

RIFFTIDES

Doug Ramsey on jazz and other matters...

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September 4, 2007

Hello, Cello

Several major jazz bassists - including Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, Sam Jones, and Percy Heath - also played the cello. Ron Carter doubles on cello. For the most part, Carter employs it as a midget replica of his main instrument, soloing by plucking the strings, as did his predecessors. Indeed, Heath referred to his re-tuned cello as a baby bass.

Improvising while bowing the cello is another matter. Fred Katz, who became well known in the 1950s for his work with the Chico Hamilton Quintet, demonstrated that there was a place for the arco cello in improvisation despite the instrument's challenges, which include its relative slowness. The cello's small, fast, cousin the violin has had a role virtually from the beginning of jazz. In Roger Kellaway's glorious *Cello Quartet* recordings, Ed Lustgarten was brilliant at reading and interpreting the solos Kellaway wrote for him, but he was not an improviser. After the mainstreamers pioneered the instrument, players like David Eyges, Hank Roberts, Trinstan Honsinger and Tom Cora gave the cello a role in avant garde jazz. Recently, Erik Friedlander Peggy Lee, Alisa Horn and Matthew Brubeck, among others, have further helped to move the cello toward the circle of fully-accepted jazz instruments, using all of its capabilities.

If you do an internet search for Brubeck, you'll get a link that describes the territory he has staked out. It says, "improvising cellist [Matt Brubeck's website](#)." The youngest son of Dave and Lola Brubeck has a master's degree in cello performance from Yale and has worked in a range of symphony and classical chamber settings. His recorded debut as a bowing and plucking improvising cellist came in 1991, when he was thirty, on his father's *Quiet As The Moon*. His impressive performances included a duet with his dad on a theme from Dave's mass, "To Hope: A Celebration." He has worked with musicians as various as Tom Waits and the eclectic *Oranj Symphonette*, with which he plays an passionate opening cadenza on Mancini's "Dreamsville." Brubeck's resume is sprinkled with mentions of duo associations. The most recent is his partnership with the Canadian pianist [David Braid](#).

In their CD called *Twotet/Duextet*, the musicians play five pieces by Brubeck and three by Braid. Matt Brubeck's facility with the instrument, bowing or plucking, seems to allow him to play whatever occurs to him. His full, deep sound takes on an edge of dramatic urgency when he improvises with the bow, as he does to great effect in "Mnemosyne's March" and several other tracks. In "Sniffin' Around," he employs his cello as a baby bass a la Percy

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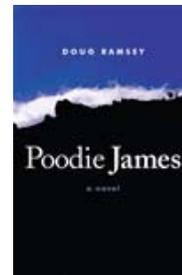
...Doug Ramsey

Doug lives in the Pacific Northwest, where he settled following a career in print and broadcast journalism in cities including New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, San Antonio, Cleveland and Washington, DC. His writing about jazz has paralleled his life in journalism...

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...Doug's books

Doug's most recent book is *Poodie James*, a novel published in 2007.



Previously, he published *Take Five: The Public and Private Lives of Paul Desmond*. He is also the author of *Jazz Matters: Reflections on the Music and Some of its Makers*. He contributed to *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* and co-edited *Journalism Ethics: Why Change?* He is at work on another novel in which, as in *Poodie James*, music is incidental.

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SEARCH

Heath, occasionally letting the strings slap wood as bassist Milt Hinton used to do.

I usually rail against debut CDs in which musicians restrict themselves to original material, not only because it gives the listener nothing familiar to relate to, but also because so often the music is weak. In *Twotet/Deuxtet*, the songs are light years beyond the wispy excuses for blowing that fill so many jazz CDs. Their melodies have strength, the harmonic structures have substance. Even the rhythmic offbeats that open a free piece of instant composition called "Improvisation" develop a melody. It may not be instantly hummable, but it is distinctive. A pair of ballads, Braid's "Wash Away" and Brubeck's "It's Not What it Was," have melodies that might have been written by Stephen Foster. Brubeck's "Huevos Verdes y Jamón" has a Hispano-Caribbean lilt worthy of Sonny Rollins or Chick Corea, Braid's "Mnemosyne's March" Brahmsian gravity and beauty of line.

I had never heard - never heard of - Braid before *Twotet/Deuxtet* showed up the other day. Now, I'm compelled to catch up with his previous work, particularly his sextet made up of Canadian all-stars Terry Clarke, Mike Murley, Steve Wallace, Gene Smith and John MacLeod. Braid's tone, touch, chord voicings and imagination make him one of the most interesting new pianists I've encountered in a long time. In researching him, I discovered that I'm not alone. It turns out that when Gene Lees first heard Braid, he wrote, "If Bill Evans were alive, I'd send Braid's CD to him."

[Alisa Horn](#) is the cellist in pianist Bill Mays' new group The Inventions Trio. She is a protégé of trumpeter Marvin Stamm, the other member of the trio. I wrote [nearly a year ago](#) about Mays convincing classical string players that they could swing when he recruited the cellist and violinist of the Finisterra Trio to perform Bach's "Two-part Invention #8" with an overlay of Charlie Parker's "Ah-Leu-Cha." Horn has been convinced, too. The conviction didn't come easily. She is added to the duo in which for several years Mays and Stamm have been melding jazz and classical music. A classical cellist ingrained with the notion that improvisation should be avoided at all costs because it could lead to (gasp) mistakes, she was terrified at the recording session. Here's some of what Horn wrote in a news release that came with the advance copy of [The Inventions Trio CD](#).

What if I play a WRONG NOTE? During the session, I almost had a breakdown worrying about a shift that I had "missed" during an improvisation. No one else in the studio even heard the mistake or noticed it at all and these are some of the most experienced and well-trained ears in the business! (I was) almost in tears, worried over this horrible imperfection. Bill and Marvin looked at me and just said, "No one is ever perfect and that isn't what this is about. Screw it!"

Since that moment, I have a new outlook on my music and the meaning of "perfect" has changed. Now I understand that perfection is an individual's perception of what the music is and this idea applies to both classical and jazz styles of playing.

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DOUG'S PICKS

CD: Maria Schneider

Maria Schneider, [Sky Blue](#) (artistShare). As I wrote in a [Riffides review](#) of the album, this CD is the finest expression of the composer's restless and evolving talent. She writes with an ear for the capabilities and personalities of the musicians in her band. They respond with improvisations that suit the character of her music. It's a perfect marriage of a writer's intentions and her players' ability to carry them out.

CD: Jay Thomas, John Stowell

Jay Thomas-John Stowell Quartet, [Streams of Consciousness](#) (Pony Boy). Delightful, often profound, intimacies. Thomas on fluegelhorn and Stowell on guitar sometimes blend in ways reminiscent of the Art Farmer Quartet with Jim Hall. When Thomas switches to tenor saxophone, the music moves into Wayne Shorter territory. Those comparisons are unfair to the originality of both of these veteran players, but it's unlikely to be a coincidence that three of the tunes are by Shorter. Bassist Chuck Kistler and drummer Adam Kessler are full contributors to the success of this imaginative recording.

CD: Bing Crosby, Louis Armstrong

Bing Crosby & Louis Armstrong, [Havin' Fun](#) (Storyville). A two-CD set containing several of Crosby's radio shows from the late 1940s and early '50s with Armstrong as the guest, but not the only one. Jack Teagarden, Joe Venuti, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald and Dinah Shore show up, too. The album title, as Louis might say, ain't no stage joke, neither. They really do have fun, occasionally sending up the stilted lines the writers hand them and improvising their own. Great live radio of a kind long gone. Kidding aside - and there's lots of that -- the main thing is the music, and it's all good.

DVD: Miroslav Vitous

Miroslav Vitous, [Live In Vienna](#) (MVD Visual). Another in the series of bassists playing at Porgy & Bess in Vienna. This time the star is Vitous, an erstwhile wunderkind of the double bass who arrived in New York from Czechoslovakia in the late sixties and quickly installed himself in the US jazz scene. After concentrating on his role as an educator, he is again in heavy performance mode. In this concert, Vitous applies his

Horn is exquisite in the trio numbers on the CD, which include Debussy's "Girl With The Flaxen Hair and "Mays' three-movement "Fantasy for Cello, Piano and Trumpet," an important new work. She is impassioned in Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise," and has a stunning introductory moment in the first movement of the "Fantasy." Mays and Stamm, collaborators for years, have developed an empathy that verges on the mysterious. Their duo numbers on this album are among their finest work. In the trio pieces, Alisa Horn complements their magic. She does not sound like a newcomer to improvisation.

The Inventions Trio will be a part of [The Seasons Fall Festival](#) next month, along with James Moody, Miguel Zenon, David Friesen, Karrin Allyson, Matt Wilson, Martin Wind, the Finisterra Trio and the Yakima Symphony Orchestra. I look forward to hearing them in live performance.

Posted by dramsey at September 4, 2007 1:05 AM

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formidable gifts to a range of music including Beethoven, Dvorak, Jewish melody, opera fragments, a lyrical ballad, free improvisation and straight-ahead jazz reflecting his days with Miles Davis. This is a solo bass recital. Despite the claim of the minimal liner notes that Vitous is accompanied by pianist Fritz Pauer and drummer John Hollenbeck, they are nowhere to be seen or heard.

Book: Lee Konitz

Andy Hamilton, [Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art](#) (Michigan). Unlike the overwhelming majority of books made up of verbatim interviews, this one works. Konitz's disarming candor about himself and others and Hamilton's organizational and writing skills transcend the form to create a balanced portrait of the alto saxophonist, one of the great individualists in jazz. Hamilton's transitions, insights, and interviews about Konitz with other musicians help make the book a success.

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