

# Jazz

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Grace Kelly

Grace Under Pressure

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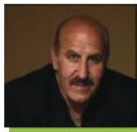


“ A great teacher will help guide you in that process, but I do always try to say, just listen and transcribe and get all of that in your blood as much as you can. ”  
 –Grace Kelly

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upclose

# Grace Kelly



PHOTO BY MEDHI HASSINE

## Grace Under Pressure BY BRYAN REESMAN

**G**race Kelly is reinventing the rules of jazz and jazz education one step at a time. A musical wunderkind who began learning classical piano at six and quickly transitioned into jazz piano, then saxophone by age 10, she was always meant to turn the music world on its ear. The alto sax player performed publicly for the first time at age 10 (you can find the performance on YouTube), then, at the behest of her music teacher Ken Berman, recorded her debut album *Dreaming* at age 12. It's been a wild ride ever since for the 26-year-old bandleader, singer, and songwriter.

Her approach to music exemplifies a famous piece of Richard Branson advice: "If somebody offers you an amazing opportunity but you are not sure you can do it, say yes – then learn how to do it later!" This happened when Stephen Colbert's bandleader Jon Batiste invited Kelly onto "The Late Show" with him and his group, Stay Human, back in December 2015. The award-winning alto sax player happened to be in NYC when she got the call on a Friday and had to be ready by the following Monday. She also needed to practice baritone sax anew and relearn the clarinet, which she had not played since fourth grade. Kelly agreed to something she was not sure she could pull off, but she dived headlong into the effort, got product support from Yamaha and Vandoren, practiced hard, and pulled it off. The two-week gig lasted six months.

In truth, Kelly is always up for a challenge, pushing herself and her genre. While her 10 solo and collaborative albums tend more towards the traditional jazz that she loves, a more exuberant and edgy side has also been emerging in her videos and live performances. Rather than crank out a new album on a regular schedule, she has used "pop-up" videos and live studio performances to satisfy longtime fans, reach new ones, and experiment. The pop-up videos are short solo performances, anywhere from a rooftop in L.A. to a beach in Haiti to a gondola in Venice, and she has done some with baritone

**“Only do this as a career if you, 200 percent, need to do it.”**

sax player Leo P, who hails from the trio Too Many Zooz and is formerly of Lucky Chops fame. The fashionably flashy duo with colorful hair riff off one another while also performing choreographed dance moves. Leo also appeared in her "GO TIME" studio sessions in Brooklyn that found her incorporating funk and EDM elements into a mixture of covers and originals. She has fully embraced technology, even teaching students via FaceTime and Skype.

*JAZZed* sat down for a two-hour lunch with Kelly in Forest Hills, Queens to discuss her musical evolution, ever expanding career, and the amazing experiences she has had. A Boston native, the young sax player has performed with everyone from David Sanborn to Billy Cobham to the late Dave Brubeck, and two days after her *JAZZed* interview, she appeared onstage with jazz vocal legends The Manhattan Transfer. Life is never dull for Grace Kelly.

**You seem pretty fearless – you just try things out and go for it.**

I really appreciate you saying that because I think jazz and music have literally forced me to become more [that way]. Without music, I'm not really a fearless person. Literally, learning jazz and realizing that the most exciting things come from the unknown and from improvising has actually forced me to get out of my comfort zone, and I'm so grateful because it's way more exciting like that. Normally, I don't think most people would get the opportunity to experience it.

**You seem pretty extroverted. You're having fun in your pop-up videos, and I've joked that you and Leo P must spend as much money on wardrobe as on instruments. You're reaching beyond the stereotype of the tuxedo and evening gown look associated with jazz and classical, plus you're performing wherever you want.**

I'm so glad it translates like that because when I was creating my [video] series, that's exactly what I was going for. It was not made for other musicians. It was actually to capture a non-jazz audience and bring them in to jazz, to learn about jazz. I realized in order to do that in our digital culture – we're all scrolling through Facebook, inundated with videos – it's got to be something more that grabs people's attention than just another video in a recording studio. And so it dawned on me, why can't I sit on top of a car and play the same awesome material and visually stimulate people and stop that extra person on Facebook or Instagram who thinks they don't love jazz? Maybe it will give them a fresh perspective – jazz is fun, it can be playful – and at the same time listen to quality stuff. Musically, I'm always striving to push people's ears. So let's see the same thing visually.

Working with Leo is an incredible inspiration because he is just like that as a person. He will dress that way to go out for breakfast. Just by being around him, he's been teaching me a lot about how to present oneself as an artist. I think at the end of the day it just becomes performance art in however you want to present it. I'm still very much experimenting with different styles, music, looks, and scenarios. That I've been learning every step of the way.

**Leo makes a good foil for you. He's like the rhythm guitarist and you're the lead. Would you agree that playing with Stay Human and with Leo has been bringing out a different side to you?**

You're right on the money on that. The pop-up idea came naturally just after working with Jon for six months straight. He does this impromptu "Love Riot" – that's what he calls it – where he brings everyone out on the street. When they were originally on the "Colbert Report," they got Stephen out on the street dancing. We used to do these gigs at Rockwood [Music Hall] where, after the show, he would just lead the whole audience out. Then he'd text me and be like, "Hey, we're going to be at Union Square Station. Come by at four. We're going to do this pop-up."

Seeing the way people reacted and seeing how he created this



PHOTO BY ERAN SHAVSH

open feeling – there's no stage, we're all in this together, we're all dancing and playing – it's very New Orleans. You could see that they'd brighten up and sing along and their day would change. The energy would change. I was so inspired by him doing it. I don't do it with a full band. He'd been doing it like that for years in the subway with a band, and I love that. Leo and Jon in their own ways have been such amazing inspirations. With most of those pop-ups [Leo and I] did together in Times Square, we choreographed the day before in a matter of hours. Both of our tour schedules are so crazy, so there's not much rehearsal at all.

**I've noticed that your recorded stuff tends to fall more on the traditional side of jazz, whereas your live performances over the last two or three years are showing more of your rock star side. I feel like the next album is going to be**

**the first one in your new phase.**

I'm really excited for that. We did that "GO TIME" [performance] live in Brooklyn. We just recorded a "GO TIME" live in Los Angeles that won't be released until fall. I've realized that the energy from the audience brings so much more to me and my band, live, but there are a lot of things that are coming together in my head and how I want to present the next chapter, like you said. I have such a strong background in traditional jazz – I grew up literally learning Charlie Parker solos, getting mentored by the great Phil Woods, Lee Konitz, Frank Morgan, playing my favorite music in the world, jazz – but I've always had such a wide range of music that I love. I started as a Broadway geek, and then I listened to pop music and EDM. I love Zedd and Skrillex. But I got a little shy and afraid of fully embodying all those things, worried about everyone else except me, actually. And then I realized there's no reason that I can't embody all those things that I love. Right now I'm in that journey of stepping into that. It feels very genuine to me, and my audience thinks it's so great. They've been growing with me, so it's a very exciting time, musically.

**You wrote for your first song at seven years old. Were you singing at that point?**

I was singing. I wrote a folk song called "On My Way Home" and then recorded it when I was 12. I've always been a melody maker. My mom said I was always singing, making up songs, and through my whole journey I continue to do songwriting just because I love it so much. It's a great release. In the Brooklyn sessions we literally go from me and Leo playing "Fish and Chips" to a guest feature with my friend Elliot [Skinner] who was in the band Thirdstory. A month ago, I woke up to an email from Aloe Blacc, who is one of my writing inspirations, saying, "I love your songs so much and I'm just wanting to pass it on." I was so moved because it was his song that he did with Avicii, "Wake Me Up," that actually inspired my song. It was a very surreal moment. Right now I'm just figuring out where all those places live because I really enjoy doing a wide scope [of music]. I'm also right now doing film scoring with a director in L.A. Podcast music. Day-to-day it's really different, but I love it.

upclose

“ A great teacher will help guide you in that process, but I do always try to say, just listen and transcribe and get all of that in your blood as much as you can. ”

**As far as practicing, do you have a regimen every day on tour or does it vary?**

It varies just depending on certain times. If I'm heavy into writing, I'm going to focus more on that. Even on tour, I really try to get enough sleep so I'm not out late partying. Maybe we'll have a drink after. The other night I didn't even go out because I was so tired. I'd rather actually wake up early and jump start my day with creative ideas. I used to be the opposite and stay up late, sleep late, work late. But I'm actually getting more in tune with the regular body clock, and I have a lot of energy. At 10:00 to 2:00 is super. Then sometimes I get creative jolts at night, so I'll go and run with it. Ideally, I wake up and start with some type of creative writing, do some meditation. I've actually been getting back into meditation lately, and I had one session where I was meditating for 15 or 20 minutes. At the end, I literally heard a bass line [in my head] and had to cut it short because that was the arrangement I was looking for. I went straight to the piano. I was racking my brain. I knew my deadline was coming up. And boom, it was like clear as a whistle. I was so grateful for it.

Ideally, I clock in some practice time [on the road], and then de-

pending on what's going on in the day, I'm trying right now to get back into reading regularly, listening to books, and listening to music. Just trying to get back into that creative place, watching a lot of other music videos and music. That's what I like to do.

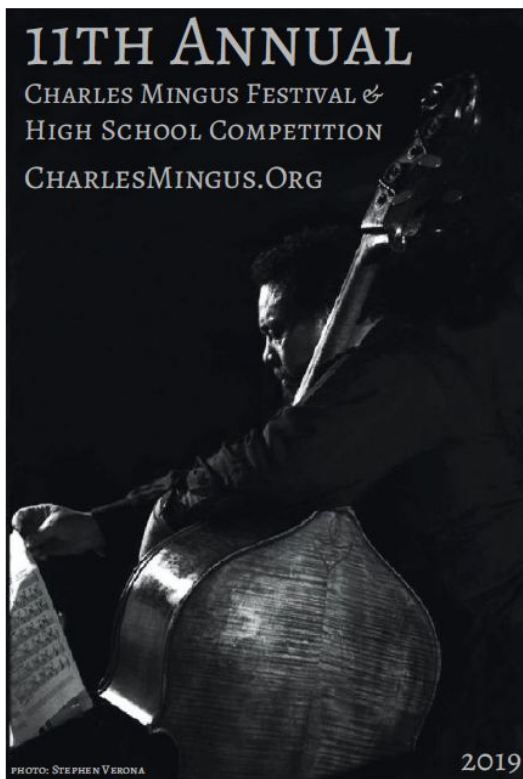
**People have showed you a lot of respect, particularly when you started at such a young age and on your first album.**

I'm really grateful. For John Lockwood, [it was] another day in the studio. But when I heard that he'd literally played with Stan Getz and Dizzy Gillespie, all my heroes, I was freaking out. They were the kindest people when I walked in and so respectful, and really treated me like the band leader even though I didn't have the answers for them. It was an amazing first experience. For some people, for John to ask all the questions to Ken Berman, my music teacher, would be the regular thing that they would do. But they were all just asking me, "This is your music, you printed out the charts: How do you want it?" I'm grateful for those first few experiences and working with them. Then it became about writing a lot of new music. We knew the engineer Peter Kontrimas, as well, so we'd go in with the band and record my new songs and then just throw in the jazz standards that I was working on. Again, my first and second CDs were literally documentation. We ended up having a CD release concert in Brookline, Massachusetts. We rented out a church and invited friends and family. We wrote postcards to all my classmates. That day of my first CD release, I'm 12, it's the first time I'm going onstage. *The Boston Globe* decided to write a two-page story and the church was standing room only that night – 250 people came and I was freaking out. This was my first time presenting my music, leading a band, and suddenly the stakes felt like a lot higher. I thought maybe 30 friends and family were going to come, and I had all these strangers who came.

**How old were you when you graduated from Berklee?**

I started Berklee when I was 16. I was 19 when I finished. Then I did a little bit of teaching for them after – just did some residency stuff. It was with ensembles and some really talented musicians. Berklee gets a great gamut [of musicians]. You could walk into a room of the most incredible heavy metal musicians and then walk into a jazz session or world music. I was basically in Boston for two years. At that point, I just started to feel so comfortable there. It was my home, but I was feeling restless and decided to go to L.A. I knew probably five people there including one record producer, Stewart Levine, who's worked with David Sanborn, B.B. King, Minnie Riperton, and Jamie Cullum, and he was one of my mentors from the age of 18. I didn't even know how to drive and learned before I went to L.A. I had a whole chapter there meeting songwriters and doing writing sessions. I did an album with Stewart and his son Sunny Levine, who is a producer. I had an amazing time.

It was also the first time I got my music into TV shows and indie movies. I got some great opportunities. I got a call from Michael Connelly who's the writer of the writer "Harry Bosch" series, a *New York Times* bestseller. There are probably 20 something books about Harry Bosch, and Michael had written me into a few of his books because he's a huge jazz fan. They're now on season four or five of the Amazon show. When I was living in L.A., I got an email one day from Michael saying, "Hey, would you consider making an appearance in the TV show as yourself? We'd love to film it at Catalina Jazz Club. You're going to play in front of Titus Welliver." That was super surreal, and so many new people have found me through that show, especially now. I think it's one of Amazon's one longest running shows.





# Grace Kelly Depends on Yamaha.

"My Yamaha 82Z alto plays with amazing ease and accuracy. It's effortless."

*Grace Kelly*

- Grace Kelly  
Saxophonist, Singer, Composer, and Arranger

Photo credit: Merrill Hassler



@YamahaMusicUSA



## upclose

Then, literally after two years in L.A., I got a call from Jon and the "Late Show" gig is what brought me to New York. I thought I was going to live in L.A. Jon asked me to play for two weeks and it just [lasted longer]. Literally for the first three months I was bouncing from friend to family friends' apartments, living out of the dressing room. It was nuts, but so exciting.

### **Do you remember any teachers who had an impact on you? Any mentors?**

At Berklee College of Music, there's a trumpeter, Darren Barrett, who won the first Thelonious Monk competition on trumpet. He made a huge impact on me because he's just so honest, and he basically [points out] the things that you know are your weak points but you don't want to work on them. I remember one day in our ensemble he said, "Okay, Grace, we're going to play 'Cherokee' at this tempo." The technical, really fast stuff is not one of my strongest points. I did small phrases, but he wanted to hear eighth notes and I just completely fell on my face. He pulled me aside and said, "Just work with a metronome every day. Just one click faster and eighth



notes, and by the end of the summer you're going to be able to play that tempo." I did that every day. That's so simple, right? For me to be able to point out to myself, I can't play fast songs, but I had just never addressed it. I had seen him do it in so many contexts. Some people don't take it well. I've seen some people run out of the room crying because it's very tough love.

There's another teacher at Berklee, Elon Malay, who played on some of Phil Woods' recordings. He's toured with Paul Simon. He's just incredibly tough love, but at the end of the day if they say, "That

was it," it means so much more. Phil Woods was like that with me too, and Lee Konitz. They're not throwing around compliments, so when you do work really hard to get something or get that line and they acknowledge it, you feel like, "I saw the process of sucking at this and then getting better and getting stronger." That's what a great teacher does. I've had a lot of really great teachers [working] with tough love, but never turning me off. I hear stories about people that got so scarred from teachers.

### **What advice do you give to younger artists?**

I think it's very easy in our digital world. I have parents or grandparents who say, "I bought her a guitar and she's just learning on YouTube." That's great that we have all of this available, but you want to be really careful. All the small habits that you develop from the beginning are the basis and foundation. The most important thing is, in the beginning, getting a great teacher, getting a great role model. I try to tell younger students and musicians, use the Internet, but know what you're looking for. You can have and develop a relationship with a future mentor by hitting them up on their website. I get emails from these young musicians. But don't just start with the first thing that you type in, like "learning guitar." Research it a bit. In Boston, we all knew that New England Conservatory Prep School had a level of teachers that was pretty incredible.

In the future, I really want to be able to make a mark and help young, talented students. Or people who've never picked up instruments before and are not in a position, financially, and yet their creativity and their potential could be the one thing that they're put on this planet to do, to make music and be amazing. I have done seminars and workshops where I'll travel around. In Iowa, I went to public schools and the gymnasiums, and for some of those kids it was literally the first time they were seeing a saxophone. To be able to leave some inspiration is something I'd really like to do much more of in the future. When opportunity meets hard work meets mentors, it's all part of the puzzle.

I do like to remind people even younger than me that it's not instant. That's really a huge thing about the Internet. I can only imagine with Generation Z the pressures of going through high school and looking at the amount of likes and numbers [on social media]. I'll try to remind them you're not going to just find a YouTube tutorial and get it tomorrow. It's the diligence of it. Also, if you are in a place that doesn't have a New England Conservatory – my drummer's from Fargo and he literally grew up listening to records – you always have Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. You can put on your headphones and learn it. A great teacher will help guide you in that process, but I do always try to say, just listen and transcribe and get all of that in your blood as much as you can.

**Your videos certainly bring you out into the open, and you like to show yourself jamming or chatting backstage. By going out in public in front of people, there's no artifice, such as when you were performing off the cuff with Leo P in Times Square.**

It's literally one take. I think this is the great training if you are a great jazz musician and you learn your scales and your arpeggios. All those Brooklyn "GOTIME" [performances] are one or two takes. Actually, after one or two takes I usually get worse. I really do. It's amazing. I have been in a studio with other people, and the producer will be like, "Do one more, do one more." Then we'll listen back, and they're always like, "You're a first take girl." We go back to the first take. I rely on my intuition so much.

## upclose

### What kind of online teaching do you do? Private or group lessons?

Both. This last one I did [via FaceTime with the Miami Valley Jazz Camp in Ohio] had 65 of their students all in chairs. They had the big projector up. Then I have some private Skype students. One of my goals is to come up with online material like tutorials, blog posts, tips, practice stuff. Eventually I would like to turn it into an actual online course. There are two thoughts that I have about that. They're not completely fleshed out. I could go more in the direction of the jazz saxophone thing. The other thing I'm realizing when I'm teaching, whether it's college or middle school, is there is a lot of really basic etiquette, like jazz etiquette, one-on-one stuff that is not discussed. Like how do you cut off a band? How do you end the song? How do you count off? I was teaching at Ithaca College, and cats did not know how to count off a song or how to end it, how to look at each other. It would be really great to have a one-on-one online video tutorial.


**It's so interesting that you're doing this online because when I learned drums, I was in a room with my teacher, and if I was doing something wrong – say, my posture was not good or my stick technique was not correct – he could physically show me how to make those adjustments. You can't do that with online teaching.**

I actually tell beginners, I can't teach you online. You need to go to a teacher to make sure your posture is cool. Because I had that. My teacher's like, you're crooked here, your sound needs to come from here. It's a physical thing. The other thing you can't do [online]

is play together because of the lag [time]. I have one student who I just met for the first time in person. I played in Seattle and his family lives there, so we did an in-person but we'd been doing Skype up until this point. He's an eighth grader who's killing it. I brought him up on stage, and he blew everyone away. I said, in person, we're just going to spend most of the lesson playing together, because we don't get to do that on Skype. Let's just use the time to get that improv together.

### What has been the most valuable life lesson you can impart to other people?

This may sound really cheesy, but I've had so many mentors say: you've got to keep having fun. I truly believe that if you are not having fun – I mean we're in the arts world already, and there is so much sweat and tears that go into that – at the end of the day, being on stage or making music needs to have that joy. The minute this becomes like a stale thing or a job, I'll be out. It's not worth it. It's got to come from one's heart. I always tell upcoming musicians, first of all, only do this as a career if you, 200 percent, need to do it – you eat, breathe, love, sleep music, or whatever your craft is. There are plenty of other things you can do to make money and to do this on the side. But if it's your lifeline, then go for it with all you've got, and make sure that you keep the joy and the passion in it. That's the reason I got into it. It's always been this magical place. The stage is magical. Creating music is magical. Sitting with another creator and coming up with something is amazing. I love that. I don't think I get that feeling from anything else, so I'm going to hold onto that.



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## MARQUIS HILL

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