

Keyboard

keyboardmag.com

STAGE SKILLS • STUDIO SMARTS



SCOTT HEALY
Grammy-Nominated
Jazzier and
Conan
Keysman

What Traditional
Piano Teaching
GETS WRONG

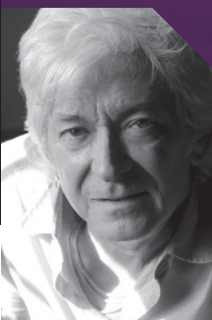
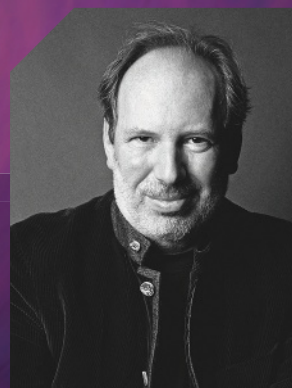
5 Ways to Play
Like Jazz Genius
BRAD MEHLDAU

Play Killer
**LEFT-HAND
BASS**

**HANS
ZIMMER**

Launches Pipe Organ into Space for

INTERSTELLAR



**Farewell
IAN
McLAGAN**



ARTURIA KEYLAB 88
Bang-for-Buck
Breakthrough Controller



YAMAHA P-255
Digital Piano for
Stage or Home



AAS STRING STUDIO VS-2
String Modeling Soft Synth



NOVATION AUDIOHUB 2X4
Recording Interface
Meets Powered USB Hub



2.2015 | \$5.99

A MUSIC PLAYER PUBLICATION

SCOTT HEALY

THE GRAMMY-NOMINATED
CONAN KEYBOARDIST ON
HIS WILD MUSICAL RIDE

BY JON REGEN



SCOTT HEALY IS EQUALLY AT HOME BEHIND A HAMMOND ORGAN OR THE CONDUCTOR'S PODIUM IN A CONCERT HALL.

Best known for his quarter-century romp as the high-energy keyboardist in Conan O'Brien's television band, Healy is also a Grammy-nominated, classically trained composer of serious sonic merit. (And to top it off, he's a frequent contributor to *Keyboard*, Where does he find the time?) Healy took a break from his near nonstop rehearsal and performance schedule to talk about a musical journey that has spanned Bach to rock, and everything in between.

You've amassed a pretty staggering résumé: from your decades-long gig with Conan O'Brien to a Grammy nomination in 2014 for your album *Hudson City Suite*. How did your musical journey begin?

I grew-up in Cleveland, Ohio, in a very musical family. My grandmother was a piano teacher, my uncle played trumpet in a Dixieland band, and both of my parents played piano by ear. So there was always music in my house. My grandmother had both a Hammond M-3 organ and a Knabe grand piano in her living room, and my *other* grandmother had an upright piano, just like my family did. So I started plunking around on the piano as soon as I could reach it.

Did you study music formally?

Yeah. I started taking piano lessons in first grade, but I was already playing by ear at that point. My Dad showed me a few chords, and my Mom used to play and sing to me, so that got me into playing Broadway and other kinds of tunes. One thing that really jump-started my musical development was that I began taking piano *and* theory lessons—a half hour of each—at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Those private theory lessons taught me things like how to write notes on the staff and how to understand intervals. They were incredibly valuable, and they made me even more interested

in practicing and playing my instrument. And so I took privately for years with different teachers, until I asked around and found James Tannenbaum at the Cleveland Institute. He was an “up and coming” concert pianist and really kicked my butt. He got me going on Brahms, Chopin, Debussy, and Bach.

So you were heavily into classical music back then?

I was mainly a classical pianist until the age of 15, but I listened to everything. When I was 13, I started listening to a lot of jazz and fusion music. And growing up in Cleveland, there was no shortage of rock 'n' roll. It was in my DNA, and I got an education in it listening to radio stations like WGAR, WOR, and WMMS. By the time I was 14, I started buying all kinds of records. But as far as playing was concerned, my focus was on classical at that time. Then I took a left turn and [got into] classical composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. But I still had my hands in lots of different things. I studied jazz composition with Ray Wright in graduate classes, I gigged with jazz bands and I practiced classical piano.

What did you want to do when you graduated from music school?

That was the beginning of my musical identity crisis, because on one hand I was playing jazz/

fusion gigs and music by Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock, and I had a Fender Rhodes and an ARP Odyssey. But I was still interested in all kinds of orchestration and arranging.

How did you pay your rent in those early years as a musician?

I graduated in 1982 and I moved to Bergen County, New Jersey—right outside of New York City. And I immediately started playing weddings. In fact, I think I worked the first Saturday night I got there! In those days, you could go out with your Rhodes and play left-hand bass, and people would hire you. I ended up on weddings with members of the Jazz Messengers and the Mel Lewis band. Back then, musicians played every gig they could. So I worked in all kinds of bands, playing jazz, standards, pop music, and everything in between. I was also leading my own bands—from quartets and sextets to full big bands—and scoring television commercials and “pops”-type music for symphony orchestras. I was also arranging horn charts for vocalists and “ghost-writing.” So I was doing a little bit of everything.

At that time, who were some of the musicians that had the biggest impact on your playing and writing?

Definitely jazz artists like [saxophonist] Michael Brecker, [trumpeter] Randy Brecker, the

CONAN'S KEYS SCOTT HEALY'S LATE-NIGHT RIG

Long time *Conan* keyboardist Scott Healy is using a streamlined rig for his television gig.

"For piano sounds, I'm using a Yamaha CP1 which I love," Healy says, "along with a Yamaha MO8 on top of it controlling a Yamaha Motif Rack for extra sounds and a Voce V5 module for organ. The Voce goes through a Hughes & Kettner Tube Rotosphere pedal for my Leslie effect. It's punchy in a way a real Leslie is not, and it's great for TV. On my left side, there's a Hohner Clavinet D6, which is pretty much original, except Ken Rich in Los Angeles replaced the pickups, and my wife replaced the strings and the felts! I also use a Korg Radias, which I sometimes use to trigger the Motif Rack as well."



band Steps Ahead, and Herbie Hancock, as well as modern musicians from the New York jazz scene of the time, like [saxophonist] John Zorn, [bassist] Mark Helias, [pianists] Fred Hersch and Kenny Werner, and [bassist] Dave Holland. I was also into electronics and early smooth jazz. The only thing I wasn't playing at that time was rock 'n' roll and blues, which is funny because they are now such integral parts of my musical identity.

What was your main keyboard rig in those days?

My main rig was a Rhodes electric piano, until the Yamaha DX7 came out. Having the DX7 and also the TX7 module allowed me to become liberated from the Rhodes. I actually had a lot of fun playing and programming the DX7, and it got me interested in other keyboards like Roland Junos, Oberheim Matrix 6R's, the Casio CZ101, and the Kurzweil K2000. Later, I bought a Pro Tools rig and started using it for scoring sessions. The Rhodes, on the other hand, was a clunky veteran of my high school days. It was heavy and huge like a boat anchor, and it had a hard action to play. Back then I was more than happy to see it go. Ironically, I sold my Rhodes in 1986, only to track it down and buy it back in 1993. Now I use it all the time.

How did your gig on *Conan* come about?

It all came from playing weddings in New Jersey! I met [*Conan* guitarist and bandleader] Jimmy Vivino on a wedding gig, and we had a great time playing together. He liked that I had a good ear and knew a bunch of tunes and styles. I knew what to do in rock and roll—I just hadn't had experience doing it. That kind of hard-edged, boogie piano style has always been in my genes since my early days in Cleveland. So in 1993, I got the call to join *Conan*'s house band, which was fronted by Bruce Springsteen drummer Max Weinberg. He and Jimmy put that band together and tapped me for the keyboard chair.

When you got the call to join the *Conan* band, how did you go about getting yourself better versed in rock and blues piano?

Max Weinberg showed up at the first rehearsal

with a couple of records for me to check out. His words to me were something along the lines of, "You're not *quite* cutting it." So he had me check out things like a "roots" piano compilation that had tunes on it like the Amos Millburn "Chicken Shack Boogie" and a few New Orleans "second line" rumbas. Max and Jimmy also wanted to play a bunch of Chicago shuffles and jump blues. So I had my work cut out for me. I had to get my left hand together, and more Dr. John and Professor Longhair kinds of right-hand riffs too. It was basically about finessing the New Orleans style and the blues. And I had about a week to figure it all out!

The first thing I did was check out the Dr. John "play-along" series, which I believe was released by Homespun on cassette tape. I also checked out a lot of records by Professor Longhair, Johnnie Johnson, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard. I learned that a Chicago shuffle is different from a Texas or a Kansas City or a New Orleans one. Learning these distinctly different piano styles is the key to understanding roots music. Jimmy was a great coach, too. He has a near encyclopaedic knowledge of the records and knows when things are right, and when they're not!

Do you remember what your keyboard rig was back in that first installment of the *Conan* show?

It was probably an old Roland RD-series digital piano, as well as a Yamaha KX88 MIDI controller, along with two Kurzweil K2000RS samplers, which I used for all synth sounds and organ.

You played organ on a weighted keyboard?

I've been playing it that way on television for 20 years, but I think as a pianist who plays a lot of organ, it actually really keeps my hands in shape. I know it seems counter-intuitive, but I've always liked to have 88 keys and feel that extra weight. Even now, I'm controlling a Voce V5 organ module from a Yamaha MO8, which is an 88-key weighted keyboard. On the *Conan* show, it wouldn't be my first choice, but as I can only have two keyboards facing the front of the stage, and I need to be able to split sounds and control another rack of synths

plus have a solid piano sound, it works.

Your song "Koko on the Boulevard" from *Hudson City Suite* was nominated for a Best Instrumental Composition Grammy in 2014. How did that project come about?

I've been writing and arranging music for various kinds of instrumental ensembles since I came to New York City in 1983-84. So while I was busy with *Conan*, I was always doing things on the side. I wanted to stay artistically challenged. There was a day when you could actually get a gig with a ten-piece band in New York City! I played a club in Greenwich Village called Visiones, where [arranger] Maria Schneider got her start, as well. I also played concerts in the Citicorp Center and Sweet Basil and all kinds of venues. So I was always writing and arranging, and when *Conan* moved to Los Angeles in 2009, I followed and wanted to get my own band together right away. By fall 2010, I was rehearsing the band that ended-up on *Hudson City Suite*. I kept writing, meeting new musicians, and performing in Los Angeles venues like Vitello's and the Blue Whale.

The *Hudson City Suite* project started years back when I lived in Jersey City, New Jersey. It was then that I had the idea to write a suite, but I never finished it. When I moved to Los Angeles, only three of the nine pieces were underway. I always had it in the back of my mind to finish the suite; I liked the idea of a full record of thematically connected tunes. So I revised and finished the nine songs for the album and recorded the suite in Los Angeles in 2012. "Koko on the Boulevard," the song that got the Grammy nomination, was one I started back in the mid 1990s.

When you speak to young music students now, what words of advice do you try to impart?

Stay open, stay interested and always say "Yes," because you never know which New Jersey wedding just may give you a 25-year television gig! 🎹



Scott Healy on
Hammond Organ TV

keyboardmag.com/february2015