

MAX WEINBERG TALKS FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT

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INTERVIEW COMPILED & EDITED BY JONATHAN WEST

(Above) Max Weinberg drums with The Max Weinberg Big Band in a special concert in Frank Lloyd Wright's Hillside Studio at Taliesin, celebrating Taliesin's 100th Anniversary.

(Right) In December, Max Weinberg visited Taliesin West for a presentation about his career as a musician and his lifelong fascination with Frank Lloyd Wright.

Max Weinberg is a celebrated musician who has been the drummer for Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band since the 1970s, was a television icon as Conan O'Brien's hip-and-witty bandleader for seventeen years, and is the leader of his own driving musical force, the Max Weinberg Big Band. According to Weinberg, however, all these parts of his life have merely been a means to an end to explore more deeply his true passion: the work and legacy of Frank Lloyd Wright.

In December, Weinberg visited Taliesin West for a presentation about his career as a musician and his lifelong fascination with Frank Lloyd Wright. He spent some time sharing his experiences following many paths to more fully understand the body of work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

How did you first discover the work of Frank Lloyd Wright?

My appreciation, admiration, and real true love for Frank Lloyd Wright, his work, and the people who worked with him began when I was a young kid. I have cousins in the New York real estate, building, and construction trade and when I was about seven years old my cousin, who is much older than me, told my mother that there was an interesting construction site very close to our home and that he would like to take me to it. My mother did take me to it, and we went to this really cool building that was being built and the construction people working on the building gave me a little hard hat and said, "Go to town." I was able to run up and down these poured-in-place concrete ramps, and it turned out to be the Guggenheim Museum under construction. All I thought at the time was that it was a really cool building and it felt like being inside of a seashell. My cousin later got me a children's book on Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect of this building. My cousin thought it was important, so I thought it was important. There were pictures of me inside the building with wheelbarrows and rocks, which actually led me to become a drummer.

How did that early trip lead to you being a drummer?

Music and architecture are very similar. Drumming, in particular the type that I do, is very architectural. It's composed; it's not random. You leave room for improvisation, but you want to have a theme, rhythm, melody, texture...all those things. In any case, that initial trip started a lifelong study and appreciation of Frank Lloyd Wright, who in my view is the "Buddy Rich of Architecture."

Haven't you also called Frank Lloyd Wright the "Bruce Springsteen of Architecture?"

True. I use those individuals as superlative examples of someone at the top of their field, the leader of the class. That was Wright. I always like to go into bookstores and see the architectural section, and then you see the Frank Lloyd Wright section. There's something to that. No matter what architectural firm or individual I admire, I always come back to Frank Lloyd Wright, not only because of his ideals and his work but the way he sold it. As a musician, you write a song and perform on a song; you really need an audience to enjoy it. It's no fun playing alone in your room. I think it's the same with architecture. You can have it on paper, but the idea is to get the thing built. I always appreciated the volume of Wright's output, most of it residences. I think it's a shame that buildings like the Larkin and the Imperial Hotel were taken down. These buildings, like people, make an imprint on your soul and they deserve to be preserved.

You have an impressive knowledge of Frank Lloyd Wright and architecture. Do you have any formal architectural training?

Well, I had a lot of time to kill on those buses and vans back in the 70s, and as I got older I would just read everything I could on both Wright's principles and his actual building. My entrée to a lot of the off-the-beaten-path Frank Lloyd Wright buildings came when I was traveling around with the E Street Band somewhere around the country and with whatever free time I had, I would seek Wright-designed residences out and simply walk up and knock on the front door and ask to see the house. I'd explain that I was in town to do a concert and invariably people would invite me in to see their home because they were proud of them. I would invite them to come and see the

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(Above) In addition to drumming for Bruce Springsteen, Weinberg founded the Max Weinberg Big Band in 2009.

(Right) The Max Weinberg Big Band performed in Hillside Studio at Taliesin in celebration of Taliesin's 100th Anniversary.

concert. That started twenty to thirty years ago. I got to see a lot of places you normally wouldn't because these were private homes. Now there are atlases to find out where those private homes are, but back then I needed to simply do my own research.

When I was young I took an aptitude test and found out I was very good at putting forms into space abstractly, which is really the essence of drumming. It's also a good trait to have as an architect. I've appreciated the construction elements and the creative elements to do something different. For me it was very important to feel the fabric of a Frank Lloyd Wright building whether it was Johnson Wax, or the Darwin Martin Home or some of the smaller Usonian which were modest. I very much appreciated his social instincts and his belief that even if you didn't have a lot of money you should still be able to have a great piece of architecture to live in. Very early on I learned the difference between architecture and building.

You played a special concert at Taliesin recently. Can you tell me about that?

I had the wonderful opportunity to perform at Taliesin with my big band for the 100th anniversary of Taliesin. It was an incomparable experience. I got to stay in the house, which for me was fantastic. Playing in the drafting room was a unique experience and of all the places I've played in the world, it was the best sounding room. There was a certain resonance in the acoustics which I'm sure wasn't conscious for Mr. Wright in terms of musicians playing in there. They moved out all the

tables, and it basically became a dance hall. I kept referring to the place as "Frank's Joint." We turned it into a bit of a nightclub. Where I was seated at my drums I could look out the windows, see the trees; it was a magical experience. It was effortless to play. My drums became one with that room and the room became a resonant chamber. I would love to have had a conversation with Frank Lloyd Wright as a musician about the sound in that room. It was the perfect venue for sound.

If you were able to have a conversation with Frank Lloyd Wright, what might you ask him? What might you say to him?

Of course I've read so much about him and his work and philosophies. There's so many great collections, Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer has done such great work cataloguing his life's work. I probably would be dumbstruck. It's kind of like this Saturday Night Live skit when Chris Farley meets Paul McCartney and all he's able to say is, "Remember when you were in The Beatles...that was awesome!" If I could get past that, I would pretty much stick to the concept of everything being composed in the house. Things like the plan and the scoring of the floor leading to his unit system. All of that for me is very, very much like drumming. I specialize in three-minute records, and you have to be concise. It's sonata form, A-A-B-A. You have to build it. It's recognizing where you're going to end up by what you have to do to get there. It's not haphazard. You don't get there by just throwing something up against the wall. I would also be interested in hearing about the various stages Frank Lloyd



Wright went through in his career. I know I don't play the same way as a musician now that I'm in my 60s as I did when I was in my 20s. I have friends who own the Bachmann Wilson residence, a very late Frank Lloyd Wright house in New Jersey. When you go into it, it's very different from the houses he built in the 40s and early 50s. It's very international style, very unornamented, very straight lines. He kept current. We'd probably have a discussion about those kind of things. I'd like to understand how a guy who started his career in the 19th century was able to rise to the top of his field by constantly innovating and staying true to his essential core.

Finally, what's your favorite Wright site?

That's sort of like asking me what's my favorite Bruce Springsteen song to play. I always make a pilgrimage to Fallingwater and its companion piece—in my view Kentuck Knob. The two places are very different, composed of the same stone. I could live full-time at Kentuck Knob, and I'd like to visit Fallingwater as a weekend house, which is how it was conceived. Every house and building, whether it's the Zimmerman House in Manchester, New Hampshire, or my friend Virginia Loveness's house in Stillwater, Minnesota, there's something unique about each one. Virginia's story is an incredible one. She and her husband really embraced the idea of "building it yourself." There's a wonderful picture of Virginia and her two daughters standing in front of this massive pile of rock and this huge sand dune in their front yard before they built the house. They then lived in a trailer for three years on the property and built the house by hand. It's one of the most magnificent upscale Usonian in existence and it's exactly as it was in the 50s. That's one of my favorites because they constructed it by sweat and determination; they worked all night long by electric light to build this masterpiece. It's hard to pick a favorite though, because every time I go into one I have a new feeling about the work.

Weinberg lists the Virginia Loveness Cottage in Stillwater, Minnesota among his favorite Wright Designs.



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Jonathan West is the Director of Communications for the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation.