

JAZZGRAM

JAZZ INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

SEPTEMBER 2008

DEDICATED TO JAZZ IN ALL ITS FORMS

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JEFF PARKER: “WE, NOT ME”

BY COREY HALL

BECAUSE THE YOUNG GIRL HAD GIVEN UP learning its language through lessons, the acoustic guitar just existed, ignored and untouched. Then, the girl's nine-year-old brother saw the neglect, seized the moment and instrument, and began mimicking bass sounds he had heard on his father's Parliament, Funkadelic, and Earth, Wind & Fire records.

Once the father heard the sounds his son made in their Hampton, Virginia home, he immediately enrolled him in music classes. Having already explored his father's record collection had inspired an interest that now, with an actual instrument in his hands, would soon become a passion.

“I'd just put on headphones and listen to his records all day. I'd look at the pictures and read the liner notes and lyrics,” says guitarist Jeff Parker, when recalling this time 32 years later. “I had also seen some live shows, people like Duke Ellington, Gil Scott-Heron, and Maze, but I was always more interested in cultivating my own personal relationship with music. I was never that intrigued with being a performer. I was more into just having music be part of my life.”

While in high school, Parker played in his first band, Shades of Grey. This group covered songs by a Southern rock-fusion band called the Dixie Dregs. Parker eventually enrolled in the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where the ever-present music scene served as further inspiration. While at Berklee, Parker listened and played with his colleagues, who included Danilo Perez, Delfeayo Marsalis, and Lalah Hathaway. Parker finished at Berklee in 1991.

Now what? New York, right?

Well, there were problems. First, living there would



PHOTO: JIM NEWBERRY

have been too expensive, and, two, an internal issue needed resolution.

“I didn't really want to play straight-ahead jazz, and I didn't want to play avant-garde stuff, either,” Parker recalls. “My friends in Boston who were from Chicago told me it was cool there, and I somehow got my hands on a Reader. Back then, there were a lot more places to play, and I'm like, ‘Man, looks like there are lots of cats working.’”

Upon moving here, Parker played gigs with pianist Brian O'Hern, saxophonist Lin Halliday, and drummer Larry Banks. While playing in Banks' ensemble, Parker met saxophonist Ernest Dawkins. By chance, Dawkins had recently begun searching for a chord instrument to add to his group, the New Horizons Ensemble.

Once Dawkins heard Parker play, his search ended.

Dawkins offered Parker member- *CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE*

JEFF PARKER

ship in the Ensemble, and he accepted. Writing new compositions with a guitar now in mind, Dawkins says, opened multiple options.

“I could now use the voicings differently,” he explains. “I knew I could double two lines if I wanted to. I could put the trombone and trumpet together, and I could put the saxophone and guitar together.”

“The alto saxophone and guitar – along with the flute and soprano saxophone – are close in terms of orchestration,” Dawkins continues. “So I could also trade-off. I could use the guitar in the melodic sense, use it in the rhythmic sense, or use it in the harmonic sense with the rhythm section.”

Dawkins’ compositions also expanded Parker’s thinking and playing. “Once I got in ‘the zone,’ I was free to pretty much just work with the music,” he says. “And the way Ernest was writing back then was totally linear. There would be a groove, a mode, and he would write rhythmic figures. There weren’t any chords; it was more like sounds, and it really opened me up 1000 percent.”

Beyond the New Horizons Ensemble, Parker’s other group affiliations include Tortoise, the Chicago Underground Project, and Isotope 217. He has also performed with saxophonist Fred Anderson and percussionist Michael Zerang. While playing with Zerang in Paris, Parker composed a song in his honor called “Rang.”

“That tune is centered around a very colorful solo approach to the drums, and I think Michael is probably the most colorful drummer I can think of,” Parker says. “He can get so many colors and sounds out of the instrument.”

“Rang” closes out *The Relatives*, Parker’s second album. Released in 2005, it followed *Like-Coping*, released in 2003. *The Relatives*, Parker explains, is a more structured studio project, complete with overdubbing, while *Like-Coping* served as a more relaxed



PHOTO: MICHAEL JACKSON

affair. Parker’s ensemble for the debut – bassist Chris Lopes and drummer Chad Taylor – recorded everything ‘live’ in no more than two takes. Only “Roundabout,” the finale, contained overdubs because the composer, Taylor, requested them.

“I’m really proud of *Like-Coping*,” Parker says. “We rehearsed in one day and then put mics up in the studio. It’s

almost completely improvised. I wanted that record to be how I felt at that time.

“When I hear this record now, it’s kind of hard. The performances are not perfect,” he continues. “I was playing this guitar that I wasn’t really that comfortable with, and when I listen to my playing, I say, ‘Oh, man, I could have made that a lot better,’ but it’s not about that at all. It was just about me being honest about what I’m trying to do.”

Although satisfied with his solo efforts, Parker is more comfortable playing in ensembles. “I’m all about the music. I like collaborating with other musicians and being part of a group,” he says. “I’m a student of music, first and foremost. It’s all about learning for me. I’m always about the music.”

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VANDERMARK FIVE

BEAT READER

(ATAVISTIC)

Over the past decade or so, Ken Vandermark's Vandermark Five has become his most consistent and rewarding ensemble in terms of the range of its instrumental acumen and as a vehicle for Vandermark's compositional explorations. After various personnel changes that have swapped out horns and a drummer, 2006's *A Discontinuous Line* brought cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm into the fold of the core ensemble (Vandermark and Dave Rempis, both on reeds, plus bassist Kent Kessler and drummer Tim Daisy) to serve as a de facto utility man.

With his gorgeously fluid lines, distorted string shards, and prickly puckishness, Lonberg-Holm is as versatile as a soloist, rhythm player, or front-line melodicist. With *Beat Reader*, Vandermark's recipe for The Five's success continues to be followed, with eight compositions mixing elements of jazz, rock, funk, and improvisation that result in the continued expansion of the band's varied repertoire.

Long-time watchers might express reticence when faced with this offering, harboring a belief that a sense of sameness has crept into Vandermark's catalog; however, such a mindset fails to grasp the subtle distinctions offered by each new group blueprint. For sure, there are more than enough "classic" pieces that can stand up to any previous work. The spirited multi-sectioned "Friction" is the sort of epic performance that fits in well with the continuum, as does the funk rock of "New Acrylic" or the swirling, then crescendoed vamp of "Desireless." Capable of straddling both abstract and concrete fences, the ensemble mines more inside realms on the proto-bop anthem, "Speedplay," in honor of Max Roach. The piece is taken to new levels thanks to Lonberg-Holm's incisive lines and Rempis' fiery alto. More approachable realms also stimulate the balladry-meets-blues of "Any Given Number" and the stunning chamber jazz a la Chico Hamilton on "Further From The Truth." While



the program is rich with emotion, perhaps the most compelling moments are heard during Vandermark's tribute to the late trombonist Paul Rutherford on "Compass Shatters Magnet." Framed as a haven for Vandermark's trademark blend of contemplation and

high-energy group vamp thanks to Vandermark's baritone rhythms, the unfolding drama proves euphoric. Worth noting is that a limited edition version of the record contains a three-part New York Suite, dedicated to various painters, composers, and improvisers, a version already likely sold out by now. Like previous documents of the ensemble, *Beat Reader* demonstrates a vivacious working group that continues to document Vandermark's

growth as one of this city's most important composers and improvisers. — **JAY COLLINS**

SCORCH TRIO

BROLT

(RUNE GRAMMOFON, CD AND 2LP)

Forty-odd years ago jazz-rock fusion and free jazz offered competing visions of jazz's future that were as divergent as East and West. The Scorch Trio not only brings them back together, it ties them in a knot so tight no sailor or boy scout could work it loose.

Finnish-born, NYC-based guitarist Raoul Björkenheim has always played with one foot in rock, some of it quite proggy, and the other in jazz of various stripes. He's also a student of music from other times and places; here he doubles on viola da gimbri, an instrument of his own design that combines qualities of an ancient European stringed instrument



and a Moroccan bass lute. His Norwegian confederates are bassist Ingebrigt Håker-Flaten, who lives in Chicago and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love, who still gets his mail in Oslo. They come with impeccable free jazz credentials, having worked together in School Days and Atomic. The Thing, their trio with saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, has already done yeoman's **CONTINUED ON P. 7**

JAZZ IN CHICAGO

CONCERTS / SPECIAL EVENTS

SEPT. 3: REMEMBERING JOHNNY GRIFFIN

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8 p.m., Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Ct., jazzshowcase.com or 312-360-0234 for more info

SEPT. 13: KEITH JARRETT, JACK DEJOHNETTE, GARY PEACOCK

8 p.m., Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave., cso.org or 312-294-3000 for more info

SEPT. 26: DELMARK RECORDS 55TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Featuring Ari Brown, Lurrie Bell, Jimmy Johnson, Nicole Mitchell, Dave Specter and Corey Wilkes. 8 p.m. Old Town School of Folk Music, 4544 N Lincoln Ave., oldtownschool.org or 773-728-6000 for more info.

SEPT. 26: CASSANDRA WILSON, MARVIN SEWELL, JONATHAN BATISTE, REGINALD VEAL, HERLIN RILEY, LEKAN BABALOLA

8 p.m., Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave., cso.org or 312-294-3000 for more info

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A FEAST FOR ALL

BY EMILIE PONS

WINDY CITY NATIVE ABBEY LINCOLN, Chicago musicians Nick Moss and the Fliptops and Gerry Hundt just had a series of extraordinary gigs at Montreal's International Jazz Festival. Abbey Lincoln, who now lives in New York City, sang in the Theatre Maitonneuve while Nick Moss and the Fliptops and Gerry Hundt were featured in the outdoors program.

Now 77 years old, Abbey Lincoln moved an entire audience with her breathtaking voice. Once married to Max Roach, Ms. Lincoln was very happy to have been invited to the jazz festival this year, she confessed to

for the closing concert), to jazz rock (with Chick Corea and Return to Forever), to modern jazz (with the Zenon Quartet), to Cuban sounds (with Grupo Fantasma) and jazz staples (with Dave Brubeck as well as the Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey orchestras), artists from all over the globe were present this year at the Montreal 29th jazz festival. The Bjorkestra and the world famous singer Leonard Cohen, who was back on stage after fifteen years of absence, also startled the audience.

Young and up-and-coming musicians and jazz elders alike gave rousing performances. British band Empirical, a recent revelation, Christian Scott, and Yaron Herman showed that the future of the music is in good hands while McCoy Tyner, Oliver Jones, and Hank Jones proved that they still have important statements to make.

Some people may wonder why the Montreal festival



PHOTOS: MICHAEL JACKSON

Alain Brunet during an interview with the Montreal daily newspaper La Presse.

Lincoln performed with pianist Rodney Kendrick, drummer Jaz Sawyer (Sawyer was born in San Francisco and began playing drums at age 2) and bass player Michael Bowie. Those musicians, very attentive to the singer, enabled the show to be a most special one and Lincoln's voice, her overall tone, made the public shiver.

It all started in 1979, and now Montreal is the most important jazz festival in the world. As Howard Reich, from the Chicago Tribune, mentions it, Montreal is "the biggest and best jazz festival on the planet." But it is not only a jazz festival: it is essentially a music festival. This year, it boasted 725 shows.

From rock to hip hop (with Public Enemy), to dub (with Lee Scratch Perry and the Wailers), to African music (with artists such as Salif Keita and Vieux Farka Toure and Mory Kante in the griot tradition who played

L-R: **Abbey Lincoln; Miguel Zenon; Jay Phelps; Nick Moss.** seems to defy the definition of a jazz festival; but the larger and the more diverse the audience the bigger the chances of enabling people to discover jazz. For some, the Montreal festival offers "a refreshingly broad definition of jazz" (Entertainment Weekly).

According to the Israeli pianist Yaron Herman, who is now based in Paris, what matters is to "transmit emotions." For him, "music should first touch the heart." This is definitely what the Montreal jazz festival, one more time, managed to do this year, with, among others, some of the most talented Chicago musicians.

PRODIGES CHARM MONTREAL

They are between 14 and 26 years old and they mesmerized a vast audience June 26-July 6: from Nikki Yanofsky to Christian Scott, some Canadian, European, American, or Israeli prodigies performed at the latest

edition of Montreal International Jazz Festival. Music, for them, is like breathing.

Fourteen-year-old Montrealer Nikki Yanofsky, already present at the 2006 festival, opened the event and shook the audience one more time with her very peculiar voice while 25-year-old trumpet player Jay Phelps, from Vancouver, came to play with his British band Empirical: his musicians are not older than him but all sound already quite confident.

For Phelps, playing in Montreal this year was a real opportunity to position himself at a more international level, to accomplish more. "I loved it," he claimed. But after his first outdoor concert, he added that he would have preferred to play inside, because that way he can "hear his trumpet." He prefers to "play acoustic" and doesn't like to "depend on a microphone."



For Shaney Forbes, Empirical's drummer, "the British jazz scene is extremely young and the standards are very high." He added that in Europe, jazz comes more from Classical music than in the US. But for him, musicians are equally talented in Europe and in America; of course the US is a country which, overall, has been of primary importance for jazz. "Jazz chose me," Forbes added. "I like expressing myself," he said, and he discovered, with jazz, a "better way" to express himself.

"Getting consistent work so you can pay your rent" is one of the challenges when being a young musician, explained Nathaniel Facey, Empirical's saxophone player. For him, jazz "challenges you to be creative, honest and focused. It is a means of expressing one's innermost thoughts, feelings and emotions using a given stimulus." But he also thinks that "jazz is not big enough and needs to grow everywhere."

With his sextet, Christian Scott, aged 24, played some of

his last album's tunes at the Gesu, where the Israeli pianist Yaron Herman, now based in Paris, astonished the audience on the very first Saturday of the festival with what proved to be one of the most remarkable shows of the entire festival. Now 26, Herman started thinking about music at age 16. When asked whether he handles his success well, the pianist answers that he "does not even think about it." All he knows is that he has a "mission," and the question "what does it mean to be a young jazz musician nowadays" sounds irrelevant to him: "I have a duty towards myself. I have a mission to accomplish, a job to do on a daily basis, and that's all. Being young or old doesn't matter, really; what counts is my mission, my daily mission."

Surely enough, the Montreal Jazz Festival would not have been as impressive without the presence of all those young spirits, including the American singer Melody Gardot, another prodigy, hardly 23 years old, who was invited to one of the festival's closing concerts, and not the least since the event celebrated the 25th anniversary of the creation of the respected Justin Time label.

CONTINUED FROM P. 2 work in rock energy and themes to a free jazz setting.

No offense to Gustafsson or any other saxophonist, but no instrument speaks the language of rock quite like the electric guitar. Björkenheim knows that tongue well, and he wields it like a hide-flaying lash on this record, Scorch's lucky third release. He leaps from the starting gate on "Olstra" with a spray of fleet, stuttering, distorted notes that'll take listeners of a certain age back to the Mahavishnu Orchestra's Inner Mounting Flame. But where John McLaughlin rode a rhythm section that had bound itself to the backbeat, Nilssen-Love and Håker-Flaten seem determined to make Björkenheim work for every bit of forward motion he achieves. The bassist's electronically enhanced instrument blasts out low-flying lumps of noise while the drummer registers his opinions about where the music should go with an unstable yet utterly controlled attack that makes clear that in this trio no one is boss and no one can count on deference. Björkenheim rises to the challenge with a mad feedback foray that compacts the music to black hole density for ten exhilarating minutes. The next number "Basjen" moves to the other extreme, twisting sharp-edge ribbons of sound before a broad backdrop of silence. And so it goes for the rest of the album; the trio may vary its attack, but never its intensity or brute eloquence. — **BILL MEYER**

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