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# Outside Real Time

**John Hollenbeck May Fantasize About Life in Music as Only a Composer, but His Drum Chops Are too Good to Put Down the Sticks.**

» By Dan Ouellette » Photo By Scott Friedlander

**P**olyrhythmic drums propelled swirling waves of reeds and open-water whitecaps of brass. Wordless vocals and chants wafted above currents in turmoil. Saxophone blasts and drones mingled with a melancholy bass clarinet and musing flute. Horns repeated a five-note dirge that increased in volume until it thundered into a death-metal march. A pause of pensive melody and pastoral impressionism was followed by an accelerating tumult of frolic.

These were sonic snapshots of John Hollenbeck's wildly imaginative music unleashed last summer at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, as the drummer led the 16-member Jazz Bigband Graz augmented by vocalist Theo Bleckmann. In the breezy, tent-like Congo Hall at the fest's new site, Hollenbeck served as the piston that sparked the band on a journey of wide-angled vistas and treacherous curves.

The show consisted of Hollenbeck's music arranged for the Austrian group and recorded in 2005 as *Joys & Desires* (Intuition), which was released last year in the United States. Jazz Bigband Graz is only one of a passel of projects into which Hollenbeck's plugged. He leads his own Large Ensemble in New York, formed a duo with Bleckmann that's expanded into the Refuge Trio with keyboardist Gary Versace and he teams with saxophonist Jorrit Dijkstra in an electronica improv duo that recently released the intriguing *Sequence* (Trytone).

The drummer collaborates with vocalist/multimedia performance artist Meredith Monk, including her recent "Impermanence" project; provides support as a member of saxophonist Tony Malaby's Tuba Trio with Marcus Rojas; and most importantly helms the wonderfully unpredictable The Claudia Quintet, the 10-year-old group that Hollenbeck said is "my backbone. If all the other stuff went away, I'd be happy enough if Claudia stays."

**H**ollenbeck is sitting in the studio at Brooklyn Recording in the borough's Carroll Gardens neighborhood, where he's mixing The Claudia Quintet's new CD, *For*, scheduled for release in May on Cuneiform. "It's our fourth album and it just happened that I wrote new pieces for people," he said. "So the album name is a little pun." He laughed, then added, "We just started mixing, but so far it sounds good."

A thin man with close-cropped dark hair and an equally dark Fu Manchu, Hollenbeck may excel as a rhythm specialist in his various projects, but his passion resides in his composing. "I am a drummer," he said, "but when I get older, I may not be able to physically do what I can do today. I fantasize all the time about just being a composer. No doubt I'd be up at 6 a.m. doing it day after day. As it goes now, I write in spurts and whenever I can find the time, on a plane or on a subway—anywhere I can be alone and not have to deal with distractions."

Hollenbeck is articulate about his methodology. He sums up his compositional approach in abstract terms: first coming up with a concept that overarches and informs the tunes he writes, then developing access points that allow listeners to engage with the music. Each setting dictates a different conceptual outlook. As Hollenbeck zeroes in on examples of how he confounds convention to create anew, his personal jazz mission becomes all the more fascinating.

"When I work with Theo as a duo, we both play seemingly independent parts that come together for the listener. I write with that in mind," Hollenbeck said.

However, with Jazz Bigband Graz, he used tunes originally written for The Claudia Quintet and rearranged them, but with a twist. "I wanted to make this large ensemble feel and sound like it was a small group," he said. "Even though they have the power and the density that's [poles apart] from Claudia, they were able to think of themselves differently, as if they were playing in a chamber-group atmosphere."

In the *Joys & Desires* liner notes, Bigband Graz co-directors Heinrich von Kalnein and Horst-Michael Schaffer wrote that their ensemble became "submerged in a unique world of composition which leaves the boundaries of conventional big band literature far behind." That, in turn, Hollenbeck said, enabled the group, "to delve more deeply into the concept of a new 'big band sound,' starting with traditional instrumentation and completely leaving behind the traditional forms of big band composition."

Hollenbeck insists there's nothing cerebral about his music, submitting that he wants people to see something of themselves in his compositions. "I'm doing this to give spiritual enlightenment, even if only for a few minutes," he said. "I hope the music takes listeners to some place that's positive."

As for the nuts and bolts of writing a composition, Hollenbeck avoids writing on a piano, at his drum set or on a computer. "The music would start to sound the same after awhile if I

did that," he said. "I know a composer who told me that three quarters of the way through writing a new piece on his piano he realized that he'd written the piece before. It was as if the piano was telling his fingers where to go. One of my goals is to make every piece I write be totally different from anything I've written before."

Because of this, Hollenbeck said that where a song gets its genesis is essential. "Since I want each piece to be unique, each then must have a different starting point. I'm always conscious about that, whether it's focusing on something I heard, something I heard when I played, words or numbers."

Then there's the conceit of developing a story line. Case in point: part two of the "Joys & Desires" three-section suite, titled "After A Dance Or Two, We Sit Down For A Pint With Gil And Tim." The tune romps, sways and teems with humor. Hollenbeck said that the composition, originally written for The Claudia Quintet but also arranged for Bigband Graz, is one of only a few of his compositions that can be played by almost any one of his groups.

Hollenbeck's concept for the piece was to pursue his take on saxophonist Tim Berne's music through different permutations and also to pay homage to composer/arranger Gil Evans. The setting was an Irish bar where he imagines the two getting drunk and dancing. "After a lot of drinking and dancing, Tim passes out and it's

just Gil who's left," said Hollenbeck, who figures Evans would have easily been able to out-drink Berne. "So the first section of the piece is Tim playing as he's getting more drunk, and the second section is when a drunken Gil takes over. That was the initial abstract idea I used."

Another of Hollenbeck's strategies in coming up with a fresh piece is to make everyone in the band play an instrument other than their own for sonic variety. In an upcoming performance piece he's writing to Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermon "The Drum Major Instinct," the first section features three trombonists and the second section spotlights the same three musicians playing different instruments.

This unpredictability is inspiring to the members of the The Claudia Quintet. They look forward to Hollenbeck's challenges.

"John is a composer who definitely sets the bar high," said accordionist Ted Reichman. "He pushes himself hard in everything he does. He's always looking for ways to harness our energy while seeking structural variety. He's intent on not coming up with the same piece. His esthetic struggle as a composer who's come up through jazz is to write compositions that aren't just heads to blow on."

"John is less interested in tradition, less interested in jazz solos and more interested in looking at a symphonic way of improvising," said bassist Drew Gress. "He's got an Ellingtonian

approach where he has control over the material but he also wants you to bring your voice to it. He's resourceful. We stay away from swing generally because he's so good at finding different rhythmic approaches and intriguing groove patterns."

"I trust John immensely," said saxophonist Chris Speed. "He's created his own sound and guided us as a band to bring our personalities into his music. In the early years of Claudia our rehearsals were exasperating because we were all trying to figure out this new way of straddling the boundaries between improvised and composed music. He's taught us that it's up to us to make what he's written good music."

Malaby, who says that Hollenbeck makes his Tuba Trio sound like a sextet because of his orchestrations, recalls their first interaction when they served as faculty at a jazz camp one summer in Farmington, Maine.

"The faculty performed concerts during the week and most played in standard quintets," Malaby said. "But John and I played as a duo. We had never performed together before. Nothing was set. There was no sound check, but we made an immediate hookup. Quickly, I'm gone. I'm into it, and then I notice John quits his drums and is on the piano. We're squawking and squealing when all of a sudden 20 kids in the audience start singing this Indonesian folk song that John had taught them right before the show. It was so shocking, beautiful and otherworldly."

It's that element of surprise in Hollenbeck's imagination that marvels Malaby. "You can be playing along, and John will always throw in a curveball," he said. "He pushes the music into a corner and sprouts this amazing foliage. Every time I play with him, the clouds part and the angels come soaring through."

Hollenbeck's growing prowess has led to gigs as a professor at Jazz Institute Berlin and in March he will be an artist in residence at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Despite such extracurricular activities, as a composer Hollenbeck continues to be indefatigable. He's currently working on four different commissions (including ones for the Earshot Festival in Seattle, the Ethos Quartet from Portland, Ore., and the Youngstown State Percussion Ensemble in Ohio) that will form a four-movement piece inspired by C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*. The project got its start when the Austria-based Studio Percussion Graz asked Hollenbeck to contribute a piece on an erotic theme.

"I would have never picked that subject in a million years," Hollenbeck said. "I started to research the word and came to its root, eros, which led me to C.S. Lewis' book on the four different meanings of love, including the erotic. In a short period of time, I got three other commissions and decided to make a series of pieces on love, with the other themes being friendship, affection and charity."

For Studio Percussion Graz, an all-male percussion ensemble, Hollenbeck has written a

piece about a sexual encounter to be played on drums that resemble a female body. "We'll see how that works out," he said. "It could be a complete disaster. I try to think of composition as a practice that's 100 percent experimental, which means you're bound to have failures. But most of those disasters will never be heard."

Hollenbeck stands as just one of a few accomplished drummers with a high aptitude for composition. He surmises that an intimidation factor may keep drummers from composing, which asks harmonic players to work on lines written by someone whose instincts focus on rhythm.

"I won't be as strong with harmonies as someone dealing with that all the time," he said. "But I use that to my advantage by exploring places where the other guys in a band may not have gone before. I'm not tied down to the 2-5-1s. Through my weaknesses, I'm freer."

He paused, then noted, "Drumming and composing go hand-in-hand. Both jobs require you to think about the big picture. When you're accompanying on the drums, you're shaping the music in real time. When you compose, you're doing the same thing, but more slowly outside of real time."

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