



## Opera & Classical



Critic's Rating

### Album review

## John Hollenbeck

By Doyle Armbrust

### Rainbow Jimmies (GPE)

The charming title of percussionist-composer John Hollenbeck's new album refers to the multicolored sprinkles atop mounds of ice cream. The 41-year-old composed the title track in celebration of his marriage engagement, and the deliberately out-of-phase teams of vibraphone/drums and guitar/clarinet/accordion indeed conjure the image of tiny cylinders of sugar cascading from spoon to dish.

For "Ziggurat (interior)," the Binghamton, New York, native creates a steam-punk atmosphere with chiming alarm clocks and what sounds like a rhythmically driven Ping-Pong-ball burp-gun battle. This boiler-room clamoring evolves into a satisfying groove in the final minutes of the movement, as though the machinery has finally powered up. Coupling that with the construction-site thumps and dings of "Ziggurat (exterior)," Hollenbeck effectively evokes the erection and inner workings of an eccentric, colossal structure, deftly negotiated here by the Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet and the Ethos Percussion Group.

The production quality sits the listener among the performers—most effectively with violinist Todd Reynolds's immaculate execution of the composer's Gray Cottage Studies, a technical minefield for the violin. Reynolds traverses the glissandi of the underwater, frigid world of "Dustish" with enviable nuance of pitch and bow control. Throughout, Hollenbeck's fleet stick work and harmonic structures emerge from the jazz idiom, but the language is entirely his own.





## CD Review: John Hollenbeck 2009

By Richard Kamins

on May 15, 2009 1:30 PM

*Rainbow Jimmies* - The Music of John Hollenbeck: Various Artists (GPE Records) - John Hollenbeck is truly a multi-faceted creative artist. As a percussionist, he's worked with diverse artists such as pianists **Fred Hersch** and **Pablo Ziegler**, fueled the big band recordings of composer/trombonist **Bob Brookmeyer** and the **Schumaker/Sanford Sound Assembly**, and worked alongside **Meredith Monk** on several projects. As a composer, he's created unique works for

various ensembles including his own big band ("*The Blessing*" released on OmniTone Records), a duo with vocalist **Theo Bleckmann**, and 4 CDs with the **Claudia Quintet**. That list just touches the surface of Hollenbeck's contributions to creative music (click [here](#) to see a more complete listing.)

"*Rainbow Jimmies*" is a wondrous and varied collection of his latest compositions. The seven-part "*Gray Cottage Study*", funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship he received in 2007, was written for violinist **Todd Reynolds** and named for Hollenbeck's residence during his stay at the **Blue Mountain Center** in the Adirondack Park region of New York. As befitting the setting, the music is contemplative and exploratory. **Matt Moran** (vibraphone) is the other voice on 6 of the studies with Hollenbeck contributing drums to 4. Reynolds' sound ranges from light and airy to rich, thick, tones that are often both melodic and percussive. Nothing is rushed, no piece overwrought.

2 commissioned works "*Ziggurat (Exterior)*" and "*Ziggurat (Interior)*" are the result of commissions from different percussion ensembles. Both works are inspired by Hollenbeck's interest in architecture (a ziggurat is "a temple tower of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians, having the form of a terraced pyramid of successively receding stories.") "*Z...Exterior*" features the **Youngstown State Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet**, **Glenn Schaft**, music director, and they sure sound like they're having a great time. The construction of the piece features rollicking rhythms, "honking" alto saxes, shouting, sounds that wax and wane yet one always gets the feeling that the 9 musicians are building something together. "*Z...Interior*" is, at times, noisier but no less fun. Here, the **Ethos Percussion Group** sometimes move together while, at other times, the foursome work independently. There are moments (especially the unison parts) when the work is reminiscent of Steve Reich's "*Drumming*."

The Claudia crew (**Matt Moran**, bassist **Drew Gress**, saxophonist **Chris Speed** and accordionist **Ted Reichman**) show up on 2 tracks. "*Sinanari*" (*acoustic remix*) is a hypnotic and relentless mash-up of a very popular Turkish tune - this version would not feel out of place being used at background music for a cinematic car chase. The disc's closer, "*Rainbow Jimmies*", features guitarist **Mark Stewart** (Bang-on-a-Can All-Stars and Paul Simon) and it, too, has a relentless feel. Hollenbeck composes works that might be called "minimalist" with their repetitive phrases but he orchestrates them for maximum effect. The 6 musicians often have independent parts that fit together like a puzzle and the blend of instruments are so sympathetic. Here, the accordion burbles, the vibes chime like a clock at the top of the hour, the clarinet warbles, the drums set up a walking beat and all this goes on for nearly half the piece until an accordion melody (shadowed by Speed's clarinet) rises from a hypnotic vibes phrase. A bit later, Stewart's guitar comes in over a busy beat and soon the band is playing variations of this convoluted melody line while the guitarist plays full chords. A frenzied finish for all, like a train arriving at the station and fading on the vibraphone melody.

"*Rainbow Jimmies*" is much more than a confection atop a dish of ice cream. John Hollenbeck's creation is a fascinating, multi-colored, journey that ignores genres, lays out puzzles for both performers and listeners, and posits hard sounds (drums, vibraphone) against softer ones (clarinet, accordion.) Short melodic fragments give way to longer phrases, drones to quick articulated lines. There's much to absorb so take your time with this excellent recording. Click [here](#) to find out more and hear samples.



## Rainbow Jimmies

John Hollenbeck | GPE Records (2009)

By Troy Collins



Percussionist and composer John Hollenbeck has led a diverse and multifaceted career since his early studies with legendary trombonist/composer Bob Brookmeyer. As a sideman, Hollenbeck has served alongside Brookmeyer, Satoko Fujii, Fred Hersch, Jim McNeely, Patrick Zimmerli, and others in addition to leading his own group, the unclassifiable Claudia Quintet. On a larger scale, he has written for big band, collaborated with new music composer Meredith Monk, and received numerous commissions from wind and percussion ensembles.



Whether writing for the Claudia Quintet or his big band, Hollenbeck's compositions always bear the distinctive stamp of his singular style—an eclectic but cohesive amalgam of advanced jazz harmonies and post-minimalist rhythms bolstered by tuneful melodies and driving rock-like intensity. *Rainbow Jimmies* is no exception, but where previous efforts have focused on his writing and drumming skills equally, this session spotlights his work as a composer first and foremost.

Revealing a keen ear for melody, the opening series of "Gray Cottage" studies features the unique pairing of renowned classical violinist Todd Reynolds and jazz vibraphonist Matt Moran (a member of the Claudia Quintet) intermittently supported by the understated flourishes of Hollenbeck's trap set. Conceived as a series of meditative etudes to test the limits of the violin, these introspective variations reveal Reynolds' lyrical virtuosity as he unfurls bittersweet cadences ranging from austere to soulful, interweaving with Moran's scintillating accents and Hollenbeck's subtle interjections.

Hollenbeck's intricate yet melodious writing for large percussion ensemble is deftly realized on two versions of "Ziggurat." The first, "(Exterior)" employs the Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet in a primal exercise in counterpoint reminiscent of the harmonious canons of Moondog. In a similar vein, the Ethos Percussion Group interprets the percolating exotica of the Balinese gamelan-inspired "(Interior)" with the minimalist rigor of Steve Reich and the kaleidoscopic detail of Max Roach's M'Boom.

The Claudia Quintet makes an appearance on "Sinanari," a fusion of Turkish melodies and Zeppelin-esque stomp from the leader that knits rock intensity to infectious minimalism. The title track closes out the album by adding guitarist Mark Stewart to the quintet. Navigating a series of complex meters and unusual time signatures, Stewart delivers a prismatic array of asymmetrical contours over the quintet's increasingly dramatic prog-rock finale.

*Rainbow Jimmies* is a welcome addition to Hollenbeck's discography, appending an already impressive resume as a creative percussionist and adept bandleader with composer of note.

John Hollenbeck at All About Jazz.  
Visit John Hollenbeck on the web.

Track listing: Gray Cottage Study #1 "Lost In Fog"; Gray Cottage Study #2 "Getting Chilly"; Gray Cottage Study #3 "My Dear"; Gray Cottage Study #4 "Healing And Gratitude"; Gray Cottage Study #5 "Dustish"; Gray Cottage Study #6 "Jazz Hands"; Gray Cottage Study #7 "Tax Penalty Payment Approaching"; Sinanari (Acoustic Remix); Ziggurat (Exterior); Ziggurat (Interior); Rainbow Jimmies.

Personnel: John Hollenbeck: drums (1-7), vibraphone (7); Todd Reynolds: violin (1-7); Matt Moran: vibraphone (1-7); Mark Stewart: guitar (11); The Claudia Quintet (8, 11); The Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet (9); Ethos Percussion Group (10).

Style: Classical  
Published: May 03, 2009



## Rainbow Jimmies

John Hollenbeck | GPE Records (2009)

By Mark Corroto



When encountering drummer John Hollenbeck in a traditional jazz setting, there's usually the distinct feeling that he is something other than a jazz drummer. Where some drummers muscle their way through a set, he prefers to finesse the music, accenting the songs in always new and creative ways. Maybe it is his past experience in other formats such as klezmer, Latin, classical and especially world music, that affords him the freedom to dream beyond the parochial nature of jazz.

His prior discs have been filed under jazz, but seem to want to migrate toward the chamber music section of your record store. Just as the Modern Jazz Quartet and the work of Anthony Braxton refuse to be categorized, Hollenbeck's music reaches out towards European, modern, and ethnic music almost simultaneously.

*Rainbow Jimmies* draws together several commissioned works by Hollenbeck for different groups, but all somehow reconcile Hollenbeck's musical vision and vocabulary.

The first seven pieces feature some combination of Hollenbeck, vibraphonist Matt Moran, and violinist Todd Reynolds. Written to showcase the extensive range and technique of Reynolds, the "Gray Cottage Studies" (mostly very brief) are imaginative, exhilarating and at the same time quite meditative.

The "Ziggurat" (or ancient buildings) compositions were written with construction in mind. The composer is accompanied by the Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet on "Ziggurat (exterior)" and Ethnos Percussion Group on "Ziggurat (interior)." Where the exterior piece amplifies the harmony of all the builders working as one, the interior work song showcases the independent percussionist working towards a whole. The rhythms of teamwork are juxtaposed against the on/off switches of autonomy, and as such these two constructions necessitate they be played side-by-side.

The remaining two sections reunite The Claudia Quintet. "Sinanari (acoustic remix)" is a faux remix of a traditional Turkish song, with bassist Drew Gress, Moran, clarinetist Chris Speed, accordionist Ted Reichman and Hollenbeck playing a precise, machine-like version. The title track allows time to fluctuate as guest guitarist Mark Stewart winds his way through Hollenbeck's complex writing. Not quite jazz nor truly classical, it may just be the middle way. Somebody call the Buddha.

John Hollenbeck at All About Jazz.  
Visit John Hollenbeck on the web.

Track listing: Gray Cottage Study #1 "lost in fog"; Gray Cottage #2 Study "getting chilly"; Gray Cottage Study #3 "my deer"; Gray Cottage Study #4 "healing and gratitude"; Gray Cottage Study #5 "dustish"; Gray Cottage Study #6 "jazz hands"; Gray Cottage Study #7 "tax penalty payment approaching"; Sinanari (acoustic remix); Ziggurat (exterior); Ziggurat (interior); Rainbow Jimmies.

Personnel: John Hollenbeck: drums (3, 4, 6-8, 10, 11), piano (8, 11), vibraphone (7); Todd Reynolds: violin (1-7); Matt Moran: vibraphone (1, 2, 4-8, 11); Mark Stewart: guitar (11); Drew Gress: bass (8, 11); Chris Speed: clarinet and tenor saxophone (8, 11); Ted Reichman: accordion and organ (8, 11); The Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet (9); Glenn Schaft: faculty advisor; Michael Anderson: percussion, Dean Anshutz: percussion, Cory Doran: percussion, Tim Hampton: percussion, Brian Sweigart (leader): percussion; Chris Coles: alto saxophone; Sara Kind: alto saxophone; Evan Hertrick: alto saxophone; Tim Sharek: alto saxophone; Ethos Percussion Group; Trey Files: percussion; Eric Phinney: percussion; Yousif Sheronick: percussion; David Shively: percussion.

Style: Beyond Jazz  
Published: April 30, 2009





## Rainbow Jimmies

John Hollenbeck | GPE Records (2009)

By Lyn Horton



In 2007, percussionist and composer John Hollenbeck won a Guggenheim Fellowship he used to study the extent to which the violin can be pushed instrumentally. To do this, he worked with consummate violinist Todd Reynolds and vibist Matt Moran and created "The Gray Cottage Studies," which provide the majority of pieces for *Rainbow Jimmies* (the remaining four tracks of the recording spotlight other musical groups).



Hollenbeck's muses are his direct experiences with his work surroundings. Generally, he translates them into highly rhythmic and repetitive phraseology. The intended simulation of building a temple is evident in "Ziggurat (exterior)," where the Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet perform unison sax lines at differing intervals, overlaying tribal-like drum beats, vocal calls and tinkling percussive ornamentation. For the title cut, The Claudia Quintet, of which both Hollenbeck and Moran are members, exhibits a similar principle of repetition (to imitate sprinkling decorative jimmies on ice cream) but, in this instance, specific and typically modified phrases overlap one another in a continual progression of changes in tempo, key or instrument.

The elegant and poignant "The Gray Cottage Studies" (reflective of The Blue Mountain Center in New York State where Hollenbeck wrote them) seem to break the pattern of recurrence by moving into more narrow, yet fluid, examination of timbral alteration. Reynolds employs every violin attack imaginable with precision, from legato to pizzicato, staccato and more. The vibes echo or complement the violin's dynamic to create a full vibrancy and resonance. In four out of the seven studies, Hollenbeck offsets the tone colors of the integrated string and vibe sound with the dryness of clicking stick to cymbal or snare combinations.

John Hollenbeck at All About Jazz.

Visit John Hollenbeck on the web.

Track listing: Gray Cottage Study #1 "lost in fog"; Gray Cottage #2 Study "getting chilly"; Gray Cottage Study #3 "my deer"; Gray Cottage Study #4 "healing and gratitude"; Gray Cottage Study #5 "dustish"; Gray Cottage Study #6 "jazz hands"; Gray Cottage Study #7 "tax penalty payment approaching"; Sinanari (acoustic remix); Ziggurat (exterior); Ziggurat (interior); Rainbow Jimmies.

Personnel: John Hollenbeck: drums (3, 4, 6-8, 10, 11), piano (8, 11), vibraphone (7); Todd Reynolds: violin (1-7); Matt Moran: vibraphone (1, 2, 4-8, 11); Mark Stewart: guitar (11); Drew Gress: bass (8, 11); Chris Speed: clarinet and tenor saxophone (8, 11); Ted Reichman: accordion and organ (8, 11); The Youngstown Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet (9); Glenn Schaft: faculty advisor; Michael Anderson: percussion, Dean Anshutz: percussion, Cory Doran: percussion, Tim Hampton: percussion, Brian Sweigart (leader): percussion; Chris Coles: alto saxophone; Sara Kind: alto saxophone; Evan Hertrick: alto saxophone; Tim Sharek: alto saxophone; Ethos Percussion Group; Trey Files: percussion; Eric Phinney: percussion; Yousif Sheronick: percussion; David Shively: percussion.

Style: Beyond Jazz

Published: May 29, 2009



Featured Artist: John Hollenbeck

CD Title: Rainbow Jimmies



**Year:** 2009

**Record Label:** GPE Records

**Style:** Free Jazz / Avante Garde

**Musicians:** John Hollenbeck (drums, piano, vibraphone), Todd Reynolds (violin), Matt Moran (vibraphone), Mark Stewart (guitar), Ted Reichman (accordion, organ), Drew Gress (bass), Chris Speed (tenor saxophone, clarinet), The Ethos Percussion Group, The Youngstown State Percussion Collective and Saxophone Quartet

**Reviewed by:** Dave Wayne

**Review:** Percussionist and composer John Hollenbeck is a relentlessly multi-faceted musician who moves with ease between the worlds of classical, jazz, avant-garde, and progressive rock. Many know him as the creative leader of the Claudia Quintet, an innovative small ensemble whose music is as enjoyable as it is iconoclastic. In the past few years, besides leading his own big band project, Hollenbeck has also worked with artists as diverse as Bob Brookmeyer, avant garde vocalist Theo Bleckmann, Klezmer virtuosos David Krakauer and Frank London, avant-garde composer and performance artist Meredith Monk, and the unclassifiable pianist Satoko Fujii and trumpeter Natsuki Tamura (in their co-operative 'Junk Box' Trio). Rather than spreading himself too thin, this wide stylistic embrace seems to feed Hollenbeck's creative fires.

"*Rainbow Jimmies*" is more about Hollenbeck the composer than it is about Hollenbeck the drummer, or Hollenbeck the jazzman. Though the CD features a variety of different groupings – from violin / vibraphone duets, to percussion and saxophone ensemble works, to two pieces for the Claudia Quintet – "*Rainbow Jimmies*" comes across as a tightly conceived whole, rather than a collection of commissioned odds and ends. The seven Gray Cottage Studies, which constitute part of Hollenbeck's Guggenheim Fellowship project, were written for violinist Todd Reynolds (you may know him from his work with the Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project and the New Music ensemble 'Bang On a Can'). Reynolds, whose violin playing here is nothing short of amazing, is joined in a series of duets and trios by Matt Moran on vibraphone, and by the composer on drum kit and vibes. Hollenbeck, in a brief liner note, mentions that the Gray Cottage Studies were written in a bucolic, pastoral setting. Hollenbeck, Reynolds, and Moran successfully capture an airy, open-ended, nature-centric sensibility replete with bird song, sun-dappled forest floors, and the silent gliding of a canoe on a fog-shrouded morning lake. At the same time, each study is based on a specific violin technique. Some of these techniques are quite apparent; the brief Study #3 is all about pizzicato, Reynolds' bow rattles over the strings like chattering teeth in Study #2, and dips across all four strings like a canoe paddle in still lake water in Study #1. The rather spooky Study #5 features very elongated and odd-sounding glissandi over Moran's vibraphone ostinato. The other studies are less obvious, violinistically, though no less rewarding. Hollenbeck joins the duo on Studies #4, #6 and #7, which have the same careful construction and rhythmic tension that is always evident in the work of the Claudia Quintet. Reynolds absolutely outdoes himself with a virtuosic and emotionally-charged solo over shimmering bowed vibraphones. I'd also add that there are some really beautiful and memorable melodies here – particularly on Studies #4 and #7.

The two pieces featuring the Claudia Quintet would not be out of place on any of their recordings, though it seems to me that, here, improvisation is somewhat de-emphasized, if not eliminated altogether. The maze-like, propulsive 'Sinanari' is based on a popular Turkish song that Hollenbeck dissected and reassembled into a totally new composition replete with odd harmonies, jagged rhythms, and high-precision ensemble passages. The title track – for me the *pièce de résistance* of the whole CD – opens with Hollenbeck's interpretation of the sound of jimmies – those little multi-colored sugary bits used to decorate desserts – falling on ice cream. The quintet (plus guest guitarist Mark Stewart – also from Bang on a Can) pull this marvelously humorous and fiendishly difficult device off with ease and grace. The action shifts continually, though my favorite part of the piece features a subversively twisted fuzzed-out guitar ostinato that resembles something Robert Fripp might write after spending the week with Anthony Braxton. Stewart's chameleonic guitar work fits in beautifully with the Claudia Quintet regulars.

The remaining pieces – 'Ziggurat (interior)' and 'Ziggurat (exterior)' are also quite tightly composed, and seemingly involve little or no improvisation. But both are brilliantly written and beautifully executed. As the titles suggest, both pieces are inspired by the processes involved in the construction of a shrine or sacred building. The result is a bit more literal than the other pieces on the CD – replete with restless, relentless clanking of miscellaneous metal and wood percussion and the rhythmic chanting of the workers. Here, Hollenbeck's interest in some of the repetitive and rhythmic devices explored by minimalist composers such as Steve Reich and Jon Gibson are most apparent, though the result is nothing like minimalism.

Amazingly diverse and ceaselessly fascinating, "*Rainbow Jimmies*" is an essential document by one of America's most inventive and original composers, and a must-have recording for fans of Hollenbeck's Claudia Quintet.