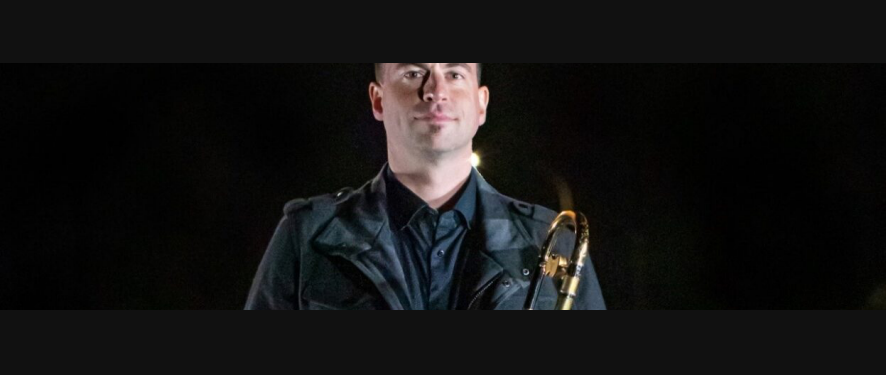
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH ‘NICK LA RIVIERE AND THE BEST LAID PLANS’

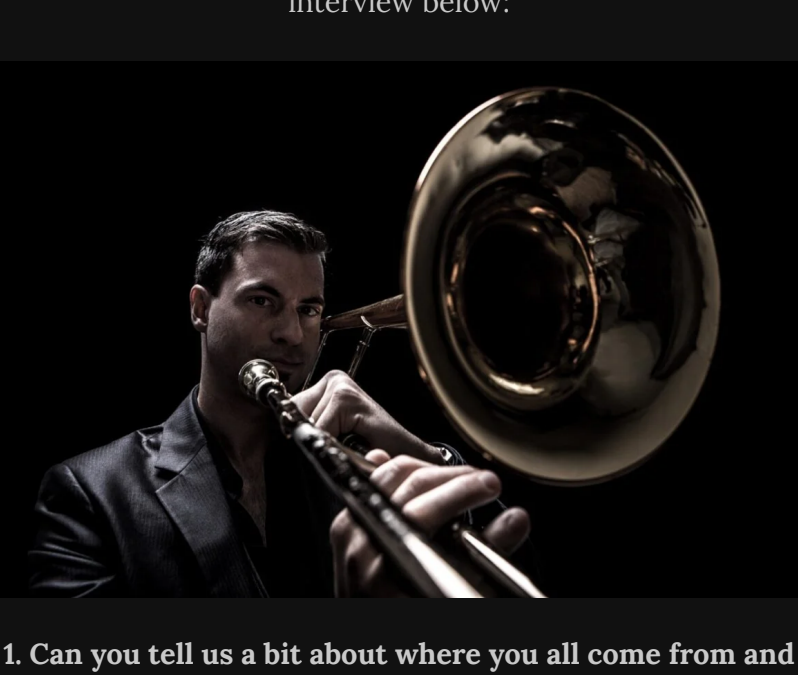
September 13, 2022



Nick La Riviere, a talented trombonist who has performed all over the world with groups like the JUNO Award-winning Paperboys, Michael Kaeshammer, and 54-40, demonstrates both his vocal and trombone abilities on the soulful piano-driven pop song “Where We Go.”

According to Nick La Riviere, he wrote this song around the time Spirit of the West frontman John Mann was fighting Alzheimer’s. The song is a personal take, stating that he wants to achieve as much as he can with the time he has on this earth, and hopefully do something worth remembering, like he did, even if he can’t remember myself. While he didn’t know him personally, he performed frequently with another Spirit member, Geoffrey Kelly, and heard about his struggles.

Nick La Riviere and The Best Laid Plans’ new album Get Ready! is full of pop and funk grooves with New Orleans style horns and an energy injection of wild solos, drawing inspiration from musicians like Trombone Shorty, Galactic, The Preservation Hall Band, and The Soul Rebels, to name a few. The band is made up of Nick La Riviere on trombone and vocals, Miguel Valdes on trumpet, Barrie Sorensen on sax, Kelly Fawcett. Check out their single ‘Where We Go’ from the upcoming album ‘Get Ready!’ and the exclusive interview below:



1. Can you tell us a bit about where you all come from and how it all got started?

NICK LA RIVIERE: The band is based in Victoria, BC and it’s where the band members all call our home base. We have band members who have lived in other major cities, such as Toronto and Michigan, and we all continue to do a lot of travelling. I put this band together as a creative outlet for my own compositions. I’ve been a sideman for many years in other people’s projects – I play with The Paperboys, Locarno, The BC World Music Collective, various cover bands, and have performed as a guest with 54-40, Michael Kaeshammer, and many others. I wanted to have the opportunity to be the front man, performing my originals and running the show my own way. It’s been a great opportunity to build on our strengths, and with every show the band performs we’ve been finding our groove with each other even better. In this project all the band members get the opportunity to show off their musical strengths and creativity.

2. Did you guys have any formal training or are you self-taught?

NICK LA RIVIERE: We’ve all been to college/university level music school for jazz. Even though what we’re playing, this group wouldn’t really qualify as jazz. Learning how to navigate that style of music has given us all the skills needed to play in many genres. It also helps that everyone in the band can read musical notation, so when I write something new I can give them a detailed chart (and a demo recording), and we can nail it right away. That also allows us to have detailed musical arrangements right from the first play through of a song – something that would take many hours of rehearsal to sort out in a band that can’t read. Of course, we don’t have our heads in the charts on stage – we want to be tuned in and interactive with the audience.

3. Who were your first and strongest musical influences and why the name ‘NICK LA RIVIERE AND THE BEST LAID PLANS’?

NICK LA RIVIERE: I’ve been influenced by a lot of different musicians over the years. For my main instrument, trombone, Hugh Fraser was a huge influence. He was a great trombonist from Victoria who did many performances here, as well as educational workshops. Every time he played it was with fire and passion. There was nothing boring about his playing; he was showing how trombone could be exciting and powerful. Then of course I learned a lot about improvisation by studying the classic players like JJ Johnson, Frank Rosolino, Curtis Fuller, etc – those are famous trombone players from the jazz age. Now we’ve got Trombone Shorty from New Orleans ripping it up just like Hugh did, but with more pop-style music – the New Orleans funk/party/pop music. His style of improvising is a huge influence, as well as his pop/funk compositions. Then there’s other New Orleans bands like Galactic… and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band – their 2017 album *So It Is* is nothing like the old dixie style music you might think of when you hear their name. Instead it’s like a combination of Mardi Gras funk music with a latin soul. Our new album has tunes influenced by both those bands. Also on our new album is some folkier melodic stuff, which is at least in part influenced by some of the bands I play with such as The Paperboys.

I chose the name Nick La Riviere and the Best Laid Plans (or just Best Laid Plans for short) because I’d been calling the previous version of this project “The Nick La Riviere Band”. First of all, no one can hear me when I’m telling them “Nick La Riviere” in a loud venue. I get a lot of “what? Uhh ok, I’ll look it up” (no you won’t, you didn’t catch the name – plus people always think it’s Nick Riviera like the guy on The Simpsons). It was definitely time that this band had a proper name, and Best Laid Plans seemed very fitting for the time. With how many gigs got derailed somehow during the pandemic, and how much work went into trying to put them together, it seemed appropriate. The saying is based on a Robert Burns poem where the actual word is “schemes” not plans, but everyone thinks of it as plans, and it flows better that way in a band name anyway. “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry”.

4. What do you feel are the key elements in your music that should resonate with listeners, and how would you personally describe your sound?

NICK LA RIVIERE: First of all, our music is very arranged. By that I mean that we’re not just jamming – most of the time anyway – we do a couple of jams to keep the feeling of freedom and improvisation in our show. For most of our music, I’ve composed every element – the drum beat, bass lines, piano/guitar parts, horn lines – everything. When I give a new song to the band, I give them a demo with me playing all the instruments, and a chart that lays it all out. So that allows us to have interesting, tight and rich arrangements right from the start. Having a horn section in the band also gives us an extra layer of fun that helps us stick out from the guitar trios out there. Horns add an exciting layer of energy and melody over top of the foundation of the music. Everyone in the band is also a killer soloist, and they all get the opportunity to show off their chops in our live shows. That helps us make it a very high energy performance, and with the freedom/creativity of the solos there’s that element of communication between the band members live – we’re not just playing through a song exactly ‘as it always is’ – we’re adding something new in every performance.

5. For most artists, originality is first preceded by a phase of learning and, often, emulating others. What was this like for you? How would you describe your own development as an artist and music maker, and the transition towards your own style?’

NICK LA RIVIERE:

With my background in jazz my first compositions were all in that style. My 2008 album *Too Much To Do* was an instrumental-only album featuring trombone, two violins, cello, piano, bass, and drums. I wrote all the arrangements, and it was a mix of my originals and some jazz standards. I still think that album turned out quite well. After that, I’d say there was a bit of a learning curve as I transitioned into writing in more of a funk/pop style, and singing on my recordings. I’d been playing as a sideman in bands people could dance to for quite a while, and I really wanted my own project to create music in that style. I’ll be the first to admit that it wasn’t an easy transition at first, however with the release of the new album, *Get Ready*, I think the band has really found its place.

6. What’s your view on the role and function of music as political, cultural, spiritual, and/or social vehicles – and do you try and affront any of these themes in your work, or are you purely interested in music as an expression of technical artistry, personal narrative and entertainment?

NICK LA RIVIERE:

I think music can be both pure entertainment, and make political/cultural points. It’s good for any artist to be able to do both. In general I try to keep things light and fun, because at our shows we just want people to have a great time. However we did release one track called “No More” that was a commentary on gun control. I’d written the song years ago and hadn’t released it until the week of the Uvalde shooting. It’s a real shame that the themes of the song are still as relevant today as they were when I wrote it.

7. Do you feel that your music is giving you back just as much fulfillment as the amount of work you are putting into it, or are you expecting something more, or different in the future?

NICK LA RIVIERE:

There’s no doubt about it, it is a LOT of work putting a recording, or a show together – or booking a tour. People always see the fun part – when we’re on stage having a great time. What they don’t see are the hours of emailing, working on compositions, organizing people and logistics, practicing, driving long hours to gigs… But it’s absolutely worth it when we’re on stage doing what we love, and when we feel the energy of the audience coming back at us.

8. Could you describe your creative processes? How do you usually start, and go about shaping ideas into a completed song? Do you usually start with a tune, a beat, or a narrative in your head? And do you collaborate with others in this process?

NICK LA RIVIERE:

I’m a very independent writer, mainly because I don’t feel like I’m good enough to waste someone else’s time trying to collaborate. When I go to write something, I’ll usually hang out in my studio for hours working on melodic ideas on the piano until I come up with something that seems about right. Sometimes I’ll also start with a particular beat or theme in mind, but most of the time my ideas start with chords and melody. I guess that’s my jazz background coming out. As the song develops, the more detailed aspects of the arrangement start to emerge, and usually I’ll make a very basic recording with GarageBand on my iPad so I can flesh it out further. Then I’ll write a chart with a lot more detail, and record a much better sounding demo with proper studio mics using Logic (pro recording software for Mac computers).

9. What has been the most difficult thing you’ve had to endure in your life or music career so far?

NICK LA RIVIERE: I’m sure you get this answer from everyone, but it was when my guitar player broke a string right when we really needed that note. Just kidding, it was the pandemic. I had just played a gig in Mexico with the Paperboys, and was about to start a vacation part of the trip when the pandemic was declared. It was a weird day, getting calls and texts as all of my gigs were cancelled – then walking around Puerto Vallarta and seeing people vacationing and going about their business as usual, while knowing that I’ve got no job when I get home, and of course wondering how safe it is to even be around anyone. I made it through the pandemic mainly by pivoting to the technical side of music. I started making ‘quarantine covers’ with the community bands I teach that could no longer meet in person (YouTube playlist of them all: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLP4RWN8QjLbt7wZxHfD54Im9bSBtnxWc4). Working on those helped me get better at video and audio editing, and I started working on similar videos for various choirs and bands. I also did a lot of one-on-one teaching online. There was a lot of hours spent in front of the computer.. but I made it… I hope! If things go downhill again and another variant – or monkeypox – or some other new thing – makes us shut down and isolate again, I’m sure it will be a lot harder for musicians to get by. I think people are a bit tired of livestreams and online lessons. No offence to people still making livestreams or doing online teaching – there’s artists doing great stuff out there right now! But it may be tricky to maintain my livelihood if we go back to that being all that we can do. Hopefully that doesn’t happen. By the way, at the one year anniversary of the pandemic being declared, I put out a song called Together Again. The song appears on the new album – a great sounding studio version with the band members playing on it. For the 1-year pandemic-a-versary the version I released has me playing all the instruments – quarantine style. Check it out here: https://youtu.be/UOCVrOvXq_A

10. On the contrary, what would you consider a successful, proud or significant point in your life or music career so far?

NICK LA RIVIERE: I think some of the best points of my career have been being on stage with some awesome bands. Playing the sold out Commodore Ballroom with iconic Canadian rock band 54-40 (using horn charts I composed by the way) was a great experience. And of course The Paperboys have had some great shows and tours across Canada, USA, Mexico, and Europe. Best Laid Plans is in its infancy, with Get Ready being the first album under the BLP name, and we’ve only just begun touring in this format, but I’m very excited to see where the project will take us. I’m looking for more opportunities to bring the band to new cities, and bring our own unique brand of fun energizing music to new people.

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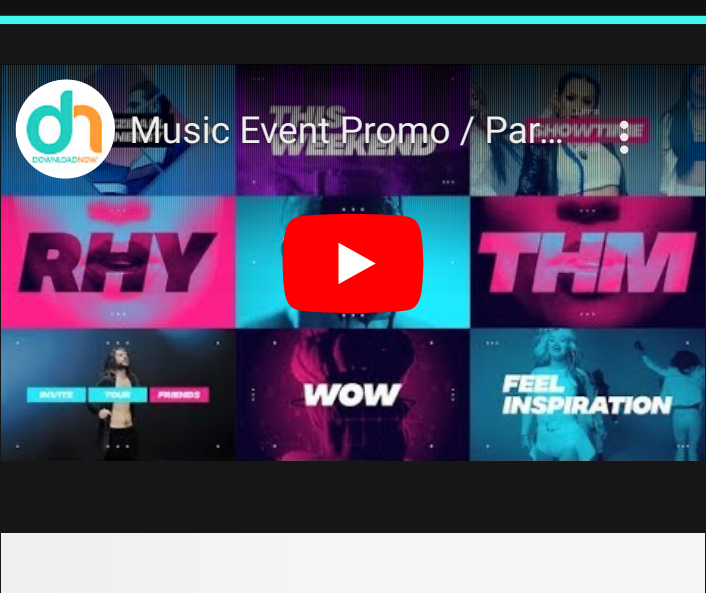

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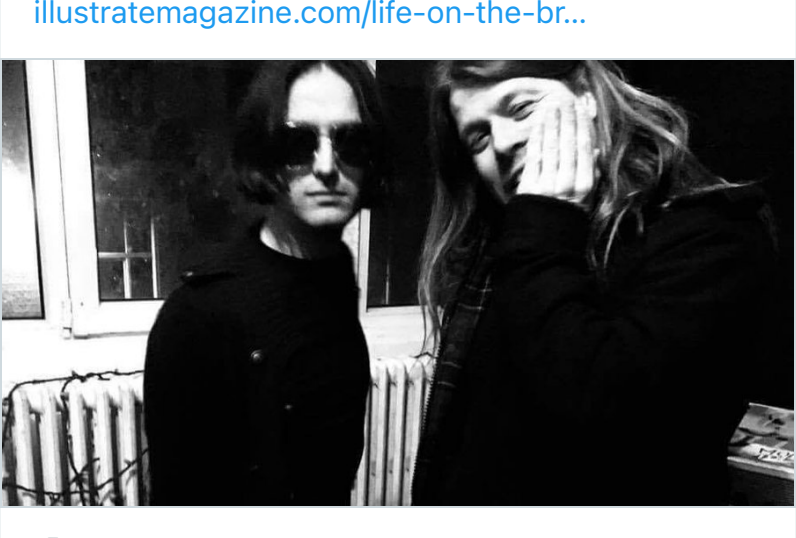

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