



# If You Can Make It Here...

Story by Lal Ingram Photography by Sean Francis Martin, DHS Communications

Ask 39-year old pianist Jon Ballantyne what it takes to be a jazz musician in New York City. He'll tell you what it's like to play with some of the greats – Joe Henderson to Phil Dwyer. He'll also tell you what it's like to listen to the best in the world and then hear yourself on tape and know you're just not there yet.

"1987-88 was a formative time for me and I remember hearing tapes of myself and thinking, 'I've still got so much work to do.' So I practiced 12-14 hours a day for several months. I had pretty good natural technique, but that didn't mean anything if the notes weren't placed well and that's what I had to learn how to do. The only way for me to get there was to play hour after hour after hour after hour."

In jazz music, there are few overnight successes, maybe a few wunderkinds, but for most, this is an art form where you pay your dues. "I definitely went through the dues paying period," Ballantyne says.

"Through all those years of scuffling and not necessarily making a lot of money I learned how to live frugally. But the thing about playing jazz is that you become so passionate about it. When you realize just how great the music is and how great the history is, you think, 'I want to be a part of this.'"

Born in Prince Albert in 1963, Ballantyne was exposed to jazz from an early age. His father, Fred Ballantyne, is a well-known musician on the local scene whose record collection ranged from the recordings of

Miles Davis and John Coltrane to Frank Sinatra. Jon started piano at six, at 10 he was playing classical piano, at 17 he won a scholarship to Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, where he stayed only one term, then at 18 won a scholarship to North Texas State University, one of the best music programs in the country.

By 1985, he was gaining notice. He won Downbeat magazine's Deebee Student Music Award for Outstanding Individual Performance that year. The next, his trio won Best New Jazz Group in Canada at the Montreal International Jazz Festival. That led to a performance at the Paris Jazz Festival, where he opened for Dizzy Gillespie and Dexter Gordon. And then came Sky Dance.

- facial treatments • spa body treatments • tanning • manicures & pedicures • registered massage • waxing • hot stone massage • gel nails • reflexology • body scrubs & polishes • ear candling • spa packages • hydrotherapy tub & much more!



**spa ahava**  
720 Broadway Avenue, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 1B4  
Phone: (306) 978-8111 Fax: (306) 653-8845

Recorded in late 1988, Sky Dance featured legendary saxophonist Joe Henderson as special guest. It went on to win the 1989 Juno Award for Best Album, but for Ballantyne, the biggest thrill came at the end of the recording session.

"When Joe Henderson asked me if I could play some gigs with his quartet, that was the highlight of my life. I went on to do 50 gigs with him over the next three years – with one of the greatest musicians in jazz history. The first gig I played was in New York City. We did six nights there and every musician in town came out. I hadn't even lived in New York at that time. It was scary. I was practicing six hours a day before the gig just to feel like I could make it through.

*"I didn't get serious about playing jazz until I left home. And then I started doing 8 to 10 hour practice sessions everyday. Then that wasn't good enough."*

"Joe was one of the greatest improvisers in jazz. Some nights, the music was staggering, just staggering. I'm playing with him but I'm also trying to absorb as much as I can in the hopes that it will rub off. I mean, you wonder, how is it that this guy makes time stand still? That's what the greatest musicians in the world do, they make time stand still. It's a feeling of euphoria when you're in the midst of that kind of greatness."

It was the beginning of a journey that has seen Ballantyne play with some major names. He's toured with the bands of Henderson, Woody Herman, Dave Liebman and Pepper Adams, studied in New York with Barry Harris and Paul Bley, shared stages with Roy Haynes and Joe Lovano. He's made eight recordings, including 1991's A Musing with pianist Paul Bley, 1994's The Loose and 1995's Trio Live with bassist Drew Gress and drummer Billy Hart, 1998's Known/Unknown with Drew Gress and Gene Jackson.

It sounds idyllic, like a steady upward progression through the jazz ranks. That is true, to a point, but again the reality of jazz is that after 15 years, Ballantyne is really just hitting his stride. He looks back on who he's played with and for a moment seems awestruck. "It's hard to put into words experiences that were so profound. Showing up every night and wondering how I got there, and hoping I was going to rise to the occasion. I never get fired, so I guess I did," he laughs.



Today he divides his time between a small apartment in Upper Manhattan and a fixer-upper house he shares with his wife, Anne, in Pennsylvania. The house is a recent move; Ballantyne lived off and on in NYC between 1988 and 1992, moved there permanently in 1993 and finally got his green card in 1996. Throughout, he has made his living playing, writing and recording jazz.

For the past two and a half years, Ballantyne's energies have been focussed on his quartet, with himself on piano, Boris Kozlov on bass, Douglas Yates on bass clarinet and saxophone and Jeff Hirschfield on drums. They recorded Round Again in 2001 with Hirschfield and Gene Jackson sharing drum duty and featuring guest saxophonist Dewey Redman. Following the

release of the CD, the quartet toured Germany, Italy and Israel, and recently played international jazz festivals in Rochester, NY and Stockholm, Sweden.

"We're playing all original music. We're rooted in modern straight ahead jazz, but we're really trying to expand things beyond what we know. That's what jazz is all about. It's taking chances and trying to see what you can come up with. My pieces are really pieces for improvisation. I'm trying to suggest, not a hook but an idea, a flavour. You put that in the hands of individual players.

"One thing about musicians in New York, they're not overtly derivative. When you get mature as a jazz musician, you want to shed your influences. You don't want them to be obvious, that's the school I'm from," Ballantyne says. "I was walking by this club the other day and there was a guy playing like John Coltrane from 1958. It was like a dead ringer. That's not easy to do, by the way, but at the same time, I had to say, how old is he? If he's 20, then that's okay. If he's 40, I don't think that's okay. I think by now he'd better think about how he wants to sound. I figured he was about 25, so I'll give him a few years."

For now, with a steady gig and work with his quartet, Ballantyne is pondering the possibilities of what comes next. After ten years in the Big Apple, it comes as something of a surprise to hear he is seriously considering moving back to Canada.

"My wife is from Finland originally, which is similar to Canada. They brave the winters, they're a tough bunch of people, but they're also soulful. In a lot of ways, there are parallels. We always enjoy it when we go to Canada. My dream would be to play gigs across the country. I'd love to play Yellowknife, I've heard audiences are good up there.

"Oh I'll definitely keep my ties to New York. I mean, this is the greatest city for jazz. The music has evolved in New York. You can feel the vibe. That's why so many good musicians end up here, at least for some period in their careers. But it's a bit of a dream to move back to Canada." 🍷

*John's*

FOR A FINE DINING EXPERIENCE

401 -21st Street East Downtown Saskatoon 244-6384

### Intelligent People Know . . .

- ✓ Saskatchewan produces some of the highest quality food in the world.
- ✓ Food processing is Saskatchewan's largest manufacturing industry.

Yet, 90% of the foods we buy are Imported. Silly but true!?!

Choose local foods to feed your family and the economy.

Look for this logo at your favourite grocery stores and restaurants!

Eat Smart!



For product information, contests and recipes visit:

[www.SaskMade.ca](http://www.SaskMade.ca)

Saskatchewan Food Processors Association tel: (306) 683-2410

WELLINGTON WEST  
Capital Inc.

One of Canada's largest independent full service investment firms.

Todd Degelman, M.B.A.  
National Sales Manager

Where clients come first with our  
**FREE self directed RSP.**

The Personalized Investment Approach

Reach Todd Degelman at:  
306-657-4402 or 1-866-844-4400  
Suite 1360, 410 22nd Street East, Saskatoon S7K 5T6

This advertisement is not to be construed as an offer or the solicitation of an offer to buy or sell or a recommendation to buy or sell securities. Wellington West Capital Inc. (WW) and/or its individual officers and/or its directors and/or its representatives and/or members of their families may have a position in securities mentioned and may make purchases and/or sales of these securities from time to time in the open market or otherwise. Free RSP are on qualified accounts.

MEMBER CIPF