

HIROKI NISHIOKA



G. CALVIN WESTON

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

G. Calvin Weston is a drummer from Philadelphia, where he became an active musician as a teenager. He joined Ornette Coleman's Prime Time band at 17 and went on to work with James "Blood" Ulmer, John Lurie's Lounge Lizards, Tricky, Marc Ribot, Derek Bailey and many others. He's recorded several albums and *Improv Messenger* is the latest under his own name. When we spoke, he was just heading out the door for a last-minute show in New York with vocalist Kaylé Brecher before leaving in the morning for a European tour with John Medeski and David Fiuczynski playing John Zorn's *Bagatelles*. This part of the conversation goes back to Philadelphia and Weston's musical origins.

The New York City Jazz Record: How did your audition with Ornette Coleman's Prime Time come about in the first place?

G. Calvin Weston: Charlie Ellerbe is a guitar player that played with Ornette for years and he lived two blocks from me. He mentioned that Ornette was looking for a drummer, so he took me up to New York and that's how that went. I also played in a band with Charlie in north Philly when I was still in high school, so I had to go to New York, catch a late train back, go to school in the morning, but after music class, I'm outta there and I went straight to a rehearsal hall where I had my drums set up and I just played for the rest of the day. I was also in a band back then called The Bad Influence, from 1970-75, so I was always at the rehearsal hall after school rehearsing and playing.

TNYCJR: I saw a photo you had with Michael Hines and Stanley Miller. Were they the Bad Influence cats?

GCW: Yes! That was The Bad Influence: Michael played bass, Stanley played guitar and is actually a very multi-talented musician. He still plays guitars and keyboards and Mike still plays bass. We lived in the same neighborhood. I lived on the 2500 block of Chadwick Street and they lived on the 2600 block of Bancroft. We all went to the same elementary school, M. Hall Stanton. We had a band at the age of 15, 16 years old. We played with this blues and R&B singer Chuck Jackson; he used to do that song "Any Day Now". We also used to play with the soul singer Barbara Mason; she sang that song "Yes, I'm Ready". She saw us on the street playing and...

TNYCJR: ...and told you she was ready [laughs]

GCW: She hired us as her band and we weren't even old enough to go into bars yet. Back then, every neighborhood had a band, two or three bands. We were doing cabarets, ballrooms and stuff like that and we weren't even really supposed to be in ballrooms. I never had a regular job. This has been what I've been doing all the time, through the ups and downs, the high struggles and low struggles and everything, you know?

TNYCJR: Since you were a kid.

GCW: Since I was a kid. I actually started playing at the age of six. My uncle used to take me up to the Uptown Theater where every Sunday they had a matinee show where the Motown review came through. I saw everybody on Motown in the '60s: The Jackson 5, Little Stevie Wonder, The Temptations, The Four Tops. That theater still stands, actually abandoned today, right up there on Broad between Susquehanna and Dauphin, and I go by every day. I hope they name it a historical site and start building it back up.

TNYCJR: So, coming from the funk and R&B thing, Mahavishnu Orchestra, Billy Cobham and Narada Michael Walden opened your musical mind, right?

GCW: Yeah, because, to tell you the truth, I didn't listen to a lot of standard jazz, like bebop and Coltrane, Charlie Parker, until after I got out of Ornette Coleman's band. So, the Mahavishnu Orchestra really opened me up at the right time, when I was getting into Ornette's group, because it was different—different kinds of time signatures and it was a total different kind of energy. When I went to play with Ornette, the truth of the matter is I had no concept or had even heard his name before. So, when I went to audition for him, I didn't know what to play. It was so out and different sounding—two guitars, two basses, two drummers and a horn—I didn't know what to do. So I went home for a week after the first night to listen to some stuff—mind you, I'm just this 17, 18 year old, young teenager—I just listened to a whole bunch of Mahavishnu Orchestra. I just had to come up with something to play on his music. Because, like I said, coming from playing funk and R&B, I had to go out, I had to turn my head totally in another direction. Ornette had given me a list of his tunes. So, every tune that I heard of Mahavishnu, I would write down the name of that tune beside one of Ornette's tunes. So, when Ornette would call out, "fellas, let's play 'Song X'", right next to it, I had "Birds of Fire". So when he played "Song X", I was actually playing "Birds of Fire" from Mahavishnu. And he called out two more tunes and I had another Mahavishnu tune written beside that and then, by the time we got through some tunes, Ornette looked at me and said, "Calvin, that's good, I figured you went home, listened to some stuff and you actually learned something." But I never told him I was playing Mahavishnu tunes to his tunes. As years went on, I kind of grasped what Ornette really wanted. He wanted me to play melody, improvise around the melody of every instrument and improvise around the solos while also keeping a beat. So, to go in and out, in and out of the rhythm and play the melody sporadically throughout the tune.

TNYCJR: You worked with guitarist James "Blood" Ulmer at the same time you worked with Ornette?

GCW: No. Well, yes. I met Blood at one of Ornette's rehearsals. When Ornette was moving in another direction I started playing with Blood. I had come into Ornette's band after [drummer] Ronald Shannon Jackson left and formed the Decoding Society. Blood had two drummers at one time too: it was myself and Ronald Shannon Jackson. Amin Ali was on bass, son of Rashied Ali, and he lives in Philly too and I hook up with him sometimes. Then Shannon went on and kept doing more things with Decoding Society and I still play with Blood to this day. After that era, that's when I had some kind of audition with John Lurie and the Lounge Lizards.

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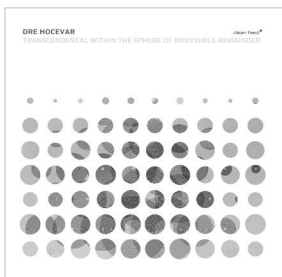
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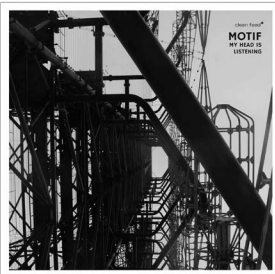
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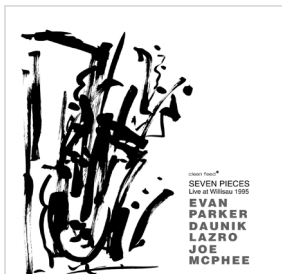
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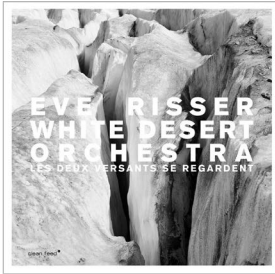
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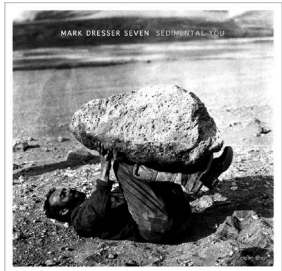
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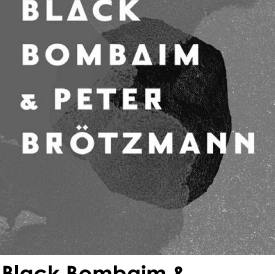
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TNYCJR: Are there certain things that you change about your approach to the music or to the instrument when you work with another drummer?

GCW: It's all about improv and listening, you know? I don't want to be playing the same thing the other drummer is playing, so I kinda counterpoint on his accents. If he's playing a straight beat, I would syncopate what he is playing, play on the upbeat or in between his beats.

TNYCJR: Did you guys talk about that much, you and the other drummers?

GCW: No. We play the form around the melody. If Blood likes it he says, "okay, let's stick with that" and then we counterpoint each other. But me and the drummer, we never talked about it because we're always listening to each other. Me and [fellow Prime Time drummer] Denardo [Coleman], we never talked about what beat we were going to play or nothing like that and me and Shannon never talked about it because we know not to get into each other's way. And each of us playing the melody at a different time in space made it different anyway because, you know, in improv, nothing is the same the second time around.

TNYCJR: I've seen video where you're performing with Prime Time on electronic drum pads. Did that group get you into electronics or was that you?

GCW: I got into that on my own. I still have some electric drum pads here that I play sometimes, but I'm not good at electronic stuff at all. It adds another voice, but I really just like playing acoustic drums.

TNYCJR: You're headlining the first night of 577 Records' NYForwardFestival in December, celebrating your new album *Improv Messenger*. There's electronics on there, right?

GCW: No, no electronics on there. It's all acoustic. I play all the instruments: bass, guitar, trumpet, keyboards and drums. I was actually experimenting. I had mic'd all my drums in my house and just put the drum tracks down first with no click track and then I got this keyboard and then I'm gonna put this track down... That's how I did that record.

TNYCJR: I saw you play some trumpet with your group Big Tree. How long has trumpet been a part of your arsenal?

GCW: When I was in high school I had to pick another instrument, so I picked cornet. I got sound to come out of it and that's it. It's all total improv. If you asked me to play a C, I don't even know where it's at. That sound is what I play off of.

TNYCJR: Did you take private drum lessons too?

GCW: I never took private drum lessons with anybody. There was this guy when I was younger that lived on my block, I forget his name, but he used to sit outside and practice with a drum pad all the time. He taught me some things. Then I went up to his house and he had his drums and he would play. He was basically a jazz, swing and bebop player. That was in the '70s also. But I never took a lesson from him, I just went to go watch him play. And that's how I learned, just watching, going up to the Uptown Theater when I was six or seven years old. I always used to focus on the drummer. And I just automatically knew how to play when I sat behind the drums.

TNYCJR: Did you practice a lot or just play a lot?

GCW: I did practice some rudiments and I did play a lot, so it went hand in hand.

TNYCJR: Do you still practice?

GCW: I still practice, but mostly on the practice pad, just keeping my strokes even. I don't know how many drums I've got up on my third floor. I used to practice all the time when I had a set up there, but now, since I'm moving so much, everything is just scattered around. I switch drumsets out, play this drumset, then play that drumset so... I don't practice a lot, only on my pads right now. But I listen to a whole bunch of music all the time.

TNYCJR: I recently read a commentator reviewing another drummer saying that it was "refreshing" to see and hear a drummer hitting so hard. I think of your music as powerful, but I don't necessarily think of you as hitting hard—same with Elvin Jones. Is hitting hard something that you think is important or something you think about at all?

GCW: No. To tell you the truth, any drummer can play hard, but not a lot of drummers can play soft. I don't try to play hard, but I just play what the music calls for...and I use my imagination. That's something drummers have to understand: don't be afraid to use your imagination. ❖

For more information, visit facebook.com/g.calvin.weston. Weston's *Improv Messenger* is at Scholes Street Studio Dec. 9th as part of 577 Records NYForwardFestival. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Ornette Coleman—*Of Human Feelings* (Antilles, 1979)
- James "Blood" Ulmer—*Freelancing* (Columbia/CBS, 1981)
- John Lurie National Orchestra—*The Invention of Animals* (Amulet, 1992-93)
- James Carter—*Layin' in the Cut* (Atlantic, 2000)
- Grant Calvin Weston—*Nassira* (Amulet, 2008)
- Grant Calvin Weston—*Improv Messenger* (577 Records, 2016)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

option I know of. Not that releasing experimental music is a goldmine, but Andreas really respects musicians and tries to make it financially acceptable for everyone. HUBRO is also willing to put money into other stuff that needs to be done like getting a photographer to get some decent band photos."

HUBRO discs are available on streaming services and as downloads. "I prefer listening to LPs and CDs myself, but most of the listeners in Norway use streaming," Meland notes. "And we need to be available where people are." Although HUBRO aims to release discs in both CD and LP formats, about a dozen are only available as vinyl. When it comes to a particular disc, "sometimes we sell more LPs than CDs," he adds. Usually 1,000 to 1,500 are initially pressed, but with repressing almost the entire catalogue is available. Among HUBRO discs scheduled for 2017 are *Chromola* by 1982, Stephan Meidell's *Metrics*, *Ishihara* by Cakewalk and *Phosphorescence*, a Dans les Arbres session with Wallumrød.

A couple of years ago Meland relinquished the position of ECM's Norwegian label manager in order to devote more time to HUBRO. When it was five years old, the imprint was conclusively established as a force on the international music scene, remembers Meland. "In a way it felt like it had reached a new level," he recalls. Two years and 30-odd releases later the label continues to evolve. ❖

For more information, visit hubromusic.com