

## Mark Guiliana

Drummer / Composer / Band Leader

*“What happens when you add hard-bop drum masters Elvin Jones and Art Blakey to a 1980s Roland 808 drum machine, divide the result by J Dilla and then multiply to the power of Squarepusher? Answer: Mark Guiliana.” — Time Out London*

Mark Guiliana has become recognized as one of the world’s leading drummers, admired and in demand across the spectrum from jazz to rock to electronic music for his rhythmic sophistication, creative impulse and individual sound. He has been in the vanguard of drummers creating a new vernacular on the instrument, blending virtuosity on acoustic drums with artfully deployed electronic beats and processing. Guiliana was chosen as Best Jazz Drummer in the *Modern Drummer* Readers Poll 2017, while *DownBeat* dubbed him a Rising Star in its Critics Poll. *JazzTimes* aptly proclaimed: “Guiliana, a technical master with a rare sense of musicality, has over the past decade become one of the most influential drummers of his generation.” Along with leading his own groups – the acoustic Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet and electronica-minded Beat Music – the drummer has appeared on a string of acclaimed recordings with others. The verve and precision of Guiliana’s drumming was a primer mover of *Blackstar*, David Bowie’s multiple Grammy Award-winning final album. Guiliana teamed with keyboardist Brad Mehldau as the duo Mehliana for the Nonesuch release *Taming the Dragon*, and he has also collaborated with such artists as saxophonist Donny McCaslin, guitar hero John Scofield, Soundgarden/Pearl Jam drummer-songwriter Matt Cameron, neo-soul singer-songwriter Meshell Ndegeocello, guitarist-vocalist Lionel Loueke, jazz bassist Avishai Cohen, reggae/hip-hop artist Matisyahu and jazz singer Gretchen Parlato.

Guiliana’s newest album as a leader – *Jersey*, to be released in September 2017 via Motema Music – features his ever-compelling Jazz Quartet, with bassist Chris Morrissey, saxophonist Jason Rigby and pianist Fabian Almazan. It’s the second album billed to the Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet, following 2015’s *Family First* (and its companion release, *Family First: The Alternate Takes*, both of which featured Shai Maestro on piano). *DownBeat* gave *Family First* a four-star review, while *JazzTimes* offered this apt description: “Guiliana sounds like Tony Williams filtered through Dave Grohl. His band plays advanced postmodern freebop with a garage/grunge sense of license.”

Describing the Jazz Quartet’s concept, Guiliana says: “Many of my releases as a leader have been driven by electronic-inspired beats and textures, but with *Family First* and now *Jersey*, it felt like the right time to present my music in an entirely acoustic environment. So the Jazz Quartet is my humble attempt to make a personal statement using the traditional palette of saxophone, piano, bass and drums. For the band, this lineup presents the challenge: How creative can we be inside this box – how much freedom and experimentation can we find? And I have to say that it’s always so exciting to hear the guys play this music in ways I never could have imagined.”

The urgent rhythms of Guiliana at a stripped-down kit launch *Jersey* via the stylish opener “inter-are,” one of six compositions by the drummer on the album along with the lyrical “Jersey” title track, the atmospheric “September,” ballad “Lavender Again,” swinger “Big Rig Jones” and solo drum piece “Rate,” an acronymic, virtuosic tribute to drum heroes Roy (Haynes), Art (Blakey), Tony (Williams) and Elvin (Jones). Two more tracks, “Our Lady” and “Mayor of Rotterdam,” are characteristically tune-rich contributions penned by Morrissey. “BP,” one of the album’s hook-laced highlights, is a piece by Rich Hinman, a guitarist friend of Guiliana. The lone cover is a moving interpretation of David Bowie’s nostalgia-evoking “Where Are We Now?” (from Bowie’s second-to-

last album, *The Next Day*). “It’s a ‘thank you’ to David, for the incredible experience of working with him,” the drummer explains. “This is my way of paying tribute to him, but in an entirely different sonic context from *Blackstar*.”

Beautifully produced by Guiliana, *Jersey* brims with an energized cohesiveness. “We recorded the album right after a two-week tour of Europe – I really wanted to capture the momentum of the band,” the drummer says. “I’m beyond grateful that Chris, Jason and Fabian are onboard, since they’re all such excellent leaders in their own right. As a drummer, I’m a big fan of bass players, and I’m lucky to have played with some great ones. Chris is one of my favorites. He always brings an exciting energy to the music, and because he’s also a singer-songwriter, that storytelling sensibility comes out in the way he plays. With Jason, I love his sound and the way he delivers melodies. He’s an effortless improviser with a deep connection to the music at every moment. Fabian is the quartet’s wild card. He has a unique harmonic and rhythmic sophistication to his improvising that makes for really fun interaction. With these guys, we’re always passing inspiration back and forth to each other. We take a lot of chances in the music, developing new ways to play together every night – and that takes trust, a musical and personal empathy.”

The title of *Jersey* references Guiliana’s center of gravity. Born in 1980 in Florham Park, New Jersey, and raised there, Guiliana graduated from William Paterson University in Wayne, lived for years in Jersey City and Hoboken and now resides in Madison with his wife, singer Gretchen Parlato, and their toddler son. If *Jersey* points to his geographical roots, the title of the *Family First* album served as another motto of sorts. “The importance of family was instilled in me naturally just the way I was raised,” Guiliana explains. “My parents have been married for more than 50 years, and I’m so happy now to building my own family with Gretchen. Because of our careers, we travel a lot – so home life might not be so traditional. Our little son’s passport is already filling up, and it can get pretty crazy at times. But it helps that Gretchen and I understand each other and the artist’s life, supporting one another’s aspirations even as we cherish the family unit. Those sorts of values extend to my bands – the guys are like extended family for me.”

Reviewing a Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet performance at the venerable club Ronnie Scott’s in London, *Jazzwise* marveled: “Rhythmic interplay and complex layers are key features of Guiliana’s style, so these characteristics permeated the entire set. The music is full of surprises, in form and content; in spite of this, the transitions were fluid, even when moving between radically different sections. Sometimes you’d wonder how the music arrived at its current point, so suddenly yet with such ease. Add to this the fact that Guiliana and his bandmates have a gift for intentionally blurring form, and you have an utterly absorbing musical experience, with beautiful twists and turns.”

Guiliana’s electro-oriented albums – including *My Life Starts Now* (2014), *Beat Music: The Los Angeles Improvisations* (2014), *A Form of Truth* (2013) and the *Beat Music* EP (2012), all released through the drummer’s Beat Music Productions – have been created with another family of musicians. They have included bassist Tim Lefebvre and keyboardist Jason Lindner (who both played with Guiliana on *Blackstar*), keyboardists Jeff Babko and Yuki Hirano, guitarists Michael Severson and Nir Felder, Troy Zeigler on electronics and Meshell Ndegeocello on bass guitar, among others. Reviewing the simultaneously released *My Life Starts Now* and *Beat Music: The Los Angeles Improvisations* (the former compositionally focused, the latter a day of improv), *All About Jazz* called Guiliana “a beat poet of another sort... one of the few drummers who can creatively straddle and blur the electro-acoustic dividing line.” Prior to these albums came Guiliana’s band Heernt (featuring longtime collaborator Cole Whittle on electric bass), which released *Locked in a Basement* in 2006. *All Music Guide* praised Heernt as “the more melodic side of avant-garde jazz.”

On the Beat Music albums, hard-edged grooves and synthetic-organic fusions blend with filmic atmospherics and spoken word – all driven by Guiliana’s sonic ingenuity and percussive virtuosity. “Electronic music is a huge inspiration for me,” he explains. “The first time I heard Squarepusher’s *Feed Me Weird Things*, it hit me like the first time I heard Tony Williams with Miles. Then hearing Aphex Twin was like hearing Elvin Jones with Coltrane. Experiencing that electronic music – its precision, discipline, timbral imagination – was just as profound for me as hearing those jazz drumming icons. So, marrying the discipline of electronic music with the improvisational sense of jazz is a lot of what the Beat Music albums are about.” Another key adventure in electronic music came thanks to Guiliana’s duo with Brad Mehldau, the pair releasing *Taming the Dragon* through Nonesuch in 2014. “Brad was one of my favorite musicians before we ever met – I listened to his piano trio so much, live and on record,” Guiliana says. “He dug the Beat Music stuff I was doing, so we got together to improvise in a more electronic environment. It’s great to hear the sonic experimentalist in Brad, and getting to improvise with him in this context is thrilling. You can really hear his mastery of counterpoint, and his bass lines are just incredible.”

*The Guardian* extolled the virtues of *Taming the Dragon* at length: “Brad Mehldau, master of slow-burning, classically inflected acoustic piano improv, gets down and dirty with Mehliana, the electronics duo he shares with jazz, hip-hop and drum’n’bass percussionist Mark Guiliana. Mehldau mostly plays old-school synths and Fender Rhodes keys, spinning melodic fragments into distant spaces to be replaced by grouchy low-end hooks and snare patterns, striking chirping treble melodies over chanting children’s voices, planting steady, pop-song chord figures under acoustic themes laced with catlike whines. Tense, jostling pieces such as ‘Hungry Ghost’ and ‘Just Call Me Nige’ thinly disguise all the pianist’s familiar improv resourcefulness inside the zooming sound effects, while the remarkable Guiliana balances drum-machine remorselessness with dazzling improv receptivity.”

Recording with McCaslin, Lindner and Lefebvre as David Bowie’s core band for the universally celebrated album *Blackstar* was a pivotal moment in Guiliana’s musical life – and *Modern Drummer* dubbed his playing the Best Recorded Performance in 2016. “It was so inspiring – and moving – to witness David work,” the drummer recalls. “We were all in the same room, and he sang every take with us. He was so incredibly present and focused. That said, the mood was always light. He was super funny, keeping everyone in check with his British humor. What was so instructive for me as an artist was the way he combined this constant openness to experimentation with a total dedication to his vision. He let the four of us really play, pushing us to take chances and be ourselves. Most of these songs had demos, and David had programmed the drum parts. It was an exciting challenge to try to emulate those beats on the acoustic kit. It was a total learning experience from start to finish. I can never thank David enough for letting me into his artistic life, and in doing so, changing mine.”

Beyond *Blackstar*, Guiliana has featured in full on the Donny McCaslin Quartet’s electro-acoustic albums *Casting for Gravity* (2012), *Fast Future* (2015) and *Beyond Now* (2016), along with touring the world with the band. Before joining the group, Guiliana had pre-existing relationships with both Lindner and Lefebvre going back to 2003, “so there was a lot of natural interplay among us right from the start,” the drummer explains. “Donny plays with an energy that is both demanding and inspiring. There is a lot of room inside the music to explore, both rhythmically and sonically. We’ve developed some almost telepathic communication by playing so much over the years.”

Of late, Guiliana was able to record with another hero of his: Matt Cameron, an original member of Soundgarden and longtime drummer for Pearl Jam. Drawn to Guiliana’s playing from *Blackstar*, Cameron recruited him to drum on an upcoming album featuring the grunge veteran out

front as a singer-songwriter/guitarist. “Man, I learned so much playing along to Soundgarden records as a teenager,” Guiliana says. “When I first started playing as a in the mid-’90s, it was Matt in Soundgarden, Dave Grohl in Nirvana and Chad Smith of the Red Hot Chili Peppers – those were my heroes, not only hearing them on records but seeing them play on MTV.

“I discovered jazz in high school, through my first drum teacher, Joe Bergamini,” Guiliana continues. “When I heard Tony Williams with the Miles Davis Quintet, it created a feeling in my body that was like no other – it blew my mind, really. It was the beautiful sophistication of his playing – the improvisation, the energy and the freedom of it, but also a mindful simplicity. It was the same profound inspiration with the other master jazz drummers I discovered: Elvin Jones, Max Roach, Art Blakey, Roy Haynes, Jack DeJohnette. Elvin and Tony have always been the kings for me – this yin and yang that I constantly return to for inspiration. *Modern Drummer* magazine, for their 40<sup>th</sup>-anniversary issue, asked me who I thought was the future of drumming. I said, ‘Tony Williams. He may be gone, but we’re all still trying to catch up to him!’ ”

Discussing key influences among contemporary drummers, Guiliana lists Steve Gadd, Jeff Ballard, Joey Baron, Brian Blade, Zach Danziger, Dan Weiss, Dave King, Jojo Mayer, Bill Stewart. “But of anyone around today, my biggest inspiration has been Jim Black,” Guiliana says. “He was the first guy I witnessed who really mashed together a wide variety of diverse influences. That gave me the confidence to develop a personal sound, one that incorporated different aspects from everything that has inspired me so much over the years.” Guiliana’s unique soundprint led *Modern Drummer* to declare him “at the forefront of an exciting new style of drummer,” while *The New York Times* pointed out how he has become “a drummer around whom a cult of admiration has formed.”

With teaching key to Guiliana’s identity as a musician, he has given clinics and masterclasses across the U.S. and Europe, as well as in Japan and China. In 2016, he released the book/video package *Exploring Your Creativity on the Drumset* (Hudson Music), which delineates a method he calls DROP: Dynamics, Rate, Orchestration and Phrasing. Guiliana examines each of these building blocks individually, presenting rhythmic concepts that will help a drummer expand his or her ability to call on different rhythmic rates and subdivisions on command, move them around the kit freely and, ultimately, phrase them in exciting and sometimes complex ways that sound like polyrhythms and metric modulations but are actually constructed upon a solid foundation of drumming basics. In the introduction, he writes: “This book is a result of my love affair with music – more than two decades of inspiration, experimentation and curiosity. I am constantly in search of new ideas and ways to improve my musicianship, and the exercises contained here are the ones that have provided me with the best results. My intention is not to show you exactly what to play or how to play – only you can decide that for yourself. I hope the concepts in this book can help you unlock your creativity on the drums, and inspire you to develop your own musical identity.”

Reflecting further on his aesthetic philosophy, Guiliana concludes: “As a drummer, my goals are the same each time I sit down at the kit, whether as leader or sideman. That is, putting faith in the fundamentals and concentrating on doing what’s best for the music. The genres I’m performing in may be wildly different – jazz or rock, electronic or acoustic, instrumental or vocal – but the place from where I’m playing is consistent. I want to support the music at all times, and in doing so, lift up the other musicians, inspire them. Once you’ve done your homework, it’s all about being connected to the moment and your instrument, so that you can hear where the music needs to go and be able to help drive it there, technically and artistically. All the answers lie in the music, really.”

— Bradley Bambarger

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