



Nathan Haines

New York State of Jazz

Not many world class saxophonists start their working life as a reporter for a weekly tabloid newspaper, but Nathan Haines did. The 23 year-old Auckland, now based in New York, is back home to release his new album *Shift Left*. At 17, after six months at journalism school and two years of playing gigs with his brother Joel and father Kevin Haines, he was doing exposés on small town mayors and getting scoops on sex scandals for the *Sunday News*. There can't have been much inspiration for a young jazz wannabe down amongst the depths of New Zealand tabloid journalism — doing profiles on league players and a legal column under the name John Justice — but it wasn't all bad according to Nathan.

"Working for the paper, I always played lots of music, still did lots of gigs, still kept on writing music," he says. During his last year there he got the music page, giving him a chance to meet plenty of big names and think more about what he really wanted to do. "It got me into the game, got me around the country, got me talking to lots of different people. I met a lot of musicians. I got to interview De La Soul, and so many amazing bands — REM even. That was really helpful for seeing where I fitted in, as a musician, as somebody who was making music." Somebody who's been making music since he was four.

When Nathan was a toddler, his father Kevin started teaching him recorder. At six he had started classical lessons, and by 14 he was the youngest person ever to pass his grade eight music exam, getting 98 percent. He was all ready to go on with the classical training, but jazz was where he wanted to go.

"When I was 13 my dad gave me a Charlie Parker book of solos, so I really got into bebop. But I grew up listening to Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, Stevie Wonder and Miles Davis. *Kind of Blue* has been my favourite record since I was about 12," he says.

He got his first taste of live jazz playing with brother Joel and his dad at the Globe, London Bar and Art Gallery. After that he went off with his brother and some other younger musicians to form a band called the Jazz Committee. But it was with Joel and another band called Freebass that he started to play the kind of jazz that really interested him, the kind of jazz you could play in smoky night clubs and the kind of jazz that would get the punters moving.

"Freebass came out of the Jazz Committee, but was more dance orientated. Lots of people used to come and see [the Jazz Committee] go off and that, but we wanted to take it a step further. So we got into Cause Celebre, changed the feel of things down there, got a regular band thing happening."

After six months together, Freebass released an album of live recordings from their gigs at Auckland's Cause Celebre. Aptly named, *Raw* was just that. It boasted a minimum of production and ample crowd and background ambience. In fact, Nathan says most of the time the band didn't even realise they were recording for an album.

"Getting jazz album of the year last year for *Raw* was really weird because it was recorded in a couple of nights down at the club. God, we didn't even really think about it. We were just playing. It wasn't even a serious thing," he laughs.

Playing the Auckland scene was fine, and with Freebass Nathan had really started to cause a stir amongst Auckland's late night music listeners. But New York was where he really wanted to go. New York is where jazz has its home and where hip-hop, which was becoming more and more an important part of Nathan's music, was in its own environment.

"Ever since I was a kid I'd wanted to go to New York. It's the centre of jazz and hip-hop. If you're serious about anything, then you've got to check it out. There's no excuses for people in New Zealand bringing out inferior shit, because you've just got to go and check it out. You've just got to know what you're doing. I spent all my early years checking out jazz, learning off records, learning off people. When Wynton Marsalis came out to New Zealand I hung out with him for a couple of days," Nathan says. So, with the help of money he won through the AGC Young Achievers Awards, he

took off to check out New York. Not that they just handed the money over, mind you.

"I wasn't just given it, I had to really, really get my shit together and get my application together. That was six months of work. I had to really convince them I was a serious musician who was on the same footing as a classical musician going to study for a year at some university." He had to convince them going to New York, to hang out in seedy night clubs listening to jazz, was the best way to learn about it. And he did.

In New York he got saxophone lessons from George Coleman, who played with Miles Davis in the 60s, but most importantly, he says, he met up with the guys from Groove Collective. The New York end of the Acid Jazz scene, Groove Collective are, as Nathan says, the stateside equivalent of London's Talkin' Loud label. The music, as well as the city, is where his heart is. New York, says Nathan, is a real city.

"It's full on, and it's horrible sometimes, but it's fantastic. Let's not kid ourselves, we're living on a Pacific island down here, and it really isn't any more than that."

Not that he doesn't love living in Auckland too. It's just that there's no way he could have written a whole album like *Shift Left* here. "My musical roots are there, and the only way I wrote was by living in New York. Life is too good here. There's too many trees here and it's too beautiful. I love it — shit, I love living in Auckland — it's really fantastic. But I just have to top myself up now and again, until I get to a mature enough stage where I can produce the same sort of music wherever I am."

For Nathan it's not just the challenge of living in a city that's big and mean which helps him write the music, but the sound of that city itself. "It's the sounds of New York. The sound of the subway, the sound of the street, the music coming out of the bodegas, and hip-hop coming out of the jeeps, and the drug dealers, you know, it's everything."

That's where *Shift Left* comes from. Everything except the name, that is. That came from riding around Auckland on his racing bike. Cycling around the water front, making his way towards the Parnell Pools and the last of the container wharfs, he came to where a new road was being built, and a traffic sign that said 'shift left'.

"I thought: 'Shit, that's cool,'" he says. "It's like, just think differently, basically. Just move over a bit, or whatever. Just get out of your mainstream thinking." Getting out of his mainstream means Nathan will be heading back to New York for a third time in the middle of the year, after an album release tour that will take him and his band to Hamilton, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin and Queenstown during April, and Australia, when the album gets released there in May. This time he wants to make it to London to spend some more time with his friend Giles Peterson from Talkin' Loud — and then, who knows? But whatever happens, he'll be back home just as soon as he's had a sufficient top-up to write the next album.

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