



BRUCE PHILLIPS

# JOHN CLARK

BY ANDERS GRIFFEN

French horn player John Clark is an award-winning composer known for his work with Gil Evans, The Mingus Orchestra, Jaco Pastorius, McCoy Tyner, Hank Jones, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter and numerous artists in jazz, pop, classical as well as the studio and Broadway arenas. He studied horn with Verne Reynolds, James Stagliano, Thomas Newell and Paul Ingraham and composition and improvisation with Jaki Byard, Ran Blake and George Russell, earning a M.Mus. with honors from New England Conservatory in 1973. His newest album, *Sonus Inenarrabilis: Nine Live Plays the Music of John Clark*, is now out on Mulatta Records.

**The New York City Jazz Record:** Did you play your horn today?

**John Clark:** Absolutely. I pretty much play every day. I have a regular routine that takes 30-40 minutes and I always do that. But, if I have something coming up, I do a lot more practicing.

**TNYCJR:** Is there a reason that you practice every day?

**JC:** That's a really interesting question. I don't know. I do know that if I didn't do that and all of a sudden I had a gig, it might be a problem. But, part of the reason is I enjoy it. There's just something really basic about buzzing into a long tube of metal and getting a sound out of the end that I really dig. So, it might be just as simple as that, you know?

**TNYCJR:** As a student, I assume that you didn't really study jazz in school.

**JC:** Not really. My instrument wasn't really included in any jazz studies of those days. I studied classical music but, from the time I decided to be a musician, I was always aiming toward being a jazz musician.

**TNYCJR:** When was that?

**JC:** Kind of late, like in my twenties. I didn't really decide to specialize in the horn until I was in the military. In the Coast Guard band, that's where I kind of discovered that thing about buzzing into the long cylindrical tube of metal. I really enjoyed playing the horn. So, okay, this is what I'm going to do, but I'm going to be a jazz musician too.

**TNYCJR:** Did that inspiration come from the stuff that you were listening to?

**JC:** Absolutely and the fact that I always loved to improvise, from the time I ever started playing any instrument. Reading music is cool and everything, but I kind of preferred to play by ear or just fool around and try different things and that's how I got thrown out of the band and the orchestra when I was in junior high.

**TNYCJR:** So what were some of those early influences?

**JC:** Interestingly, it wasn't Julius Watkins, David Amram and Willie Ruff, although I have the utmost respect for all of them—in fact, they're going to appear in the jazz horn blog that Vincent Chancey and I are putting together called "Crosstalk in the Crosswalk" to raise awareness of the French horn in jazz; we're going to launch it very soon—but really it was Miles Davis and John Coltrane and that era of jazz. At New England Conservatory in 1970 I started focusing on Coltrane. Actually, as soon as *A Love Supreme* came out, I was on the turntable transcribing it and trying to play all that stuff on the horn, which, you know...

**TNYCJR:** Kept you busy.

**JC:** [laughs] Really kept me way, way busy, but looking back on it, that was really kind of a really roundabout way to finding where I wanted to go. I didn't know exactly where I wanted to go, but I knew that was the way to get there.

**TNYCJR:** Do you talk to your students about the music business and how to make a living?

**JC:** Sometimes. Any student that wants to know something that I know about the music business, I'll tell them, but I'll give you an example from an interview I saw the other day. You know this concert they had in Central Park, Global Citizen? Metallica was one of the big acts. So, I happened to see the drummer, Lars Ulrich, being interviewed and they asked him, "what's the music business like today? Where's it going?" and he just flat-out said, "nobody knows". And I found that really refreshing. I mean, if anybody tries to tell you that they know, they're lying or they're fooling themselves, because nobody knows.

**TNYCJR:** Maybe it's easier to say, instead of where the business is going, where it came from. What has changed over the last 30 or 40 years besides the internet? What changed in the '80s or '90s before we were all online?

**JC:** I don't know how much the internet affected this, but the really big difference to me is that nowadays it's really rare to have a gig that's more than one night. That did not used to be the case and this is bad for the music, I think, because very often the way a performance happens now is somebody emails you a bunch of mp3s and pdfs and you're supposed to do all of your rehearsing at home and show up for the one rehearsal prepared to play it. Most people ignore the pdfs and mp3s and don't practice at all. They show up and sight-read the gig or sight-read the first rehearsal and then sort of bluff their way through the concert and that's not good, I don't think. I mean, it shows that everybody's capable, good musicians and so on, but

back in the '70s and '80s it was very unusual to have a gig that was only one night and bands were together, even big bands, you'd have a week here you'd maybe have two weeks there, you'd maybe go on the road for six weeks. So, that way, well, you might have one rehearsal at the beginning of the thing but then every night the music develops and changes you get really deep inside it more, the way you don't now. You just can't. So, I don't know how much the internet has to do with that, but I feel like it's a bad thing.

**TNYCJR:** Is a bunch of one-nighters that much different than being at a place Tuesday through Sunday? You  
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can still develop the music even if you're traveling every day or whatever.

**JC:** Sure. Last year after [the Odd Couple Quintet] album came out, I had a little tour that was three gigs. I felt like that was a tour. The first gig was good, the second one it changed a little bit and it was a little different and, you know, that's what I really like and I would just love to have a week or two somewhere.

**TNYCJR:** Did you do that with Gil Evans?

**JC:** When I first played with Gil's band we did Monday nights at the Vanguard and then occasionally we would do a whole week. But when we went on tour we would do four, five or six weeks and that was really different.

**TNYCJR:** Is there a new Gil Evans record coming out?

**JC:** Noah Evans and Miles Evans organized it; they asked us all to think of tunes that we used to play a lot live that were never recorded. So we did and I was really surprised. I mean, I thought back and could only think of one and then another and we all came up with quite a few tunes. So, we went and recorded them in June and I think it's going to be a really great album.

**TNYCJR:** What else has been going on lately?

**JC:** I just had a gig with Alexi David, a great bass player who's done transcriptions of Mingus' brass octet. I don't think it's ever been released on record; it's three trumpets, horn, tuba, alto, bass and drums.

**TNYCJR:** With The Odd Couple Quintet you took classical themes as source material for improvisation.

**JC:** Other than *The Odd Couple* theme and another original tune that I wrote, it's two Mozart horn concertos, numbers three and four, kind of reharmonized and rearranged in jazz form. [When] we were putting it all together I kind of wound up playing the horn part from the concertos and Michael [Rabinowitz, bassoon] did [most of] the improvising. Although, I kind of twisted things around quite a bit. The more we played it live, the more I started taking more and more liberties and making it, not unrecognizable, but changing it more and more.

**TNYCJR:** Did The Odd Couple Quintet somehow morph into Nine Live?

**JC:** The OCQ didn't morph into Nine Live. Composers Concordance presented a concert at ShapeShifter Lab

in Brooklyn with a group of nine players; everyone in the group contributed a composition. Mine was "Outage", which was inspired by Hurricane Sandy and refers harmonically to Schönberg's "Verklärte Nacht". The concert was just a few weeks after the hurricane. David Soldier played violin on that concert and asked if I had any other material for the same size ensemble. The recording grew out of that. The compositions are all mine from different periods.

**TNYCJR:** What's coming up?

**JC:** Nine Live is going to play at Rockwood Music Hall. Hopefully we'll confirm more dates. I just heard from John Scofield about a performance of the music from [his album] *Quiet* around May of next year. Another gig I have this November is with Rubens Salles, a fantastic Brazilian pianist. We're going to play The Jazz Loft in Stony Brook. It's all of his original music... very challenging, but a lot of fun.

**TNYCJR:** Do these groups get to rehearse much?

**JC:** With Rubens, we usually have one rehearsal before a gig. Alexi's band, we don't have to. The personnel isn't exactly the same, but most of the cats kind of know the music. It's very loose. He runs it kind of like the way Gil used to run his band. All of a sudden in the middle of everything he'll go, "play 'When the Saints Go Marching In' in G. 1, 2, 3, 4!" And I love that, the unexpected. Last time I was there he called "Black and Blue". You know "Black and Blue"?

**TNYCJR:** "What did I do to be so black and blue"?

**JC:** Yeah. And we started into it. It took me a minute, "what is this tune? I know this tune", and then gradually I did figure it out and, oh, I love doing that. So, no, he doesn't rehearse. The Mingus Orchestra doesn't rehearse either. Very rarely.

**TNYCJR:** T-Bone Burnett made a speech at AmericanaFest talking about the state of the music business and advocating for art over technology. I think his concern is about would-be artists focusing on technology and marketing more than music.

**JC:** Yeah, putting together their thing with Apple loops and samples and stuff. Those things are great for experimentation and making demos, but to really make that your end product?

**TNYCJR:** Sometimes I think there are two music worlds, the one that is more earthy, organic and surprising and the one that's like a TV show, *American Idol* or something; there's a different focus.

**JC:** Let me just say then, something I really love about music is being surprised. And that applies to what I said about Alexi David and Gil Evans and the way they ran their thing. A lot of other bands that I've played in have been really great and had great players and great arrangements, but if I always knew exactly what was going to happen next, I'd get really tired of it, you know? It's great to swing, I love that, but it's limited unless it's fluid and can have a life of its own. Gil, whenever he was asked what he looks for in music and what he likes in music: "living spirit" is what he would look for and when you hear something that's all full of clichés and you know what's going to happen next, that's not living spirit, that's craft. That's something that's really well done and that's great and I respect it, but, if I'm going to play, or if I'm going to sit down and spend an hour listening to something, I want to be surprised. I want it to do something different. ❖

For more information, visit [hmmusic.com](http://hmmusic.com). Clark and Nine Live are at Rockwood Music Hall Nov. 22nd. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Carla Bley — *European Tour 1977* (WATT, 1977)
- Leroy Jenkins — *Mixed Quintet* (Black Saint, 1979)
- John Clark — *Faces* (ECM, 1980)
- Gerry Mulligan — *Re-Birth of the Cool* (GRP, 1992)
- John Clark — *I Will* (Postcards, 1996)
- John Clark — *Sonus Inenarrabilis: Nine Live Plays the Music of John Clark* (Mulatta, 2014)

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record for other labels. They can sell the discs at the price they want, on their website or at concerts. Plus they're free to reprint the disc on other labels, put the music onto free or paid downloads and give their albums to distributors," he explains. "This way of doing business makes money for the musician, especially if he or she plays concerts or has many contacts. Plus we have complete control of the numbers to print."

Although SdM has no distributors, CDs can be purchased from its website. "I'm happy to be out of the major record industry. Their rules have no effect on me; I don't need contracts to live and play what I like," Giust adds. Some sessions are put out on vinyl. But due to the expense only three have appeared that way. It's the same with SdM's seven DVDs. "I have no problem to print DVDs if the project is interesting," he explains, "but this stuff doesn't sell well." However, Giust isn't a fan of downloads. "I have nothing against those who put music for download on their websites or on Bandcamp. What I don't like are things like Spotify or iTunes and their policies, but this is the logic of the contemporary market. Corporation means inequality." SdM projects are available via Bandcamp, Soundcloud, YouTube and iTunes.

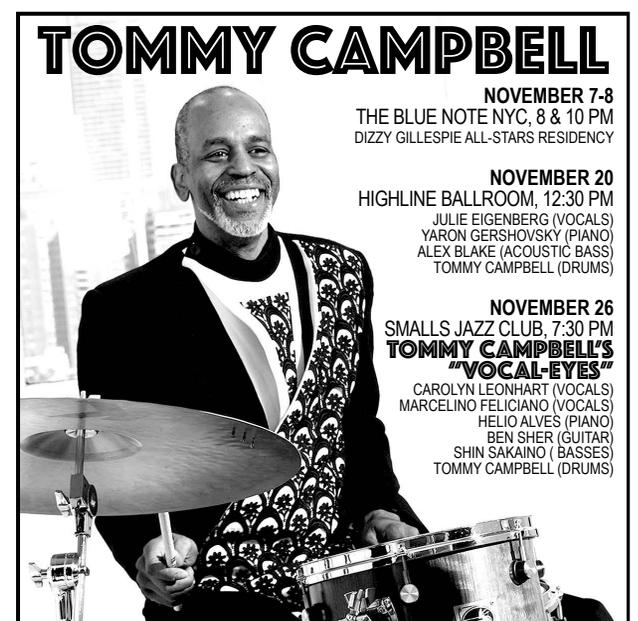
SdM has a clutch of new discs ready for release. They include *Classified* with Michele Anelli, Dominik Gawara and Giust; *Luftschiff feiertagserinnerung fotoalbum* by Grosse Abfahrt; and *Bellezza Fiammeggiante* featuring Edoardo Ricci and Edoardo Marraffa.

Giust sums up his philosophy thusly: "Things that are true, genuine and honest can be found only by digging deeply in the ground: the mainstream is desert death, regarding both culture and information. It's a well-oiled machine to make people have the same point of view to make the perfect consumer. I have no interest in growing the label, because I like it small. It means more freedom and fewer problems. I don't care about distributors or, worse, to be competitive with other labels. Béla Bartók said it well: 'Only horses have to compete with each other when they have to run, humans need joy.'" ❖

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