

GT154

Brent Mason & Jay Graydon

Interview

This month Dario Cortese gets a chance to talk about session work with two legends in the business: Jay Graydon and Brent Mason

Some time ago I had the pleasure to ask a few questions about session work to two of my favorite studio musicians of all time: Brent Mason & Jay Graydon. They live and work in two different parts of the US (Nashville and Los Angeles) with different approaches, philosophies and working scenarios and this can be seen quite clearly in the interview. I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did.

01. What is the most typical scenario on a session?

Brent Mason: We normally do 3 sessions a day at the most. 10am-1pm, 2pm-5pm and 6pm-9pm. In Nashville we will get a call from the producer checking on availability for the dates. All the musicians will show up at the studio and one will be designated "leader". This means he will write the charts as we hear the tunes in demo form for the first time. This chart will be written in the Nashville number system 99% of the time. We then will discuss the arrangements and throw our ideas in and explore every angle that might make the song unique and "hit" material. The musicians here are a very important element in the creative process of the songs as opposed to an arranger who has written out everyone's parts and you just play what is written for you. I think this is my favorite part of a session. The creative aspect and the challenge of coming up with a cool guitar part. We normally might cut one maybe two songs per session depending on the complexity of the piece. Occasionally I might be called back for overdubs, to do the solos or to add fills, textures, etc...

Jay Graydon: There isn't one. Every session is different. It has been said studio work in 95% boredom and 5% sheer terror. Well, I was rarely bored but did have a few sessions that caused me to concentrate far beyond the norm.

02. Do you read music and have you ever needed to on a session?

BM: I do not sight read but I can figure out the parts if I have time to study it. I would be "sweating blood" in a scenario where I would have to read a symphonic chart.

JG: Yes and yes. Most record sessions are mostly chord charts but could be as complex as major reading including reading a piano part! The bottom line — the studio musician

needs to read music and be ready for anything!

03. Most daunting session? Most rewarding session?

BM: The daunting session would have happened when I first came to Nashville and did my first big sessions. Looking around and seeing players that I idolized was very scary. Especially when I had to prove myself. In my mind they were just waiting for me to screw up but this wasn't so. They were all very nice. Rewarding sessions to me is when I go in and leave knowing that I played my ass off and everyone was more than happy with my work. I know I will be called back.

JG: There were a few in which I was on the edge of my chair. In a typical live TV awards show, there may be a few tough parts to play but that is standard. The band is the typical *big band* consisting of 13 horns and a rhythm section. The band members are looking at a chart that has 5 songs (8 to 16 bars of the song). The band does not know the winner beforehand so when the winner is announced, the conductor says the song number and sticks up one through five fingers for people that are too far away to hear the number. A few hundred milliseconds later, the conductor conducts a downbeat and the song starts. No count off! Melodically, not a real problem since it is typical for the melody of the song to be near unison or spread among the lead horn players in each section — at least 4 of the 13 horns players will jump on the melody at the beginning of the song and the others will catch up. I was hired to play the *2nd Annual Rock and Roll* show. I assumed the typical melody in the horn section but was shocked when I found out I had to play all of the melodies on my own!!! So in a split second, I needed to jump to one of the 5 songs and play the melody with feel like I owned the melody! Could it get worse in pressure land? Yea, as the arranger wrote most all of the music in “2” as if in *cut time*! I must say I did a good job taking the attitude if missing the song cue, simply play a random solo in any key until catching up. I only missed one at it was by a mile but kept soloing and eventually landing in a melodic fashion that was acceptable. The most rewarding session was The Steely Dan PEG solo — any guitarist that gets a shot to play on the Steely Dan stuff (and the performance is kept) is an honor.

04. What are pieces of equipment (guitar/amp/pedals etc) could you never do without?

BM: I always have to have my '68 gray Tele'. If I forget it, I'll have to drive all the way home to get it. The pedals I would have to have are a Keeley compressor, Brian Wampler modified Ibanez Tube screamer or Voodoo Lab Sparkle drive, Vol. pedal some sort of delay pedal Line 6 or Boss DD. Amp wise, any old Fender amp. My 63 showman head, '65 twin, 30w matchless, '67 fender deluxe reverb.

JG: I was known as the effects guy in the beginning of my studio career so I needed all the electronic effects at all times. Note I most always use an Ernie Ball Volume Pedal as I prefer to keep my hands on the guitar when needing level changes instead of reaching for a volume pot. My guitar and amp set up has changed many times over the years and the current amp I am using shall remain a secret until my new artist's endeavor is released. It needs to be heard first and then noted. (The CD I speak of is a collaboration with Randy Goodrum as co-artist.)

05. How do you maintain creativity on sessions and not burn out?

BM: I always look for the unexpected. Whether it would be a unique sound or unusual riff or signature lick. Never do what they think you will do or your career will be cut short. There will be lots of instances where they will call you for a certain part or sound that they will specify. In those cases you have to deliver.

JG: The key is to listen to the song before playing stock stuff. The part you may come up with may be as simple as a line. May be a 2 note part falling into the melodic structure of the song. It may be a combination of both or stuff like full chords, whatever. The bottom line is studio work can be fun if taking the approach of constant experimentation looking for magical parts.

06. What type of relationship do you prefer between the producer and you to make the session the most rewarding?

BM: You have to have good intuition about the producer. Watch his reactions to the music that is being played and try to relate to him. A lot of them can't tell you what they want in musical terms so you have to be intuitive. Some are assholes so you have to set the Bullshit meter and when it pegs you have to know how to handle that. I tell you though the producers I work with here in Nashville really respect the musicians and some were great session players so they know what they're doing. It's fun to work with them. It's like one big family when we work with these guys.

JG: One that knows when the magical *take* occurred.

07. How did/do you network for sessions?

BM: I don't really network for sessions...it's kind of "cheesey". In most cases it makes you look desperate. Just do good work and the word will spread.

JG: Getting in is the hard part. Typically you need to be recommended by another guitarist or musician. After you get the chance to prove yourself, so important to do a great job or the next cat will get his chance. After you become established, networking happens on its own.

08. What do you feel people expect when they hire you - what do you perceive to be your trademark qualities?

BM: They will be confident that you will give them 110% and make the song sound its best. I will create a fun and friendly atmosphere and I've played on enough hit songs to know what the formula is. I'm also a good "terd polisher" (inside joke)

JG: They expect I do a good job and have good attitude. My trademark qualities are I will do my best to get a good sound, find a good part, and or play a good solo.

09. How does the session scene work now as compared to 10-20 years ago?

BM: There are many more players in the mix nowadays. With Protools, you don't have to be a great musician or band. They just move you around and fix you in the mix. It's very stagnate now, vocals lack soul. Just think if you were to tune Ray Charles vocals up and move the pocket around. It would lose its charm, it's sickening. Music is not about perfection...just listen to the "Beatles" albums. We can learn from that.

JG: Even though I have not played on sessions full time for many years, I play solos for hire on occasion. Yea, I hear about the studio scene of this era from many cats that play sessions. In this era, very little tracking sessions for pop and R&B records. Overdubs are the main gig for records leading to much less work than in the past eras.

10. Any advice for the readers that would like to become a studio session player?

BM: Always be good listener and study popular styles, pick them apart, decipher, and play with good musicians who you can learn from. Don't be arrogant. Be humble and ultimately come up with your own style that will make you stand out. Then you will set benchmarks and have great success.

JG: Practice, learn all styles, jam with others, play live gigs, and try to become friends with a studio guitarist.

A very special thanks to Jay and Brent for sharing their incredible experience and visions.

Brent Mason Lead: This example is composed in the style of Brent Mason and features a typical fast train beat where Brent can really create his magic. The example is in G and the chord progression is 4-1-4-2-5 (as written in the Nashville Number System). I played this example with a Telecaster, a Fender Deluxe Amp, Keeley Compressor and Analog Delay using a thumb-pick which makes the double stops slightly easier to execute.

♩ = 130

C⁹

12 11 (11) 8 8 (8) 6 6 (6) 8 7 (7) 5 3 (3) 5 3 5

3

G

3 3 3 2 5 5 3 4 5 3 5 4 3 5 7 5 7 5 7 9 7 9 7 8 10

5 C^9

T
A
B

12 11 12 10 8 10 8 8 6 5 3 X X X 5 4 7 5 7

7 A^7 D^7

T
A
B

5 6 7 8 5 7 5 6 7 6 5 7 9 7 9 6 8 7 6 5 5 7 6 5 3 4 3 0 1 2

9 G

T
A
B

3

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Brent Mason Rhythm: Here the rhythm guitar of Ex 01. Brent's rhythm playing is at least as good (if not better) than the lead playing. His timing, tone and creativity in the rhythm seem to be endless and he almost never plays the same thing twice. I recorded this example with my 69 Tele and same amp/efxs of the lead.

$\text{♩} = 130$

T
A
B

X/7 X X 6 3 3 3 3 0 0 0 0 2/3 5 3 5 0

5 C^9

T
A
B

0 0 5 4 3 3 3 3 0 0 5 5 4 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 2 1

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8

A7 D7 G

T 2 3 4 5 3 0 1 2 0 0 1 2

A 2 2 2 2 2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0

B 0 2 3 4 0 0 1 2 0 0 1 2 3

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Jay Graydon Lead: This is example is in the style of Jay Graydon and features a typical 16th note shuffle groove very common in Jay's repertoire. One of many characteristics of Jay's style is the creativity even in front a harmony not really straight forward to many musicians. I've used the Music Man Luke, a Mesa Boogie MkII, a stereo delay from Line 6 rack unit Echo Pro and I played the example with a flat pick.

Swing ♩ = 90

Cmaj7 G(sus2)/B Cmaj7 Am7/D

T 10 12 7 5 3 5 4 5 5 7 5 5 7 4

A 7 5 7 9 7 10 12 7 10 12

B 7 5 7 9 12 14

3 Cmaj7 G(sus2)/B Cmaj7 Bbm7/Eb Gb/Ab Ab/Bb

T 5 (5) 3 3 4 10 (10) 8 8 11 13 (13) 11 11

A 7 5 7 9 7 10 12 7 10 12

B 7 5 7 9 12 14

5 Cmaj7 G(sus2)/B Cmaj7 Am7/D

T 12 13 (13) 10 12 11 (11) 7 10 8 9 8 (8)

A 7 5 7 9 7 10 12 7 10 12

B 7 5 7 9 12 14

7 *Cmaj7* *G(sus2)/B*

8 *Eb/F* *Ab/Bb* *Cmaj7*

T
A
B

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Jay Graydon Rhythm: Jay's rhythm style is very groovy, clear and sophisticated. As Brent, also Jay's rhythm playing is at least as good as his soloing. In this type of tracks Jay often uses a repetitive melodic/rhythmic idea that he varies to make a 'question-answer' type of part. I recorded this guitar part using the Music Man Luke into the Roland Jazz Chorus 120 with the TC Electronic Flanger.

Swing ♩ = 90

Cmaj7 *G(sus2)/B* *Cmaj7* *Am7/D*

3 *Cmaj7* *G(sus2)/B* 1. *Cmaj7* *Eb/F* *Ab/Bb* *Bb/C* 2. *Eb/F* *Ab/Bb* *Cmaj7*

T
A
B

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BRENT MASON

Website: www.brentmason.com

MySpace: www.myspace.com/thebrentmason

Bio: Brent is one of the most recorded guitarists in history and a multiple winner of the Academy of Country Music and the CMA (sixteen awards), being nominated every year since 1991. In addition to playing on the majority of hit country music for over two decades, his diverse work ranging from jazz and blues to R&B, classical and funk can be heard almost daily on movie soundtracks, television scores, and commercials.

Recommended Listening: As solo: 'Hot Wired' and 'Smoking Section'. With others: Alan Jackson 'Who I Am' & 'Everything I Love', Mark Chesnutt 'Saving The Honky Tonk', Lee Ann Womack 'I Hope You Dance', Shania Twain 'Come On Over' (American Version).

JAY GRAYDON

Website: www.jaygraydon.com

MySpace: www.myspace.com/jaygraydon

Bio: Jay is a music industry veteran, internationally renowned, with many hits over the years. He is a Los Angeles top songwriter, recording artist, guitarist, producer, arranger, engineer, and more - twice Grammy awarded with 12 top five Grammy finalist nominations. In 2001 Jay started his own label company 'Sonic Thrust Records' to have total creative and artistic freedom in his songwriting and producing profession.

Recommended Listening: As solo: 'Airplay For The Planet' and 'Past To Present – 70s'. With others: Steely Dan 'Aja', Al Jereau 'This Time' & 'Breaking Away', Christopher Cross 'Another Page', Manhattan Transfer 'Mecca For Moderns'.