

## **CODA MAGAZINE-FALL 2002**

John Hollenbeck No Images Composers Recordings CD2002

John Hollenbeck Quartet Lucy Composers Recordings CD2003

John Hollenbeck
The Claudia Quintet
Composers Recordings CD2004

Drummer John Hollenbeck has a widely varied musical background, and his first three recordings as a leader capture a large part of it, while maintaining some stylistic threads that reassure that he's more than a musical magpie. Hollenbeck's credentials include stints with fellow Eastman School of Music grad Maria Schneider's orchestra, Klezmer Madness, Brazilian pianist Pablo Ziegler and Bob Brookmeyer's New Art Orchestra. Brookmeyer is a major compositional influence, and Hollenbeck has won both commissions and awards, including the prestigious Gil Evans Fellowship from the International Association of Jazz Educators. Balancing that academic cred is the fact that he's also participated in a number of small groups that dominate the hardscrabble scene in New York's East Village. Is it any wonder that these three projects cover such a broad spectrum of contemporary sound?

No Images is something of a valedictory statement, recorded primarily in 1995, and partially conceived while Hollenbeck was finishing his degree at Eastman. As the title suggests, the recording deals with themes of sight and perception. The title piece, the sole performance from 2001, is based on a stark poem by Waring Cuney about the death of dreams and played by directing a small electric fan at an old autoharp. The sound shimmers and shifts like metallic guitar feedback, with the occasional plucked string breaking the sonic haze like notes on a hammered dulcimer.

The centerpiece of No Images is a 25-minute tour de force built around a sermon by Martin Luther King about the perils of what he terms "The Drum Major Instinct". The trombone trio of Ray Anderson, David Taylor and Tim Sessions acts as both a chorus, echoing and emphasizing King's distinctive speech patterns, and as vocal parishioners shouting encouragement and agreement to the preacher. Remarkably, Hollenbeck claims that he was unfamiliar with Max Roach's Chattahoochie Red, which makes similar use of King's "I Have A Dream" speech. As if the challenge of improvising around King's mesmerizing cadences wasn't enough, Hollenbeck ups the ante by making the musicians work in the dark, so King's voice becomes the sole focus of their attention. It's a stirring performance that actually manages to surpass Roach's for drama and passion.

The three-part chorus is also the basis for the opening "Bluegreenyellow", which assigns colours to the tenor saxophones of Dave Liebman, Ellery Eskelin and Rick Dimuzio. It marks Liebman's return to tenor after years of concentration on soprano, and he sounds like he never put the horn down.

Liebman and Eskelin return to duet with Hollenbeck on two rousing sets of six improvisations each, while the remaining piece marks the initial meeting of the formidable trio of Hollenbeck, guitarist Ben Monder and the remarkable vocalist Theo Bleckmann.

No Images is an exceptional debut recording — one that might have been a hard act to follow had Hollenbeck released it six years ago. Followed by the first recordings by his two current working bands — Quartet Lucy, with Bleckmann, saxophonist Dan Willis and bassist Skuli Sverrison, and The Claudia Quintet, with reed player Chris Speed, accordionist Ted Reichman, vibist Matt Moran and bassist Drew Gress — No Images sounds like a promise fulfilled.

The Quartet Lucy recording is as filled with the ethereal voice of Bleckmann almost as much as the singer's two recordings as leader, with added textures like Willis' English horn, berimbau and cello. Hollenbeck's Brazilian influences are much in evidence, and he frequently eschews a drum kit for hand percussion.

The music of Old And New Dreams and Codona are two other touchstones, particularly on "Foreva" with its taut bassline, textured sax and wordless, percussive vocals. Like Don Cherry, Hollenbeck seems drawn to exotic rhythms and singsong phrases, and he weaves it all into a form that defies characterization as jazz, new music or anything else. As on his own recordings, Bleckmann is a fearless singer, willing to stitch together improbable techniques, like the combination of Gregorian chant and throat singing that is the backbone of the closing "The Meaning Of Life".

Meditative and moving, Quartet Lucy is on the short side at a shade under 50 minutes, but there is much to savour here.

The Claudia Quintet is the most unified sounding of Hollenbeck's three recordings, filled with music of long tones and small gestures that rewards close listening. Speed, Moran and Reichman are all capable of drawing a variety of sounds from their instruments, and compositions like "Thursday 11:14 p.m. (grey)" find them in deep conversation with hushed tones and muted expression. Gress is the centre of much of the music, often providing the sole melodic element while the other instruments create texture.

As a percussionist-composer, Hollenbeck is relatively unique. With the exception of some of the raucous pieces on No Images, his music glistens more than anything else. Rhythm is frequently subordinate to colour — from the manipulated autoharp on "No Images" to the combined accordion and vibes in Claudia.

Seldom has a young musician given listeners so much to chew on at one time. These three recordings represent an impressive introduction for anyone who hasn't already encountered Hollenbeck.

James Hale