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# An Interview with James Lee Stanley: Part II, All Wood and Stones

by Joe on January 23, 2011

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*This is the second installment of a three part conversation with [James Lee Stanley](#). In the first installment (read it [here](#)), James talked about the process of songwriting. Here, he discusses a different and equally important element of musicianship – playing someone else’s music in a new and interesting way – which he’s focused on in his albums [All Wood and Stones](#) (2007), and All Wood and Doors (forthcoming, 2011), acoustic interpretations of Rolling Stones and Doors songs, respectively.*

*James and John Batdorf playing their version of the Rolling Stones’ Satisfaction from their 2007 album, All Wood and Stones.*

**The AV:** In addition to your own material, you’ve spent a lot of time working with other people’s stuff.

**JLS:** Right. As you know, I did that All Wood and Stones record – I really like taking other people’s music and re-presenting it to people in a way that they’ve never heard it before. I mean, nobody ever heard those Stones songs like that. And I’m doing that Doors album right now, and nobody ever heard the Doors like that. I have this album “New Traces of the Old Road” and I do two Dylan songs, and everybody thought I wrote those songs. I do “Thom Thumb’s Blues” and I do “You Go Your Way and I Go Mine.” And neither one sounds remotely like a Dylan song. But they’re his songs.

**The AV:** Hear, hear. When people cover songs, what I’ve seen a lot of is people trying to get it down as exactly as possible, to hit every note.

**JLS:** I’m so confused by that. I like to reinvent them.

**The AV:** What did you do to the Dylan songs that changed their character?

**JLS:** Well, I changed all the chords and I did take some liberties with the melody – actually I took some enormous liberties with the melody because frequently he just kind of shouts things. Like in “You Go Your Way” he goes *\*does impressively convincing Dylan impression\**

*You say you love me  
And you’re thinkin’ of me  
But you know, sometimes you lie*

**The AV:** That’s not really tonal at all.

**JLS:** Not exactly. And I put it in the key of E, I played an F-sharp minor and left the E and the D strings open so I’d get this ringing thing, and I play this as a two chord with an added E and B that goes

*You say you love me  
And you’re thinkin’ of me  
But you know, sometimes you lie*

I literally wrote a melody for it. But I took no credit for it. You know, I didn’t try to insert myself into his publishing situation, I just made it mine.

So I like doing that. I was actually going to do Heart Shaped Box, I love Nirvana. Really an original and really a remarkable song. But his lyrics were, for me... I think if I were 20 I would be able to sing his lyrics, but at 64 I can’t sing “I want to eat your cancer when you turn black.” I can’t wrap my head around singing that lyric and have it mean anything that I want to convey to anybody on the planet. So, when I got the lyrics and read them I thought, I can’t do this. I can’t, as much as I like that song, which I think – melodically he was so original. I don’t know where his was coming from, but his guitar playing, his chords, where he placed the melody as compared to his chords, really original. I love the guy. But I just can’t sing those lyrics.

*James and John play a creative interpretation of The Loner, originally by Neil Young and Crazy Horse.*

**The AV:** Talking about your love for interpreting other people's music reminds me of something you said elsewhere, you were talking about how the purpose to studying the greats is not only to learn from them and to emulate them musically, but also to realize that they're humans, and that if these humans can produce something great, then this human can produce something great.

**JLS:** That's absolutely true. I have some heroes, and one of them is Miles Davis. When I was, I don't know, 17, somebody played me "Kind of Blue," and I was so floored by it, I remember thinking I would never be that good a player. They could just play like that, they could just sit down and that's what comes out. It was just mind boggling to me. And years later I was on tour with my pal Peter Tork – we did some duet albums together – and Peter knew of my fondness for "Kind of Blue" and we were on the road, it was my birthday, and he gave me the book, "The Making of Kind of Blue." And I devoured the book, and discovered that for like 3 or 4 days they went in every day and Teo Macero, the producer, recorded 2 or 4 or 5 hours a day. I don't think they recorded for every minute they were in there, but there were several hours of them playing those tunes every day. And then he made a 40 minute record of out it – out of 10 or 12 hours of playing, all of which I suspect was more brilliant than I've ever played in my life, but he took the best 40 minutes out the 12 hours. And when I read that I thought, "you know, if I play the same couple of songs for 12 hours, I'll bet you we can find some brilliance in there." And it made me think that I, too, could do it, if I just changed my approach to things, if I was willing to try to play a solo on a song for, you know, an hour or two if that's what it took to come up with something. Just the fact that these guys were human, and that it wasn't just divinely inspired and one-take magic... that was work. Work I'm not afraid of. I don't know how you get talent, but I know how you get better – you practice. You do the work. So that's what I do.

*From the 2008 album New Traces of the Old Road, James' interpretation of Bob Dylan's Just Like Thom Thumb's Blues:*

[James Lee Stanley – Just Like Thom Thumbs Blues \(written by Bob Dylan\)](#) by [theacousticversion-1](#)

*From the 2007 album All Wood and Stones, James Lee Stanley and John Batdorf play their interpretation of the Rolling Stones' Satisfaction:*

[James Lee Stanley and John Batdorf – Satisfaction \(written by the Rolling Stones\)](#) by [theacousticversion](#)

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