

JOHN HOLLENBECK

The Right Chemistry

By John Ephland ❖ Photo by Jos L. Knaepen

Listening to John Hollenbeck talk is like to listening to John Hollenbeck play. That's how good he is at describing his art. Then again, there's nothing quite like hearing the terrific array of colors and contrasts he has crafted over the course of 11 CDs as a leader of both large and small ensembles.

It's a good thing Hollenbeck's got a knack for explaining his music because some people may not "get it" upon first listen, what with its unconventional twists and stop-on-a-dime turns. Still, for listeners who love intelligent music, this drummer/composer who kicks ass at both positions has his finger on a pulse that a growing number find hard to resist. At press time, he'd just received yet another Grammy nomination, this time in the category Best Instrumental Composition for "Falling Men," a track from his large-ensemble album with the *Orchestre National de Jazz, Shut Up And Dance* (Bee Jazz/Abeille Musique). The title of that CD indicates something about Hollenbeck's personality: You never can tell with this guy.

And that attribute applies to his main gig, the Claudia Quintet, as well. Consider their latest album, *What Is The Beautiful?* (Cuneiform). Full of recited and sung poetry, along with intricate arrangements and freewheeling instrumental expression, the CD is another departure from Hollenbeck's norm-less norm. As critic John Murph aptly noted in a 4½ star *DownBeat* review (December 2011), "The singers play a crucial role on this album because it's Kenneth Patchen's pioneering poetry that serves as its launching pad."

"I knew who Kenneth Patchen was," Hollenbeck explains from the comfort of a Midtown Manhattan hotel lounge chair, "most-

ly because he made two records with poetry and jazz. And I'd read two things in jazz literature about his working with Charlie Mingus, and the other might be a myth that Charlie Parker used to carry around Patchen's poetry books."

As Hollenbeck quietly speaks, the hotel's revolving front door constantly spins nearby. That perpetually swinging door is a metaphor for his busy musical life, which seems to be filled with new opportunities at every turn.

With all things Hollenbeck, musically speaking, there usually is a back-story: "I got this call," he continues, "from Richard Peek, the director of Rare Books, Special Collections [& Preservation] at Rush Rhees Library at the University of Rochester. They were doing an exhibition for Kenneth Patchen's 100th birthday of his poems, paintings and drawings, and covers for record labels and books. And there's a jazz lover in Rochester who, typically for their exhibitions, will fund a CD, a recording of some kind. So they asked me if I wanted to do something. I kind of took it from there."

As the story develops, one can get a peek into the creative process Hollenbeck follows, a process that smacks of Zen, the metaphorical brush following the canvas. "I thought it would be a really interesting project for the Claudia Quintet," he says, "and to make it a commercial release. That was about a year ago. So over the Christmas holidays, I couldn't find any Kenneth

Patchen books in the bookstores, so I went to the library and read just about everything he did. There's a good biography, and that helped. If I found something that hit me in some way, I'd write that down, and I got a list of maybe 20 or so poems. He had a wide variety, but maybe five definite genres that he was working in. So I wanted to take a cross-section of those."

Singers Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann both played crucial, unique roles in the project (Bleckmann having previously worked with Hollenbeck). In this instance, that uniqueness included their using the written word even as Hollenbeck found new ways to compose. He may discuss it as though it were business as usual when he put the music together, but there was something different going on. Commenting on the process of going from the written word to the written note, he says, "I try to separate each piece and really let each piece be its own thing. Like, 'The Snow Is Deep On The Ground'—one of Patchen's love poems—I thought of Theo, I thought of a song, whatever that means, and then just started working with the rhythm, writing down what the rhythm could be.

"The stuff that Kurt's on," Hollenbeck adds, "I had, for the title track, a real idea, but there was no way to put it together beforehand. Kurt came in before anybody else because he couldn't be there on the same day as us. He came in and recited maybe 10 poems. And then I wrote



John Hollenbeck performing in Antwerp, Belgium, Nov. 11, 2011

music, after I had recordings of him reciting the poems. Then I had actual rhythms, and pitches, in some cases. So those pieces were a completely different process than the other ones. There were a couple of poems that I had no idea what they meant [because] they flipped around so many times. For example, the title poem—you think you know, and then all of a sudden, he comes up with a different voice. He goes from dark to light really quickly sometimes. It can be pretty disorienting. Some of them I just knew that I wanted to do something, but I couldn't figure what the poem was about, and it took me a long time. I kept reading the poem."

Hollenbeck comments that certain poems reminded him of something or someone specific. "Some of them are really narrative, like 'Opening The Window,' the last track, is like a story," he says. "Those were a little easier, and then I could just go with the flow and keep the environment. With each one, I just tried to wait and let each one be its own thing, its own direction."

The unpredictable Hollenbeck then offers another revealing tidbit: "What Is The Beautiful? was the first record we [created] in the studio," he states. "[With] all our other records, the music was done; we performed it, and then we recorded it. We performed a couple of the Theo songs right before the recording, but everything else was done in the studio. So I was able to experiment a little, and come up with some things in the studio that I hadn't really figured out. For instance, 'The Limpidity Of Silences' was one of those enigmatic poems that I was trying to figure out for a long time. Consequently, the first [thing] I came up with was to write a piano solo for this poem. And then I had both Kurt and Theo recite it. I had Theo recite it in a kind of whispering voice. I finally ended up embedding that poem quietly in the middle of the piano solo."

Giving the album a special imprimatur, the Claudia Quintet's premiere performance of all the music took place in November at John Zorn's The Stone in Manhattan, with Bleckmann handling the vocals. In attendance was impresario George Wein, who has booked the band for the 2012 Newport Jazz Festival, on Aug. 3–5.

A full, fascinating discussion of Hollenbeck's innovative approaches to writing can be found in his DownBeat essay "Composing From A Drummer's Perspective" (Woodshed, November 2011). Echoing ideas from that article, he extends the conversation, talking about certain advantages unique to drummers. "It comes down to if you're mostly a drummer, you're not working with pitches as much as other instrumentalists are. So that is the first dilemma. But it can be a good thing, because when you start dealing with pitches, you have more of a freer relationship with them. If you're an instrumentalist, you practice a lot of scales, a lot of patterns, and a lot of people call upon those things in their moment of need. When you're composing, you have a lot of those moments. So, you might tend to write something that you've already done, that you know. But if you don't know anything, or you

don't have anything to grab onto, then it's harder in that moment. But in the end, you can hopefully get something that's a bit more refreshing. In essence, that's turning a disadvantage of being a drummer to your advantage. That's a big part of it. Then again, like the access point, if the rhythm element of your piece is strong, you've got a great foundation. It's not as simple as paint-by-numbers, but it could be a B-flat. If it's not a B-flat, try a B. If it's not a B, try an A. I've done an exercise that I talk about in that article where I transcribe a great drum solo and then apply pitches to it. Because the rhythmic element and sometimes the formal element—like in the case of most Max Roach solos—is so strong, the pitches have it easy!"

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Hollenbeck, who serves as a professor of jazz drums and improvisation at the Jazz Institute Berlin, brings his wisdom to the classroom. "I tell my students," he says, "to write a piece with only rhythm and get that really solid. Then you add pitches, and that helps you see how the rhythm aspect is more important. It's a glue—it's a foundational thing. Bob Brookmeyer said something like, 'Pitch is the color; rhythm is the carrier.' It's important, but you gotta have those rhythm elements to be very strong. As a drummer, you're usually looking at this overall picture of a piece. You're playing and helping with the overall thing, and that comes in real handy as a composer. Non-drummers maybe haven't done that as much. They may be writing good small things, parts or miniatures, but it's hard as a composer to see the whole thing—what the piece means, what the emotional impact of the piece is, and where's it going. So, as a drummer, a lot of times you're more responsible than anyone else in the group is to make that part of it happen. You can destroy it, or you can make it happen."

For Hollenbeck, the other side of the player-away-from-the-drums coin is that of the arranger. In October, Hollenbeck took on key duties in tribute to another one of his musical inspirations, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler. "Working

with Kenny at the Jazz Standard," he notes, "was a combination of 'our thing, my thing and Kenny's thing' at the same time. Everybody was really happy with the way it held all those kinds of things at the same time. When you're arranging, if you go too far, then it's not arranging anymore—people don't hear the song, and they don't recognize that it's an arrangement. But if you don't go far enough, then it's like you really didn't do anything [laughs]. So, it's a balancing act."

Hollenbeck's process is somewhat similar whether he's arranging for a small group or large ensemble. "When I start arranging," Hollenbeck says, "I arrange it so far that it becomes another thing. Take 'Foreign One,' the first track from the last John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble record, *Eternal Interlude*. It started out as an arrangement of 'Four In One,' the Monk tune, and then became something else. But in the case of all the arrangements I did for the Frankfurt Radio Big Band that my large ensemble played at Newport in August, those actually maintain the essence of the song. You can hear the song. So I played with that to see how far I could go but still keep the song."

The performance at the 2011 Newport Jazz Festival featured arrangements Hollenbeck wrote for special guests Bleckmann, Kate McGarry and Gary Versace. The music was recorded with the 18-piece Frankfurt band, and the resulting album is due out in April. "It's an arrangement record of pop tunes," Hollenbeck states, "but I put a couple of my tunes on it as well.... Part of the process [was] trying to figure out what pop music is to me." Hollenbeck notes there are a couple Jimmy Webb tunes, a Queen song and music by Imogen Heap, Nobukazu Takemura and Kraftwerk, as well as the traditional tune "A Man Of Constant Sorrow."

Having seen Hollenbeck perform with the University of Michigan Jazz Ensemble, playing works from *Eternal Interlude* (Sunnyside), this writer got a firsthand look at how the drummer works with a large ensemble. "I have a conductor," Hollenbeck explains. "With the large ensemble, the leading-the-band part, a lot of it takes place beforehand, in rehearsals. The actual leading is more about being in the moment. Not really for cues, but the inspiration, the time, the vibe. You can't write it down, so you have to talk through it." In fact, Hollenbeck was at his helm behind the drum kit, while Ellen Rowe, associate professor and Chair of Jazz and Contemporary Improvisation, conducted the ensemble in the sanctuary of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. It was magical to witness how Hollenbeck's pre-show prep freed him up to be "just" one of the players while Rowe took charge of the complex piece of music.

While arranging for Wheeler and working and studying with Brookmeyer were real treats, when asked about other musical influences, Hollenbeck quickly goes into deep reflection. The self-effacing artist then chooses to add some autobiographical history. "What hap-

pened to me was, from day one, I was looking at my brother, Pat, who's a composer/arranger/drummer," Hollenbeck says. "And then there's our first teacher, Russ Black. He believed you should do everything: You should be equipped to play every style and every percussion instrument, and you should be able to read well. That was something that was drilled into me. Both my brother and Russ Black gave me this sense that all musicians are composer/arrangers. Which, now I know, is not true [laughs]. I didn't realize that until I went to college [at Eastman School of Music].

"Two things I realized when I got to college," Hollenbeck continues, "were that a lot of people haven't been listening to jazz. I'd been listening to it since I was 10. A lot of these people were just kinda getting into jazz. When I got to college, I still hadn't written too much. I'd written one big-band arrangement and some different arrangements and songs, but I was trying. A lot of people weren't trying. I thought, 'Oh, you don't have to do it.' I was always under the impression you *had* to do it as part of the deal. So, a lot of it was my brother pushing me and bringing records home."

Eventually mentioning some better-known artists who've influenced him, Hollenbeck goes on to say, "I met Bob Brookmeyer when I was about 12. In high school, I still didn't have the skills to do much. I was still learning basic theory. It took me a couple years at Eastman to get the skills together, and then I went to the Banff Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music and met Muhal Richard Abrams. That was a catalyst moment. Like most people, I was gathering up all this material but didn't have a way to get it out, with the tools and skills. So, it was just a matter of getting that together."

The prolific Hollenbeck chuckles when reflecting on how many projects he juggles. "Right now I'm trying to work on a conceptual piece from an Earth, Wind & Fire song for the Gotham Wind Symphony," he says. "I'm also trying to get a new group together, and that's a little vague. I think I have a gig, and I think I have a group for the gig. It would be [saxophonist] Scott Robinson, [keyboardist] Craig Taborn and [trumpeter] Ambrose Akinmusire. So, I definitely feel another group coming on."

As to what kind of sound this band would have, Hollenbeck seems to point in all directions. Is it based more around the particular musicians rather than an idea? "Yeah," he says. "I want to get people who are really different than me. That's the main thing, different than each other and who don't know each other or don't play in each other's zones already. These guys definitely fit that category. I've only played with Scott. I know Craig, but I've never played with him. I know Ambrose, and I like his music a lot. I'm starting to think about what we'd actually play."

Looking back, Hollenbeck confesses, "I always thought I wanted to be a straightahead jazz drummer, and be like a big-band drummer. I kind of hit my climax around 1997, '98,

playing with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra in Mel Lewis' old chair, subbing for John Riley on some Mondays. But I was also playing other Mondays at alt.coffee in the Village with our newly formed Claudia Quintet. During this period, I feel like I finally saw who I was, or at least who I wanted to be, which involved a combination of leading a group, composing and playing non-genre-specific music."

The Claudia Quintet—formed in the wake of another band, the Refuseniks—currently features acoustic bassist Drew Gress, accordion player Ted Reichman, reedist Chris Speed

and Matt Moran on vibes and percussion. Hollenbeck explains the Claudia Quintet's mission in a matter-of-fact manner: "I wanted this group to be able to play completely notated 'new music' as well as jazz-based, improv-based music. So I was emulating the common-name format of chamber ensembles.

"I was thinking and plotting my own group since my first days in New York in the early '90s. After many years, it finally came together, with the right chemistry of personnel and instrumentation. Something I can truly call my own."

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