I find to be a great relief. We're all brothers and sisters under the skin and we all deserve to be given the benefit of the doubt, whenever possible. And on a related question,

I've been finding that radical self-acceptance and radical acceptance of reality in general, exactly as it is, is the key to a positive outlook on things, at least for me. Which doesn't mean that you can't work for change, but rather that those efforts are more effective when you are digging being alive in the middle of it all, regardless of how things turn out.

JJ: Out of all the books you've published over the years, which would you put in your top 5...which will stand the test of time the most, and stand out from the crowd?

CS: That's tough, since each one is the most useful book ever published on its own topic, in my humble opinion. Mark Levine's books will certainly be classics long after our generation is all gone from this world, as will *The New Real Books*, *The Standards Real Book* and *The Latin Real Book*, I'm sure. I'm also very proud of my latest book, "Foundation Exercises For Bass," which I hope will inspire bass players to really dig in and learn their craft from the bottom up, long after I'm gone. ■