

# Xylophoning in the Kitchen with Jonathan Singer

## Celebrating 100 Years of George Hamilton Green Lessons

By Nancy Zeltsman

**J**onathan Singer is like no one else. Of course, we are *all* like no one else! I've known and admired Jon for a long time, and I was happy for the chance to interview him about some experiences that set the stage for his upcoming xylophone session at PASIC 2024.

**Nancy Zeltsman:** Hi, Jon! Why do you play xylophone in your kitchen?

**Jon Singer:** Well, where else am I supposed to play it? Aside from PASIC, there aren't a lot of opportunities to play solo xylophone. As some people may know, I used to play on the subway platforms of New York City, dressed in fuzzy animal costumes – what else was I supposed to wear? – and also in bars, recital halls, and for various celebrations. I played wherever I could.

**Zeltsman:** That was with Xylopholks!

**Singer:** Right. From 2008 to 2020, I made a real effort to create opportunities to play.

**Zeltsman:** As goofy and over the top as the animal costumes were, I found something pretty deep about it. As a fellow performer of an under-known instrument family, you were getting a mallet instrument into peoples' lives, your playing was great as always, and

you made people smile. It was kinda genius.

**Singer:** That's very nice of you.

**Zeltsman:** You've also done some impressive research on the history of the xylophone – well, part of its history: your dissertation: "Noodling Changes: The Development of Xylophone Improvisation in New York City (1916–1942)." That was accompanied by a very impressive recital at City University of New York (CUNY) with Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks, including many of the famous tunes you'd written about. And you have made available a few of those charts through the Jon Singer Histori-

cal Xylophone Series. With all that behind you, I'm interested how you came around to George Hamilton Green's *Instruction Course for Xylophone* that you plan to highlight in your PASIC 2024 session.

**Singer:** Through all the aforementioned pursuits, I kept recognizing the assumption from educated percussionists that I had studied the Green course. I had not. Mostly, I was simply doing my best to have a good time. In 2016, I started recording each of Green's lessons and posting them on YouTube. The project began to provide the kind of annotated tutorial experience that I wished I'd had access to, and it turned into a several-year project – in my kitchen. I called it "Xylophoning in the Kitchen with Jon."

A number of students had approached me for insights into playing the xylophone. Typically, they had played one or two pages from the Green *Instruction Course*, and one of his popular xylophone solos that they were preparing for auditions and recitals. Is it possible to play Green's xylophone solos without a knowledge of basic harmony, musical style, any of the advice he gives in the 50 lessons or beyond, or the ability to improvise? Sure. But why not dig a little deeper? After all, in many cases, the students already



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possess the books and recordings. All that is needed is the time and focus to engage with them.

**Zeltsman:** So, again, why did this occur in the kitchen?

**Singer:** Putting the xylophone in the kitchen meant that I couldn't ignore it. After playing and hearing "The Whistler" a few too many times, one eventually starts to look for some new chords – hoping to do something new with his materials. My idea was to study each of Green's lessons, while also considering the years of musical development since their inception.

**Zeltsman:** What place did this hold in your personal journey?

**Singer:** I was at a point where I wanted to work backwards from lessons I took at Berklee College of Music as an undergrad in the early 2000s.

**Zeltsman:** You started playing percussion quite young, and already had an advanced technique by that point.

**Singer:** Maybe that accounts for the assumption that I could understand fairly complex harmonic ideas common in the modern jazz idiom. I remember my first lesson ended with a couple of pieces of paper covered in scales. They were to be played over just about every chord type I had heard of and then utilized over a tune, all in a week's time. I got frustrated by too much information, from both my lessons and the amount of knowledge demanded by the music I was striving to play. Information overload!

**Zeltsman:** In your training, did you experience other examples of "information overload" in other pedagogical approaches?

**Singer:** Sure! Another example was xylophonist Ian Finkel's outlook. In my first and only formal lesson with Finkel, he laid out what he considered to be all the major points to be concerned with as a soloist: being able to play in all musical

styles, many classical music transcriptions, sight-reading, arranging, playing in all keys – with an emphasis on keys with five and six sharps or flats, it always seemed! – four-mallet playing, improvising, and arranging – with both block-playing and isolated voices. Finkel was a virtuoso and imparted a lot of knowledge in a short span of time that would take me years to deal with.

**Zeltsman:** So you felt a pull toward a systematic approach – to work through someone's step-by-step approach.

**Singer:** Right! There have been many xylophone methods since Green's *Instruction Course for Xylophone*, but none as comprehensive or that, for instance, suggested writing out variations and improvising. One of the reasons I believe so few percussionists fully utilize the lessons in Green's *Instruction Course* is that, even though it's systematized, it can still be overwhelming to take on a 150-page book. The way the lessons were originally distributed, on a weekly basis, might limit what a student would practice in a given week. This could potentially provide a positive focus and generate interest, as a student might eagerly await the next steps. This was my experience studying and recording a lesson each week.

**Zeltsman:** How does jazz pedagogy factor for a xylophonist?

**Singer:** Much more has happened in the development of jazz and jazz pedagogy than xylophone playing since the 1920s. While some argue that Green was an early jazz musician, these lessons do not hold up as training exercises for jazz, but rather a fantastic introduction to improvising over short and simple forms.

One of the reasons for my kitchen experiment was to connect the introductory study of harmony and xylophone playing for a beginning or even intermediate student. Green addresses harmonic progressions, but not by naming the chords. While there are moderately

complex chord progressions used in his lessons, the styles addressed are limited in their chord types. Throughout the lessons, Green gives examples that can be cut and pasted into breaks or even entire forms.

"Lesson 1 – Ragtime" provides four examples of variations on the same harmonic form: I, IV, and V7 chords in the key of C. Mostly, Green favors presenting individual lessons in specific keys. Lesson 38 is the only study that addresses playing a variation in all major keys through the circle of fifths. Funny that he waits until Lesson 38 for this!

Interestingly, he does not do so with a series of resolving dominants, which

## DRUMSET

### WILL CALHOUN Drumset Clinic/Performance PULSE: The Interaction Relationship Between Sound, Rhythm, and Improvisation

Will Calhoun is a two-time Grammy winner from the band Living Colour and has been inducted into National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C. Will graduated from the Berklee College of Music, where he received his bachelor's degree in recording and engineering. Will has produced/toured with Harry Belafonte, Pharoah Sanders, Wayne Shorter, McCoy Tyner, Ron Carter, Buster Williams, Bobby Watson, Mike Stern, Public Enemy, Lauryn Hill, Marcus Miller, Yassin Bey (aka Mos Def) Herb Alpert, Mick Jagger, Oumou Sangare, and many others. He is an adjunct professor at New York University (NYU), teaching in the electronic music composing department. Will has invested over 25 years of personal research in the Outback of Australia, Mali, Morocco, Senegal, Belize, and Northern Brazil to document and study the true history of the drums, rhythm, sonic vibrations, and their impact on modern music. In April 2023 Will received the Cultural Vanguard Award from The Bronx Museum for outstanding performance, interdisciplinary cultural research, and reinvesting his talents/knowledge in the Bronx. Will is presently touring with Living Colour and recording songs for a new release.

might prepare a student to think in terms of chord resolution. Instead, a series of potential scenarios are given, which almost assume a player's innate ability to understand their application in popular songs.

One oddity is in Lesson 23. Green instructs: "Have an easy piano accompaniment made for this melody, and you can play it either as a solo or for dancing." No suggestions are given as to how to make an easy piano accompaniment, and chords or accompaniment are not addressed in any of the prior lessons.

**Zeltsman:** So where is the xylophone today, 100 years or so since all this started?

**Singer:** Today, I find the xylophone to be a bit of a museum piece. There are a few players giving performances around the world. The limitations of the instrument have always been there. Just as a piccolo soloist may struggle to get out of a novelty categorization, the range, timbre, and volume of the xylophone is fairly unforgiving. One of the reasons George Green is still celebrated is that there have been no players since him to create as prolific an output of music, recordings, and pedagogical materials.

**Zeltsman:** Could you offer a few general takeaways from Green's lessons that you often point out to students?

**Singer:** 1. Maintain the full note value. Not doing so is commonly referred to as "cheating the rests." This is something that becomes evident when playing

with other musicians. Consistency of tempo and note values is very important, especially with an instrument that is staccato in nature. No matter how the music develops, rhythmic subdivision will always be necessary.

2. Consider mallet selection. I remember standing at Ian Finkel's door, being told that I would not be permitted to return with unwrapped mallets. As I was feeling stressed about finding wrapped xylophone mallets, or making my own, Ian lowered his voice and suggested that wrapped vibraphone mallets will do the job. The common use of hard mallets on xylophone played in large ensembles often sacrifices tone and reduces options of tone color. Instead of reaching for earplugs for xylophone practice, I suggest considering a softer mallet and aiming for a desirable, musical tone.

3. Consider your roll speed. Each xylophonist has their own approach to playing rolls on the xylophone. Green does not address roll speed or much about tremolo in his course. With technology to slow down his very clear recordings, we can hear that Green favored an eighth-note triplet for rolls in fox-trot tempos, and slow rolls for lyrical playing in general.

4. Consider musical styles. The xylophone music of the 1920s has been so pervasive over the past century that there have been few developments for its use in improvisation. There have been some concerti and solo recital performances, most often performed by

percussionists, and a few by dedicated xylophonists.

The format of xylophone with marimba accompaniment, masterfully presented by Bob Becker and Nexus, has been highly influential to recent generations of percussionists. The xylophone style of the 1920s has been strongly represented by performers of arrangements by Becker, Bill Cahn, and others who were central into a revival of the music in the 1970s and beyond.

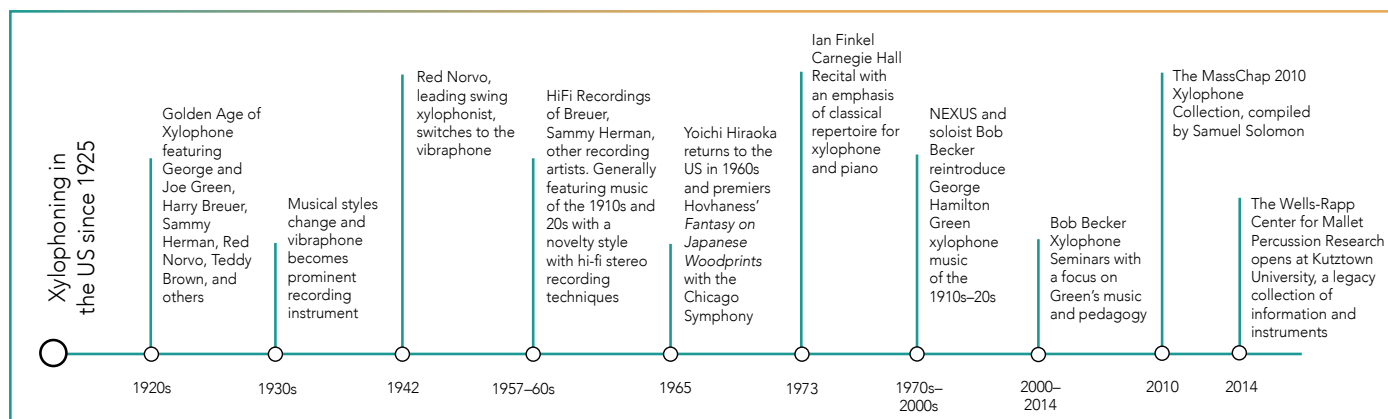
Harry Breuer, Sammy Herman, and others made recordings in the late 1950s featuring Stereo Hi-Fi recording techniques. Though these recordings featured xylophone and keyboard percussion playing of the highest level, the musical content is a musical nod to their musical roots of the 1920s. Even Breuer's "Space Age Pop" collaborations with Jean-Jacques Perrey feature arrangements of novelty xylophone playing. Ian Finkel developed a four-mallet style with clear influence from stride pianists of the 1930s and '40s.

**Zeltsman:** You created a timeline on which you charted your view of the most notable xylophone events in the last century. (See Figure 1.)

**Singer:** Certainly, much more has happened that I am not aware of, but I did my best to chart aspects of both the preservation and development of xylophone repertoire and playing.

**Zeltsman:** I look forward to hearing

Figure 1





more at your PASIC session, including hearing you play! What's next for the xylophone? As I see it, the sky's the limit!

**Singer:** Yes, the xylophone is ripe for innovation. Even the design of the instrument itself has not changed much since the 1920s. Whether or not we use the advice and instruction given 100 years ago, I also hope to see yet another revival of interest for the xylophone in new musical styles and contexts in years to come.

## LINKS

### Xylopholks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=FU6trBF151o>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNOX-Wcj\\_L6o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNOX-Wcj_L6o)

### Jonathan Singer dissertation

"Noodling Changes: The Development of Xylophone Improvisation in New York City (1916-1942)" [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3268&context=gc\\_etds](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3268&context=gc_etds)

### Jonathan Singer recital

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8fBz589k5HA&t=6s>

### Jon Singer Historical Xylophone Series

<https://www.mostlymarimba.com/product-category/sheet-music/composer-series/jon-singer-historical-xylophone-series/>

### Jonathan Singer website

<https://jonathan-singer.com/PN>

# KEYBOARD

## DAVID FRIEDMAN Keyboard Clinic/Performance Generations Trio

David Friedman's Generations Trio features Friedman on vibes, Oliver Potratz on bass, and Tilo Weber on drums. David Friedman is one of the most influential vibraphonists in the history of the instrument. *Thursday* is the first release of Friedman's brand-new Generations Trio, and also the first release of his new label, Malletmuse Records. The Generations Trio provides a musical example of intuitive communication and intense interaction, resulting in an audible process of music-making, which speaks directly to the listening audience. These three generations of musicians develop an amazingly orchestral band sound, which is fresh and hip, while firmly rooted in the deep tradition of jazz.

Friedman has been heard live or on recordings with, among others, Joe Henderson, Horace Silver, Johnny Griffin, Ron Carter, Wayne Shorter, and John Schofield. Friedman's vibraphone and compositions are featured on Chet Baker's award-winning release *Peace*. A dedicated and renowned educator, Friedman founded the jazz program at Berlin's University of the Arts and served as its head for 16 years. His book, *Vibraphone Technique, Dampening and Pedaling*, is an influential mallet instruction book.

## ERIKO DAIMO; MICHAEL UDOW; PIUS CHEUNG

### Keyboard Clinic/Performance *My Marimba Works – An Approach to Interpretation and Expression* by Keiko Abe

PAS Hall of Fame Artist Keiko Abe's newest book, *My Marimba Works – An Approach to Interpretation and Expression* – released in English in 2023 by Meredith Music/GIA Publications – blends the historical background of 69 of Abe's more than 300 compositions with interpretive insights to help current and future generations of performers. Keiko wished that a clinic presenting selected works be given at PASIC to highlight many of the concepts shared in this compendium. She requested that Michael Udow, who served as chief editor of the English edition, present her concepts with background information about the selected compositions, with examples performed by Pius Cheung and Eriko Daimo, who will also perform one of Keiko's duets in its entirety.

Marimbists Pius Cheung and Eriko Daimo offer deeply insightful performances of consequential music that captivate audiences worldwide. Their extensive history of collaborations with Michael Udow, and Michael's decades of touring with Keiko

Abe, are a testament to their musical prowess. Pius, Eriko, and Michael, drawing from Abe-sensei's legacy as a performer, composer, and educator, infuse their performances with a rare blend of humanity, wisdom, and passion for marimba.

## JERRY TACHOIR Virtual Keyboard Clinic/Performance Create a Richer Sound on Mallet Percussion through Chord Voicings

In this session, Jerry Tachoir will discuss utilizing expanded chords and prime dissonance to create bigger sounding and more aggressive chord voicings.

Jerry Tachoir's vibraphone playing, characterized by a delicate touch and expressive nuances, blends jazz, classical, and world music influences. Tachoir's commitment to his craft is evident in his extensive discography and collaborations with notable artists. Through his innovative performances and dedication to pushing the boundaries of vibraphone artistry, Jerry has earned a well-deserved place in the pantheon of accomplished musicians. Jerry is the author of *A Contemporary Mallet Method – an Approach to the Vibraphone and Marimba*. Both the Jerry Tachoir Group and Duo Tachoir have performed at major jazz festivals and concert halls throughout the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

## GORDON STOUT Keyboard Masterclass The Music of Gordon Stout

Gordon Stout is Professor Emeritus at the School of Music, Ithaca College, Ithaca, N.Y., where he taught from 1980 through 2019. A composer as well as percussionist who specializes on marimba, he has studied composition with Joseph Schwantner, Samuel Adler, and Warren Benson, and percussion with James Salmon and John Beck.

Many of his compositions for marimba are published and have become standard repertoire for marimbists world-wide. A frequent lecture-recitalist for PAS, he has appeared at more than a dozen PASICs as featured marimbist, as well as throughout the United States and Canada, Europe, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Hungary, Bulgaria, Mexico, Denmark, Puerto Rico, Italy, Greece, and Spain. His composition "New York Triptych" for marimba orchestra, commissioned by and written for the 50th anniversary celebration of PAS, premiered at PASIC 2011 in Indianapolis, Ind. He has also conducted marimba orchestras in Australia, Croatia, and throughout the United States. Gordon was inducted into the PAS Hall of Fame in November of 2012. In 2019 his newest venture was launched: G&C Music, which will be the new home of Full Circle Publications and StoutWorks.