

Fascination Chat - August 17, 2003

On August 17, 2003 BJ went online to chat with a group of Cirque du Soleil fans. The chat was monitored, recorded and made available to us in an edited version. We would like to thank Ricky Russo and the entire "Fascination!"-team for their support and courtesy. BJ had a great time chatting and who knows... this might happen again. Check on <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CirqueFascination/> for updates and news.

Without further ado - here's the complete transcript:

It was a daunting challenge involving weeks of planning and several authorizations but we finally achieved our end result... a chat with a Cirque du Soleil musician! How would it be done? Which communication program would we use? How would I keep control over the chat? These and many more questions arose as those weeks began melting away. But, on August 17, 2003 at 8:00pm Eastern Daylight Time, the chat began and all the troubles of bringing it together were quickly forgotten. With a "Good Morning from Japan," our guest, BJ, a percussionist with the Quidam tour currently in Japan, joined us for about 2 and a half hours that Sunday night and spoke about who he is, what he's doing, and where he may be headed next, not to mention that he enjoys Sushi, Sake, Pocky and a good Irish Pub! At one point the chat was opened up to everyone in attendance to get a chance to speak directly to BJ - it proved not only successful, but a highly active time. Now, I would like to share with you the log of our chat in a more easy to read Question and Answer format. So, take it away BJ:

BJ: With pleasure.

BJ: As you said, my name is BJ. I am 29 years old and currently with Quidam in Osaka, Japan. I am the drummer since December 2000 and therefore did parts of the European tour, the entire second North American tour, and now the Japanese tour. I was born in Germany; I am German, grew up in Spain for a couple of years and then moved back to Germany. I also have family in the Boston area. And my favourite colour is blue.

Richasi: In the Quidam Japan programme, your name is listed as simply "BJ". Does BJ stand for something? Is it your full name?

BJ: It does indeed stand for something: My middle initials.

Richasi: Fellow Fascination writer Keith Johnson wanted to know: What first attracted you to drums? Who gave you your first drum kit?

BJ: That is a complicated story. I started drumming when I was six. My mother is a music teacher and I had a lot of music around at home. At five she put me in some elementary music education course. After a couple of months the teacher told us that

she was from a bigger music school and that we could all learn an instrument if we wanted. I instantly shouted "drums", ran home and told my mom. She sighed and there we went. It is not clear what made me say that.

Richasi: Wow, so at a pretty early age then. Were drums the only instrument you wanted to play? Do you know how to play others?

BJ: I was never really interested in any other instrument until the age of maybe 15-16. Then I started to learn the guitar and a little later the piano.

Richasi: Multi-talented then. :) Do you just play drums with Quidam or do you double with another instrument?

BJ: I hope there's talent involved... I just play drums. In Quidam that is already a pretty busy job.

Richasi: No doubt. Sometimes twice a night, etc. Do you ever get tired of it? Do you ever tire of playing the same music all the time?

BJ: That is a deep question because when I feel tired it is hard for me to tell what I get tired of. I have spent quite a great deal of time thinking about that one. I still enjoy playing Quidam. Most mornings I wake up and get really excited to play on that day. When I get tired of it all it is mostly due to the circumstances. The travel, the pace of different cultures that I have to get used to, the unbalanced way of life.

Richasi: Do you enjoy the travel or is it something you'd rather not have to deal with?

BJ: The drumming part is a pleasure 99% of the time. The surrounding stress might be hard on us. I love traveling, seeing things, and exposing myself to different surroundings. But sometimes the culture in the country we go to is so different that the adjustment alone will eat a great deal of energy.

Richasi: When you feel the stress, and as you say you enjoy playing the show, is there a piece you enjoy more above others? One you look forward to playing each night? If so, what is that piece?

BJ: I used to see the show as a collection of numbers with individual pieces of music. But as I grew into it my perception changed. I see and feel Quidam more as two halves with waves of intensity and energetic levels. I really love German wheel for the way it gets me into it. If I get through German Wheel all right then I am pretty much set for the rest of the show. I love diabolo, Tissue. Gee, just about everything.

Richasi: Most fans would say that as well. Do you find yourself being caught up in the emotion of the show?

BJ: On certain days I might enjoy Banquine less than Cloud swing. But generally I try to look at it from a larger perspective - as one thing. Various emotions. Every day is a new emotion. Mostly - due to my specific job - I try to feel intensity. It's not a specific emotion I try to have but I try to be as intense as possible in my performance. The drums are a very powerful component of Quidam. I better make it right. ;-))

Richasi: Is the emotion of the performance/music what drew you to Cirque du Soleil and Quidam in particular or was it something else? What made you decide to join CDS?

BJ: I did a tour with a German circus in 1996 and there I met two artists from CdS. Before my experience with the German show I was not into circus at all. They

introduced me to cirque. I then saw Alegría in Hamburg and soon after that I applied. Mainly because I liked the music. Then I did not hear from Cirque until late summer of 2000. I had almost forgotten about it.

Richasi: Did you audition for Alegría?

BJ: No, I received a specific call for Quidam. They were in need of a drummer for the rest of the European tour. I guess they liked my drumming.

Richasi: So, you auditioned for Cirque in general?

BJ: No, I auditioned in Frankfurt, Germany on stage with the Quidam band specifically for Quidam.

Richasi: Wow, and it must have gone great because you're on tour! :)

BJ: I guess I played a short piece of diabolo and then skipping. I jinxed them to hire me ;-))

Richasi: Jen (JenJeninLA), who is not here tonight, wanted to know whether being in Cirque was what you thought it would be...the experience, the work, the training, the traveling, everything. Do you feel excited to be part of CDS?

BJ: I remember that I was very confused with the setup and with the way the music is conducted. I almost had to cheat my way through it but I eventually made it through. Very much so. It is a special work environment. I like touring, I like performing and I like the way most Cirque shows are put together. There's a bunch of very special people on tour with us. It's a lot of work. A lot!! But my reward is the fact that people leave the show with a big smile.

Richasi: I understand you've made some good friends, one of whom is leaving soon. Does that make you sad? Will you still hear from this person?

BJ: At present it is his plan to work on a solo project after he leaves and so far I'll be the drummer. Other than that we are already scheduled to meet in Ireland and have a pint of Guinness together. We are indeed great friends and I guess that will continue.

Richasi: Do you think Quidam will get back to Europe after Japan (and Canada)? (I know, a hard one to answer)

BJ: Very hard to answer. Usually we are the last to know.

Richasi: And we, meaning fans, are usually the first to know - lol!

BJ: That seems to be very true. ;-)) It is not my main occupation to think about next year or the tour plans for the rest of the decade. I am very concerned with my everyday performance. I try to focus on what I do now.

Richasi: Must you renew a contract each year or is it two/three/four years? A particular tour?

BJ: We sign for specific tours, i.e. the European tour, the North American tour, the Japan tour. If a tour is longer than two years it will be divided into shorter contracts. I will negotiate my next year soon. And I know where we will be going ;-))

Richasi: So, if the tour were going to go to a few Canadian cities (which we understand is a possibility), this next contract would probably cover that?

BJ: I believe so. If it did indeed go to Canada. Maybe it does, maybe not ;-))

Richasi: Albert (Treb, who is online here) wanted to know -- Exactly how much of the music is live? Is there any bit that is pre-recorded and played as a track every show? Or is every sound we hear live?

BJ: Most pieces are partially sequenced, i.e. a computer runs a couple of tracks. Mostly choir, percussion, strings, extra sound effects. The main structure of each number is played live. Skipping and some shorter pieces between acts are absolutely live. Diabolo is sequenced (percussion), hand to hand is sequenced (strings), so is the opening (choir).

Richasi: Albert also asked, Does the music continue to evolve even after the show's been on for all these years? And do you find that you are allowed to make certain changes to fit your style?

BJ: As new artists join their acts and choreography changes we have to adjust the music. I actually have a great deal of freedom to play more "in my style". I need to make sure that I transcend the essence of Quidam. But individual grooves or fills are left to my taste and style. We constantly try to improve. The composer visits every once in a while and alters things.

Richasi: What happens if you are ill? Is there someone who can fill your place? Or, as I know they have for "O" and Mystère, do they have your performance recorded... do you just get replaced with a recorded you?

BJ: If I get ill the show is in serious trouble! We had to do one performance with just recorded music in Tokyo because I was so ill that I almost collapsed on stage and they literally pulled me off the stage. I wanted to go on but I guess the fever clouded my brain.

Richasi: Really? Wow! Did the audience know the difference?

BJ: Well the audience does not know how the show is supposed to sound. But the artists and technicians feel a great difference. The acts have to be perfect. A tape cannot react if something in the act goes wrong.

Richasi: If you don't mind me asking, what did the musicians do? Hang about? Appear to play but not?

BJ: That's what they did. Perfect playback and never stop smiling. It only happened once and I hope it will never again.

Richasi: Yeah, it's no fun hearing it taped.

BJ: I was lying backstage and the mere thought of hearing the show run and not being able to perform drove me crazy.

Richasi: We've had a couple of inquiries about... is anyone looking over your shoulder right now? :)

BJ: No. I am alone in my room. I guess everybody else is still sleeping. Craig (the singer) said he might pop in and check on me but that might not happen. I don't know when he got to bed.

Richasi: Do any of the other musicians/performers get online that you know of? Are they aware of fan groups and/or keep an ear to what is said on the official forum?

BJ: Not really. I believe that a few do but generally we are more concerned with life on tour. We email with friends and family, some might chat but as far as I know this is the first ever chat between a performer and fans.

Richasi: Speaking of the tour, what do you think of the new Fuji big top? Is it better than the regular touring chapiteau?

BJ: It blows my mind. It is huge (2,900 seats) and has no masts. That means it has no restricted view seats and looks even bigger. I love it. It's quite a deal to tour it because it actually is a semi-permanent structure that is set up on a concrete foundation. There will be photos of it on www.bjpercussion.de soon.

Richasi: I also assume Fuji placed you in a great housing facility?

BJ: They take good care of us. We live in the middle of the city. In the heart of a network of shopping streets.

Richasi: I know you've said you've enjoyed touring... is there a specific tour/city you've enjoyed above others?

BJ: London, Copenhagen, Boston, Pittsburgh, Nagoya. Most cities have something interesting. Tokyo was hard because of the culture shock. At the end of this year back again in Tokyo that will be different.

Richasi: AmberrGrey (Carrie) had a quick question: What helps make a good show so memorable for the artists and musicians?

BJ: Could you rephrase that question a little. I am not sure what she means.

Richasi: I believe she's asking is there a particular aspect of a show/performance/city that makes it memorable to you as an artist? Say, makes you think of that particular city as the tour goes on?

BJ: That usually is linked to the private life on tour. I like simple things. I like to be in a city with spirit - a heart. And preferably an Irish Pub. A good hotel also makes things easier.

Richasi: Other than sitting at an Irish Pub during your off hours... do you have any other hobbies you indulge in?

BJ: I like to spend my time with friends on tour discovering the city. I read a lot. I also like to write little stories about tour life and other things. But I don't know if that collection will ever be published. At present I am reading a lot of books that are related to Japan. "Memories of a geisha" for example. I also read Nabokov, or Douglas Adams.

Richasi: Have you, by chance, taken in any Taiko drumming while in Japan?

BJ: I will soon. A couple of people wanted to do it and we finally found a possibility to do it. I am really excited about that.

Richasi: I hope you get to see Kodo. They're just wonderful. I highly recommend them! :)

BJ: I did see them but I haven't had a chance to try it myself yet. Other than that: I am currently very busy working on a couple of projects. Craig Jennings album requires a lot of attention recently. I have just recorded some overdub drums in Nagoya. After

Osaka Craig will fly to the US and start mixing the beast. I also work with a couple of people in New York or L.A. Technology is fascinating.

Richasi: Any specific technology you find fascinating that you work with on tour?

BJ: I can record drums in Osaka and send them to NY through the Internet. I don't know how specific I can get with you guys. You're not all crazy musicians, are you?

Richasi: Some of us might be, and those who aren't here, may be interested in the details...

BJ: I like a hard disk recording device called Pro Tools. We have used it for Craig's things. I also like my new mixers that I have just installed at the beginning of the Japan tour.

Richasi: Kaliwolf wanted to know what kind of music does Craig do?

BJ: That's hard to describe. It is both very electronic and very acoustic. Every track is different. A great challenge and a wide range of styles.

Richasi: Any particular type of music you like? Have you listened to other soundtracks from other CDS shows?

BJ: I know most soundtracks. I recently spent a couple of shows in the drum booth with La Nouba's drummer Joe. I really love that music. I also love Saltimbanco's soundtrack. But mostly I listen to "non-cirque" music. Peter Gabriel, Toto, Miles Davis, Keith Jarrett, Gino Vanelli, Beethoven, Zeppelin, and Green Day - whatever comes my way and touches me. It keeps me alert and helps me tolerate different styles and play them.

Richasi: Changing gears a bit -- do you find that the Quidam crew is tightly knit?

BJ: Extremely! Through thick and thin. We do a lot together. Mostly smaller groups but if we have a reason to get together and have a festivity - we sure show up. We stand together. In some situations the life of someone depends on the reliability of a fellow artist or technician. You need a great amount of trust to deal with that.

Richasi: Would you give up your drumming role with Quidam to be with another Cirque production?

BJ: I will always welcome new challenges in my life. The band just did a gig together in Nagoya. only the music we liked. A lot of rehearsing but a great gig. I guess the photos are on psioui.com. So we do actually spend a lot of time on extra stuff. Some artists have just started to rehearse for a cabaret that we will stage at the end of the Japan tour. Only for ourselves. Just for the sheer fun and excitement.

Richasi: If given the opportunity, would you want to change to another Cirque show?

BJ: That very much depends on the show. I like some more than others.

Richasi: Other than Quidam, do you have a particular favorite?

BJ: La Nouba. And Alegría. I have not had the chance to see any of the Vegas shows but I hear that they are really good. Being on tour does not really allow me to see the rest of our shows.

Richasi: What about La Nouba do you like? And Alegría?

BJ: I like the poetry of Alegría. It is a joyous and beautiful show. And I love the soundtrack. In La Nouba I love the power. It reminds me of Quidam. It is a bright and fast version of Quidam. The creative team behind it was the same so you recognize the trademark.

Richasi: Speaking of other shows, have you heard any buzz on Zumanity? Interesting concept I must say... Have any thoughts on it?

BJ: None whatsoever. I know almost nothing about it. We discussed it in the kitchen yesterday. We are trying to get more information but Japan is far from Vegas. Of course I hope that they are doing fine.

Richasi: All of the people (fans) I've spoken with thus far about the show have glowing reviews of it. Looks as if Cirque has another hit on their hands.

BJ: We did send them our best wishes for their premiere. But that happens between most shows for every premiere in every city.

Richasi: Random question: Do you get any time off on tour?

BJ: Between cities I usually have 8-12 days off. Depending on the tour. The Japanese Big Top takes longer to tear down and set up. I think we tour with 60+ trucks. They need six big auto- cranes to set it up. It's the biggest structure Cirque has ever toured with.

Richasi: Fans were able to see the big top being constructed in Tokyo over a webcam. It fascinated me. Hopefully I'll get to see it someday. I hear they'll use it for all Japanese Cirque tours.

BJ: I love it (but I said that already). Yes. They will use it for all further Japanese Cirque tours. Have you seen photos of the outside?

Richasi: I have, I think on your website if I'm not mistaken (but I might be). Might be Pascals as well (psioui.com). I'm sure he has some. It's a great looking bigtop. I bet it has a state-of-the-art sound system in there, right? :)

BJ: The sound system is basically the same we used in the States and in Europe. But we had to alter it slightly and add some speakers and amps. The Dome is bigger than the Big Tops in the US or Europe so we need more power.

Richasi: Nadia (Morpheus, who is with us) asked: Is there a marked difference in the Japanese audience with relation to other cultures that's he's perform to, ie, the reaction to certain acts or clowns that is quite different than what they had anticipated?

BJ: The Japanese have a totally different way of reacting. They are very quiet and polite. They find parts of the show exciting that are considered "normal" or "unspectacular" in other countries. Applause is generally much quieter. But that is not related to the excitement they feel.

Richasi: Do you find that changes your perspective of the performance? As in, I know some performers become unsettled if an audience doesn't react to what they do.

BJ: We have a greater amount of people crying out of emotion here than anywhere

else. I certainly appreciate it if an audience reacts. It gives me energy. In our case I had to learn to take the Japanese way of admiring and reacting. Some people have more problems with that than others. Our clowns can suffer sometimes. They need participation.

Richasi: I remember hearing a remark that they didn't like coming to the US because of that fact. And yet, audiences in the US seem to react to just about everything (not always, though). Japanese are reserved.

BJ: Japanese like to watch and silently take it in. US audiences are very loud but I sometimes ask myself what that indicates. It is not the volume of the applause that reflects the appreciation. It is unusual for Japanese audiences to get on their feet at the end of the show.

Richasi: And for the last moderated question, what type of equipment do you use in the show?

BJ: I use Sonor drums, Sabian cymbals, Pro-mark sticks and Remo heads. Micophones are mostly Shures with a couple of AKGs. I mix on two digital Yamaha desks. For the electronic stuff I use mostly Roland gear and samplers.

(At this point, the chat was opened up.)

KaliWolf: I was wondering, what was the composer's idea behind the music? What was the core sound he was trying to convey?

BJ: The main idea behind the music of Quidam is eastern. Ukrainian, Baltic music.

Treb: Do you know for sure if Richard will be compiling his independent work any time in the near future? If so, will you have any involvement in the project?

BJ: I will probably drum a few tracks on the album. But I cannot say when that will be. He will leave soon and then take his time to approach it.

Richasi: Katie (who isn't here I don't think) wanted to know about your schooling background. As in a particular college/field of study?

BJ: Well I studied philosophy and German literature. For the drumming part of my life: I was in music school for 9 years when I was 8-17. The rest is pretty ramdom and always slightly chaotic.

Pedro: What happens in the process of a new "Zoe" joining the show?

BJ: New Zoe's will do training in Montreal for several months after they have been cast and join us about three weeks before they start performing in the show. They then start to perform the show with an "old" Zoe standing backstage singing and always ready to jump in. So they lipsync. The next step would be to do one half and then the entire show.

Treb: What happens when singers themselves become sick?

BJ: On the Japanese tour we have both Craig and Richard with us and both sing in every show. Some shows Richard will sing most, the next day they switch. That helps them save their vocal chords. If one is out the other takes over but we've never had that so far.

Treb: Is there a particular piece that you LEAST like to play?

BJ: The exit of the clowns right before cloud swing is not always my favourite part But it's only 20 secs so I guess it's not so bad. The precision of the music with the acts comes from a rather complicated system of cues behind the music.

Amberrgrey: For instance, what kind of cues? From watching the artists?

BJ: Our bandleader wears a head microphone and counts in individual parts of the music when he sees that the artists are ready to move on to the next segment of their act. We can cut, extend or repeat individual parts of every piece.

Treb: Do you find yourself struggling to communicate on your off hours sometimes? Like, finding the right bus, etc

BJ: Communication here is really not easy. especially because they also have a different way of body language. And my accent is probably terrible.

Pedro: Has anyone ever offered money to get a Cirque band to play for them privately, maybe at a party?

BJ: I have never heard of such an offer. But I guess that would be really expensive.

Treb: You have mentioned that some parts of the music are pre- recorded. If you have to repeat a segment of the music due to a mistake in the act, how do those pre-recorded segments "work" out for the whole music?

BJ: We work with a system called RPS. Realtime Programmed Sequence.

Treb: Can you explain how that works? Maybe elaborate a bit?

BJ: Each number is cut into 5-20 pieces that are assigned to individual keys on the keyboards. The keyboard player can - at anytime - name the cue that comes up and "punch" it in with the groove. It is my job to make it sound rythmical and logical. Most cues have a fixed order so he does not have to announce them. He just counts them in. Banquine is quite a bit of talking behind the music.

Amberrgrey: Wow- how long did it take you to get used to that?

BJ: It took me nine days to learn it but I stopped having heart attacks after two months.

KaliWolf: This may have been asked, I'm not sure. Do you have a favorite act or segment of the show (not a favorite song)?

BJ: I do not see the show as individual numbers put together. For me it is more like a wave.

Treb: Do the acts every become "boring"? Does it get to the point where any of the acts just become, "Eh, okay, I've done this a million times -- this is just work now." Does it get to a point where it just seems routine, or do you feel the magic every day?

BJ: Some get tired but we always find ways to motivate ourselves and our colleagues. Most people get really excited when it is time for them to perform.

A few moments later we ended the chat on a high note. I wish to extend my thanks once again to BJ and his associates for making this chat happen and to BJ himself for taking the time out of his busy schedule (not to mention getting up early in the morning) to speak with us. On October 3, 2003, BJ will celebrate his

1000th performance with Quidam and in his words... "It's getting better and better."

BJ: Mesdames et Messieurs: Bonsoir!