

**JOHN HOLLENBECK'S
LARGE ENSEMBLE
MEETS JIMMY WEBB**

BIG BOSS GROOVE

BILL DOUTHART

BY ROBERT BAIRD

It's a poet's dream—a lone figure silhouetted against wide-open western skies, strapped to a single telephone pole among an endless string of similar poles running across endless miles of unbroken expanse of deserted grasslands. It was an obvious symbol of loneliness, especially to a songwriter with a broken heart. The juxtaposition of a man so alone, yet so close to wires humming with a mass of human interaction was the emotional hook. Poetic license changed the name of the actual location from Washita to Wichita. And with its gentle, winsome melody and timeless central couplet, “I need you more than want you / and I want you for all time,” it's become one of the world's most irresistible pop songs. Glenn Campbell made it a hit in 1968, the year Jimmy Webb wrote it. Hoboken native Frank Sinatra, not to mention hard rockers the Stone Temple Pilots, couldn't resist its charms. Finally, BBC2 referred to it as “one of those rare songs that seems somehow to exist in a world of its own—not just timeless but ultimately outside of modern music.” And now, Webb's enchanting “Wichita Lineman”

has been turned into a big-band number, thanks to drummer, arranger, composer, and Large Ensemble leader John Hollenbeck.

Hollenbeck, whose ambitious career has danced back and forth between classical and jazz for years, chose to open one of his most challenging and yet most populist records yet, *Songs I Like a Lot*, with Webb's oddball masterpiece. In place of the ocean of strings heard in Campbell's version, there's now a 16 pieces of brass and reeds, a drummer, a mallet percussionist and a pair of vocalists.

Hollenbeck knew going in that remaking “Wichita Lineman” as a big-band number, complete with parts for male and female singers and vocalise, would be a challenge. “When you compose, no one has any preconceived notions. If you know ‘Wichita Lineman,’ you’re kind of expecting to hear ‘Wichita Lineman.’ [laughter] And also, if it’s a great song, you don’t want to fuck it up—you want to make it great, but in a different way. Or show a different angle. So there’s a bit more pressure there to find these essential ingredients and then see what you can do.

“With ‘Wichita Lineman,’ I didn’t even listen to it. I just thought about what I remembered it sounding like and then wrote it. I think it’s pretty close to the original, but I tried to emphasize the really evocative opening and ending of the song. I just loved that, so I played with that.

“I would normally arrange something just the same as if I was composing something. You tear it apart, kind of analyzing it in the process, finding newer things for it, and then kind of put it back together again. And it may or may not sound like the original. ‘Wichita Lineman’ is more like a reorchestration and rearrangement. With the other Jimmy Webb tune [‘The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress’], I found all this other material and made it a really long journey using that tune.”

Hollenbeck, a central figure in New York City’s more cutting-edge jazz circles, smiles across the table between bites of eggplant at one of his favorite Asian veggie joints in Hell’s Kitchen when I mention that the title of *Songs I Like a Lot* seems a little silly—too simple to be serious.

“At first I thought I had to say, ‘Songs That I Love,’ but once I looked that up and that was kind of taken . . . and do I really love these songs . . . I’m not sure. So yeah, *Songs I Like a Lot*, it’s a little bit of a joke. Really, it’s more like ‘Songs I like a lot, that if you haven’t heard them, here they are and maybe you’ll like them too.’ Or, ‘Here’s a song you probably know, but it sounds a little different.’”

A little different? That’s putting it mildly. The two Webb tunes are mixed with “All My Life,” one of a small number of Ornette Coleman tunes to have lyrics, and Queen’s “Bicycle Race,” by Freddie Mercury. The wildest pitch is a big-band arrangement, with sections featuring jazz that’s both in and out, of the bluegrass anthem “Man of Constant Sorrow,” a song made famous in recent years due to its central place in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

On *Songs I Like a Lot* and other projects, the drummer and band leader

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readily acknowledges that his vision as an arranger has been shaped and expanded by working with iconoclastic singer Theo Bleckmann (joined on this project by singer Kate McGarry), who has sung on many Hollenbeck projects. His work with modern classical composer Meredith Monk has also been a big influence on the way Hollenbeck writes and, in this case, arranges for voices.

“Theo and I started out as a duo, and unlike a lot of instruments, [drums and voice] are not really part of each other’s sonic palette, so we could do lots of things because they are so different. And being able to work with someone who could sing a song, but also totally improvise freely, or pretty much do anything, has been a big influence on my writing and arranging.”

“It’s probably redundant to say, but I love working with John,” Bleckmann says. “We have been collaborating for close to two decades now, which allows for fewer words and more music to be made. The great thing about this is that

SONGS

▲ John Hollenbeck

- Theo Bleckmann
- Kate McGarry
- Gary Versace and the
- Frankfurt Radio Big Band

I LIKE

A LOT

we keep pushing each other, and our buttons, preventing us from falling asleep at the wheel, so to speak.”

One really interesting feature of Hollenbeck’s composing and arranging—and in virtually every project he’s part of, his music is a mix of both—is the use of wordless vocals or vocalise. On *Songs I Like a Lot* Bleckmann uses it frequently, beginning with “Wichita Lineman.” Not surprisingly, the wordless passages are a collaboration.

“It’s all written,” Hollenbeck says over lunch, just hours before catching an Air Berlin flight to the Jazz Institute Berlin, where he teaches part time. “The only question is what syllable do you use, and most of the time I leave that up to him. When it’s wordless, when I write the audio notes for the engineer, it will say ‘Theo lyrics’ in the

beginning of the song, and then ‘Theo as instrument.’ So when he’s not singing words, he’s an instrumentalist.”

“At the time he was collecting material for *Songs I Like a Lot*,” Bleckmann says, “I was listening constantly to Jimmy Webb’s own renditions on *Ten Easy Pieces*. Around 15 years ago, I played [for] John Radka Toneff’s version of ‘The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress,’ and he had never heard the song, and loved it. There is nothing

more irresistible than a well-written song with a great lyric. ‘Wichita Lineman’ is a song from the storytelling-songwriting era, and I think John captured that story in his arrangement and in how he elongates the melody, continuing the story in the vocalise section.”

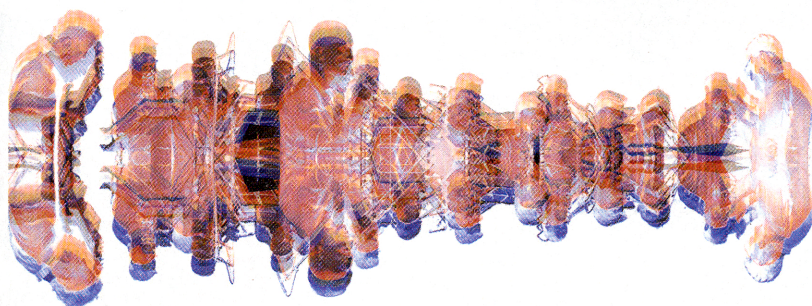
Asked if leading a big band—that is, *guiding* more than two dozen musicians—makes him crazy, Hollenbeck rolls his eyes. After a sip of mint tea, he admits that there are times, after rehearsals, when he can feel a bit . . . well, dizzy. He laughs before saying that he can also feel a

little depressed, a little confused, and sometimes has a pervasive sense of not knowing what's going on. Somewhere, the ghosts of Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and every other big-band leader from the 1930s and '40s, are smiling. "To be honest, a day doesn't go by where I don't think, 'Why am I doing this? Why am I putting myself through this?'"

Along with Maria Schneider, Guillermo Klein, Orrin Evans, Darcy James Argue, and Vince Mendoza, Hollenbeck is one of a new generation of arranger-composer-players who are breathing new life into the old big band tradition. The problem is that big bands are . . . well, big.

"The probability of making 20 people happy at the same time is low," Hollenbeck says, turning his head to hide the smile. "But there's the power of it. When you have that many people, and they're all in tune, they're all thinking, and they're all in the same place—present—it's really powerful. Even if you're losing a lot of money and you've had a bad day, then you get to the gig and you have a moment like that—it just wipes all that stuff away."

A native of Binghamton, New York, Hollenbeck began like most jazz players: by playing in jazz bands in high school and, later, at the Eastman School of Music. His brother conducted a big band at the New England Conservatory,



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and Hollenbeck counts seeing Woody Herman's band live as a formative experience. A stint playing and studying with Bob Brookmeyer convinced him that he wanted to play in and arrange for a band bigger than a quintet, though he also continues to make great jazz with his Claudia Quintet. (Hollenbeck calls his bigger band The Large Ensemble.) He has recorded for the Winter & Winter, Intuition, Omnitone, and Sunnyside labels.

"My arranging was a reaction to playing in a lot of big bands and thinking, 'Why does it always have to do that? Why couldn't it be this?' It was a reaction to things I was not hearing. It's like driving an 18-wheeler. Part of it is reading, but then part of it is how do I make this feel good with all of these people at the same time? There's a real craft to that."

"I know enough about the big-band tradition to avoid it, and that's basically what I want to do. I've heard it, and I'm not into it, really. Not really Duke Ellington, but a lot of it is very macho. My idea is more like a wind ensemble. It happens to be the same instrumentation as a big band. I think of it like that, then see what comes from it."

As far as adventurous arranging for a wind ensemble/big band goes, it doesn't get much more audacious than Hollenbeck's reimagining of "Man of Constant Sorrow," a folk song first popularized by the Stanley Brothers, who recorded it in 1950. It later appeared on Bob Dylan's self-titled debut album. Even before the release of *Songs I Like a Lot*, a version performed by Hollenbeck and his Large Ensemble at the 2011 Newport Jazz Festival became an Internet sensation (see www.npr.org/2011/08/08/139066457/newport-jazz-2011-john-hollenbeck-large-ensemble-live-in-concert).

"I really like Alison Krauss and T Bone Burnett, and I got a DVD of this concert where they played the music of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* live. I don't think I'd even seen the movie at that point. There's a bunch of songs from that movie that I would like to arrange. But that one, I did a little re-

search and found out that a lot of people have played that song, and a lot have done it differently. Like a lot of bluegrass, it's kind of sad but happy at the same time. My version is inspired by the title track of a Pat Metheny record *80/81* where Pat is playing in this great groove."

Because the Frankfurt Radio Big Band was willing to pay to record it, *Songs I Like a Lot* (licensed by Sunnyside for US release) was made in Germany instead of with Hollenbeck's Large Ensemble. The record was produced by Rainer Schulz, engineered by Axel Gutzler, and mastered in Carrboro, North Carolina, by Brent Lambert.

"What we do [in recording] we do for a combination of money reasons and sound reasons. We record digitally, but then we mix it down

to analog. The guys that I work with want to get a good, true sound. The engineer in Frankfurt [Schulz] tried a lot of things, and sometimes they went too far. The vocalists were not happy at all with their presence. He made the band sound really small. I was like, 'This is a big band! There are two singers, and then there are like 15 people over here. When these people are playing loud, it should be louder than those two people singing.' It just didn't make sense to me. I had to go there and say, 'This is what I think it should sound like. You should really feel the big band. I don't want a sound that's so different that when they hear the band live they're going to

be disappointed. I want it to sound *better* live. It *should* sound better live."

In an age when electronics have trickled into nearly every kind of music, Hollenbeck does not use laptops. "For records, yeah, it's great—I love electronic music. I could easily do stuff with some acoustic guys, and then one guy on laptop. But live, when you just see the laptop guy, you just have to close your eyes. I like the tactile thing. I want to be sure what sound is coming out, and the volume of it. If you hit a button on a computer, you're not really sure what's going to happen. It's becoming an exotic thing to hear just acoustic music. When you hear an instrument like bass sax, it's like, Wow!"

Electronics could only ornament the hard-earned knowledge of musician—*ahem*—psychology that Hollenbeck uses to great advantage in his arrangements and that are the essence of his or any large ensemble.

"You know what happens with jazz musicians is, they think they have to do something different every night. And so after you've done the normal thing, then you go a little less normal, then abnormal, then sooner or later it gets, like, totally wacky. The juxtaposition is pretty interesting. It's the pickled ginger." ■