

# Jennifer Leitham

[jenniferleitham.com](http://jenniferleitham.com)



Her story is compelling. Her journey has been most unconventional. Her career is groundbreaking as she attempts to bring a sense of normalcy to a subject that many people don't understand, all the while proudly displaying her exceptional skills. She is considered by many to be one of the finest Jazz bassists in the world.

She began life with the name John Leitham.

She grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania and attended high school in King of Prussia, where she discovered her voice, singing as a soloist with her high school choir. She graduated in 1971. Her high voice led to performing in rock bands, singing harmony parts, lead vocals and playing the electric bass. Her interest in the bass stemmed from her early fascination with The Beatles. She even learned to play the bass left handed thanks to the influence of Paul McCartney!

After graduating from school and while attending Montgomery County Community College, her band at that time became very popular and tours ensued, mostly up and down the Eastern USA. She quit school.

Gender Dysphoria was a constant, and after being outed by mistake, she withdrew from performing publicly for a few years. She took a day job, managing a fast food restaurant. Paranoia and fear won out, and she stopped singing, but her love of music would not abate. She began music studies in earnest. It was during this period when she began to play the string bass, studying with Philadelphia's legendary bassist and teacher Al Stauffer.

Within a few years, she began performing again, playing the string bass and reading music. She quickly immersed herself in performing as well as studying. Now that she could read music, playing shows subsidized her Jazz studies. No

more day jobs.

She was the staff bassist at the Mount Airy Lodge in the Poconos, then Grossingers in the Catskills, and then Palumbos in South Philadelphia. She played Jazz with some of Philadelphia's finest, performing with Hank Mobley, Gloria Lynne, Philly Jo Jones, and Shirley Scott. She also played for several well known traveling Jazz players who used the local Philadelphia musicians. She met bassist George Duvivier while at Palumbos, a valued mentor who advised her to move to a place where she could flourish as a Jazz bassist. At that time, most of the work in Philadelphia had dried up with the advent of gambling in Atlantic City.

During this time, she met her wife, a relationship that would last for close to 20 years. Her understanding and encouragement helped Jennifer thrive in her home life but a decision was made to keep her true self at home. As long as her career was in an upward spiral, her situation was manageable.

While playing at Palumbos in 1981, she was recruited to be the bassist in the Woody Herman Young Thundering Herd. That's when her profile began to rise. She met the great bassist Slam Stewart while on tour, a friendship that helped to shape her career. His advice: she "needed to be in New York or Los Angeles in order to keep her advancement viable". After playing the 1981 Playboy Jazz Festival with Woody in Los Angeles, Jennifer and her wife moved to the City of Angels in 1983.

Her early days in Los Angeles were fruitful, and she quickly began to play for some of the very best musicians, Tommy Tedesco, Bill Watrous, Ed Shaughnessy, Bob Cooper, Jack Sheldon, Bud Shank, Terry Gibbs, Mundell Lowe, and host of others.

Jennifer began to be a regular on the Los Angeles recording scene, playing for movie soundtracks, TV shows, and recording many records with West Coast Jazz stars.

There also was a flowering of creativity, and her composing skills were manifesting in a big way. She was asked to lead her own group and began leading her trio on a regular basis at iconic L.A. clubs like Donte's and Carmello's, building a loyal following. Her fans included patrons and with their help she recorded her first CD, "Leitham Up" in 1986, soon followed by a steady stream of releases.

In 1987 she came to the attention of George Shearing, and he hired her to play duo with him at the Paul Masson Winery in Saratoga, Ca. Also on the bill was Mel Tormé, who immediately took an interest in the rising young bassist. Jennifer went on to be Mel's regular bassist for ten years, traveling the world, playing in the finest concert halls and Jazz festivals, recording 11 albums and raising her profile in the Jazz world by leaps and bounds.

During the time Jennifer was a member of Ed Shaughnessy's band, starting in the early '80's, she began to be called as a sub for Doc Severinsen's Tonight Show Band. When the Johnny Carson version of the show ended, there were several tours where Mel Tormé and Doc joined forces, and Jennifer became a regular member of the band. When Mel suffered a stroke in 1996, Jennifer became Doc Severinsen's regular bassist, still performing with the big band, but also playing in his small group and accompanying him when he conducted symphony orchestras.

It was during her tenure with Doc in the '90's when her Gender Incongruence began to surface again in a big way. There was another accidental outing in 1998 and it led to strife in her home life. Her ex was not happy with the fact that Doc and his entourage all knew the truth about her. Jennifer began gender counseling. The marriage ended.

Finally, in a process that was lengthy and painful, physically and emotionally, she transitioned in 2001 while touring with Doc Severinsen.

She kept as low a profile as she could, so as not to raise a ruckus in the symphony world, and Doc was very helpful in helping her gain acceptance. She notified the Jazz festivals that she had signed contracts for and no one cancelled her, (at least in the first year). She did lose some already established bookings in her education pursuits, once being told that “the band boosters didn’t want their kids exposed to this kind of thing.”

There were a few press inquiries, mostly done in a respectful manner, but a wire service interview that turned into a ridiculous tabloid article about Johnny Carson precipitated a wariness about press inquiries. She shut down any dealings with the print press for a few years, but agreed to do a television documentary on The Learning Channel to help defray some of the enormous expense of surgery. Neither turned out as she had hoped.

In the long recovery from surgical complications, Jennifer found herself alone with her bass in an unfettered manner for the first time since those early days of intense study and practice in South Philadelphia. She retooled her playing. She wrote a plethora of new tunes. And she began to sing again.

When she left Doc Severinsen in 2006, she raised some money, and went into the studio to record the new material. The result was “The Real Me”, far and away her most popular recording. (People were still buying CDs in those days).

Since her transition, although there were a few musicians who still called on her to play, most were avoiding her. Suddenly there was a scarcity of paying work. Jennifer’s solution was to become an independent artist, and immerse herself into leading her own group. She became an entertainer in addition to maintaining her status as a serious musician. It’s a formula that has served her well, and many more CDs followed, “The Real Me”, “Left Coast Story”, “The Real Me Live”, “Future Christmas”, “MOOD(S)WINGS”, and her latest “Remnants Of Humanity” have all been made possible by the generosity of her

loyal following and also her independence as an artist.

In 2007 she decided she was ready to tell her story. Work began with producer Andrea Meyerson on a feature film documentary. 5 years in the making, "I Stand Corrected" has won 14 best film awards since it screened at film festivals around the world in 2012. It still screens occasionally at educational , outreach, and fundraising events.

In the years since the film's release, Jennifer has been receiving a whole new kind of recognition. She was awarded the 2014 Community Leader Angel Award by the Center for Transyouth Health and Development at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles. She was featured as one of the top 20 pioneers in Vanity Fair's "Trans America" '15 Edition. In 2016, L.A. Weekly named her as one of the "50 Most Interesting Angelinos." In 2019 she was asked by JazzTimes magazine to speak at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jazz Congress. While in New York, she was interviewed by the news outlet NowThis and the ensuing videos have been seen over a million times!

In recent years Jennifer is finding acceptance with a whole new group of musical artists and sponsors who have asked her to join them on tours of France, Holland, Hungary, Canada, Austria, Japan and China. Her music has been streamed on Spotify over 3 million times in the last two years.

More than ever, she is finding followers, fans, and friends on a world wide basis.