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After Two Decades, Tortoise's Jeff Parker Wants to Be Surprised



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By [Jessica Mlinaric](#), February 25, 2019

Jeff Parker shuffles into the Charleston. Armed with a winter coat, boots, and a beanie, he's lugging his guitar case. Although he lives 2,000 miles away in Los Angeles, Parker recognizes the bartender and offers to add him to the guest list for his Sunday night show at the Empty Bottle. He's not new here.

Parker is back in Chicago for an appearance at Pitchfork's Midwinter festival, where he'll join his bandmates in Tortoise playing their landmark 1998 post-rock record *TNT* in full. Adapting a 21-year-old album, which was recorded in individual pieces, to a live setting is no small task. Yet watching the band weave an intricate choreography of trading instruments and dueling drums throughout the set, you'd never know this was their first time playing some of these songs live.

Behind Parker's warm, unassuming manner is a prolific creative force that's helped earn him the titles of jazz veteran, beat producer, bandleader, and sideman. In 2016 alone, he released *The Catastrophist* LP with Tortoise; two albums of his own, *The New Breed* and *Slight Freedom*; and contributed to several other releases.

"This is the kind of interview I like to do," Parker tells me while sipping a Krombacher. Chet Baker is playing and we have the corner bar to ourselves as we discuss the differences between Chicago and L.A., Tortoise's creative process, and the need to surprise yourself.

Welcome back to Chicago! Is there anything from the Midwest you miss drinking now that you're based on the West Coast?

Thank you. Not any beverage in particular, but I miss the bars in Chicago. There's no place like this in L.A. I actually drink more beer out there just because it's hotter. Most of my friends know I prefer to drink whiskey, but out there I drink more beer. I like pilsners and lighter beers.

I know you can get PBR anywhere, but does L.A. have a cheap regional beer like Old Style?

Not that I can think of. A lot of people out there tend to drink Mexican beers like Modelo or Pacifico. I don't see Tecate too much.



Matt Lief Anderson

I imagine the music scene in L.A. must be quite a bit different than in Chicago. How has the move impacted you creatively?

I always say Chicago has the healthiest creative music scene in the world. Out in L.A., there's no shortage of amazing musicians but everything there is commercially based. Even the creative musicians out there might make their living doing something more commercial. They might be in well-known touring bands and just make weird music for fun. In Chicago, it's more ingrained in the local music fabric.

Out there, I make more commercial work sometimes to try and make money. I'd say the music I make there has less of an avant-garde aesthetic, just because of where I make it and the musicians I interact with every day. It's good. It takes me out of my comfort zone that I settled into when I lived in Chicago for so long.

I dig it. It's a good energy out there in L.A. right now. It kind of reminds me of when I first moved here. L.A. is an entertainment industry town so there's that facade of commercial stuff, but there's a lot of creative people moving there. It feels like there's a lot of potential for stuff to really happen there that's off the grid.

So, it's a magnet for all these creative people who have to pay the bills, but after that they can get together and get weird.

Right. I had a love/hate thing with Chicago when I lived here. I'm not from here. I moved here after college. I appreciate it a lot more now that I left. It's the best city for architecture and design and stuff here is still pretty cheap. It's really cosmopolitan and diverse. You can get any kind of music for sure. The restaurants here are crazy. It's a great city.

How does it feel to be performing *TNT* after all these years?

It's been awesome. We've played some of the songs from it since it was out, but there were a lot of them we couldn't play. We weren't enough people to even try and pull them off. But for this show, Jim Elkington is playing with us and we also added cornet, trombone, viola, bassoon, and cello. So we're trying to play with the actual instruments on the record, like we have a marimba instead of doing it digitally with the MIDI-controlled one we tour with. It's fun to play a lot of those songs.

What songs are the most challenging to relearn or adapt for the live setting?

"TNT" we could never play convincingly. There were six of us when we made *TNT* and then Dave Pajo left, so it was hard to play the stuff with only five of us. We tried to play "TNT," but on the record there are two drummers playing and we could never fill it out. Technically it's really simple which makes it hard to play because it's all about dynamics, making it go somewhere and staggering the entrances.

The other one we never really played was "Everglade." It's a classic Tortoise sound with two bass guitars and mallets. I think it was because Dave wrote it and we stopped playing a lot of the stuff that he introduced to the band after he left. It feels good to play that one because I've always loved it.

We try not to be totally literal about it. We don't want to feel like we're paying tribute to our own band especially since we're still active.



Matt Lief Anderson

Tortoise is such an exciting band to see live. Watching you interact and seeing all these intricate elements of your music come together live. How does that compare to writing and recording in the studio?

It's a lot different. The way Tortoise works is we tend to make the music in the studio and then we have to learn how to play it live afterward. We've kind of done some stuff where we rehearse out of the studio and then play it like a rock band, like most bands. We compose in the studio which is why stuff takes a long time. They're totally different. They couldn't be farther apart, composing and performing.

Has the process in Tortoise changed at all from when you joined to when you guys were working on *The Catastrophist* or is that how you've always worked?

Honestly, we've had different processes for all our albums. Essentially, it's kind of make the music in the studio and then figure it out. When we did *Standards* we made the album, then learned the music, then went on tour, and came back and re-recorded the album. We noticed when we did *TNT* that we composed the whole thing in the studio, but when we toured on it for like a year and a half the songs changed so much that we wished we could have recorded a new version. So, when we did *Standards*, we re-created that process.

Generally, our process hasn't really changed but there's a lot of nuance inside of that. Things inside of that process have changed over the years. Everyone records at their house now and we can review things remotely. We'll email tracks and then people will add things to it.

Kamasi Washington is also playing Midwinter this weekend. I saw you open for him with Makaya McCraven.

He blew up so fast. I was playing some with him when I first moved out to L.A. He was the same dude. He hasn't changed anything, he had the same style. Super nice guy and plays great. I had been playing with him a bunch in bands led by Miguel Atwood Ferguson then the Kendrick Lamar record came out. It was literally like in two weeks. We played a gig and then two weeks later he was in every magazine everywhere. He's still a humble guy.

One of my favorite live performances of yours was *The New Breed* record release at the Hideout. Seeing your daughter Ruby perform with you on "Cliché" was so moving. What was that experience like?

It was cool. We've been recording stuff together since she was this big. She likes it. We're recording some stuff for my new record I've been working on.

And then your dad was on the cover of that album. It's like three generations on one record.

And my son did the artwork for the flexi disc [*Blackman*].

He's an artist also! You're such a prolific artist. It's always exciting to see what you're coming out with next or who you're working with. How do you stay inspired?

I think being surprised. I try and create situations for myself where I'll be surprised at what happens.

I actually feel like I find it hard to be inspired sometimes. I make my living as a musician and I sometimes wish I didn't have to. A lot of times I'll have to practice someone's music for a week and then I don't have time to work on my own stuff. I'm fortunate to be busy.

I know people who seem like they always have ideas, but I'm not one of those. It takes me a long time. Lately I've been doing a lot with Meshell Ndegeocello, which has been super nice. I'm in a new band that Dave Douglas put together. He's a great jazz trumpet player and composer.

If you had to pair *TNT* with a beer what would you tell someone to drink with it?

Old Style.

Why is that?

It's pretty Chicago. We're a Chicago band. I'd tell them to get a six pack.

ZX Ventures, a division within AB InBev, is an investor in October