

Ben Allison: Thinking Freely

When bassist Ben Allison arrived on the New York jazz scene in the 1980's as a music performance major at New York University, he found the jazz community divided between neo-traditionalists intent on reviving the acoustic swing and bop mainstream and "downtown" experimentalists devoted to innovation above all else. This division boiled over into a public debate when trumpeter Wynton Marsalis assumed the role of music director for Jazz at Lincoln Center and began programming concerts oriented toward the jazz repertoire from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington up through the 1960's, with minimal acknowledgement of more recent developments in the evolution of the music.

Allison's response was to form the Jazz Composers Collective, a musician-run, nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting artists seeking to develop and explore new music.

"My concern was that jazz would be reconstituted as a repertory art form, much as European music has become," Allison says. "If you go to Lincoln Center, you are going to hear Brahms, performed with reverence. To me, jazz is irreverent music. It's social music. Without the social component, it's relegated to the historical dustbin.

"Our main purpose was to promote concerts premiering new works. It didn't have to be 'in' or 'out,' tonal or atonal. It just had to be something personal."

Between 1992, when it formed around a core of four or five young composers in residence, and 2004, when it officially disbanded, the Jazz Composers Collective premiered more than 300 new works, representing some 60-odd composers and featuring 200-plus musicians. It dissolved not for financial reasons, but because its mission had been fulfilled, and the members of the original

core group were increasingly busy with successful solo careers. (Also, perhaps not coincidentally, Lincoln Center's jazz programming had broadened its scope somewhat, and the jazz-identity debate had receded.)



"To my mind, it represented a huge creative outpouring in New York," Allison says of the organization for which he served as CEO. "I am immensely gratified by the work we were able to do in terms of building a community. The strength of the music depends on the audience we have. It is not enough to be proficient on your instrument. You also have to know how to write a contract, and have a presence online."

Allison has recorded nine albums as a

leader, all but the first for the independent Palmetto label. His 2003 album *Peace Pipe* placed on many critics' Top 10 lists and was nominated for album of the year by the Jazz Journalists Association, and he was voted Rising Star Bassist of the Year from 2005 to 2007 in the *Downbeat* Critics Poll.

Of his 2007 release *Little Things Run the World*, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, "Whenever some fool goes on about the death of jazz, play that misguided soul some of *Little Things Run the World*... This is assuredly jazz that deconstructs all influences, with harmonic chromaticism in an intriguing dialogue with hummable modal melodies."

Allison's latest, *Think Free*, features his current touring band – Jenny Scheinman on violin, Shane Endsley on trumpet, Steve Cardenas on guitar and Rudy Royston on drums – each a composer and recording artist in his or her own right. The unusual trumpet/guitar front line dates back to Allison's 2006 album, *Cowboy Justice*, but the addition of Scheinman, with whom Allison previously worked as the bassist in her touring band, is something even more distinctive. There must have been previous jazz quintets utilizing the combination of trumpet, guitar and violin, but it is difficult to call one to mind.

"I actually started working with the concept for my own musical reasons because it felt new and challenging for me as a composer," he says. "The trumpet and violin are fairly high-pitched instruments but all three

[Scheinman, Endsley and Cardenas] have warm, midrange kinds of sounds. When they play in unison, there is a particular sonic character. This is the kind of thing composers think about, and audiences more often don't think about."

Allison cites Duke Ellington's dictum that a jazz composer should write with the specific talents of the musicians who will be playing the piece in mind. This also applies to his own abilities as a bassist.

"Part of my desire to become a composer came from wanting to make myself sound good as a bass player, to create music that fit my style," he says. "I think of composition and performance as two sides of the same thing. This was true for a lot of my heroes – Mingus, Monk, Ornette, Ellington... Their playing and writing are inextricably intertwined."

Allison, 43, grew up in New Haven, Connecticut, where he learned to play guitar and drums before gravitating to the acoustic bass. He also absorbed a wide variety of influences that would later influence him as a composer, from the omnipresent pop and rock of the Beatles and Led Zeppelin to a course on 20th century classical music that he took as a high school student at Yale University. After moving to New York, he underwent a four-year fascination with the music of Alban Berg, and if you ask, he will gladly engage in a discourse on tone-row technique and the differences between Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.

"It's rare to encounter John Lennon and serialism in the same sentence," Allison says with a slight air of amusement. "But we live in a world where almost every conceivable form of music is easily accessible. All I have to do is type griot music into my phone, and in

10 seconds I will be listening to African griot music."

Like many young musicians who get bitten by the jazz bug, Allison went through a period where he was primarily impressed by the music's rich history and harmonic complexity. But he says he has more recently been revisiting his rock roots: the title track of *Little Things Run the World* is a pastiche of familiar rock motifs, including a melodic quote from the Beatles' "I Am the Walrus."

He has also been concentrating on writing simpler music. Several of the pieces on *Little Things* and *Think Free* start with direct folk-like melodies and build in complexity through arranged and improvised passages of group interplay.

"It's challenging to write something simple that sustains an audience's interest," he says. "By way of analogy, to play something soft and high is the hardest thing to do on a trumpet. It may be subtle, but it's not easy."

Yet while his compositions are increasingly informed by the rhythms, melodies and guitar-based textures of rock, Allison says he has no intention of abandoning the acoustic bass for the electric bass guitar.

"I am an acoustic bass player, exclusively. I love the acoustic bass, mostly for the sheer range of sonic possibilities it affords. The timbre has a range that's hard to beat."

Not surprisingly, Allison favors an inclusive definition of jazz. "That debate is over. This music is defined on a daily basis by the musicians who make it, musicians from around the world in places like Sao Paulo, Brazil and little towns in Italy, all of whom call themselves jazz musicians. At its core, it's a fusion music, and swing is one of an infinite amount of grooves you can do. Musicians very rarely try to invent categories. I think of myself first and foremost as a musician. But if we are going to use that word [jazz], I think it is about improvisation and group interplay. The rest is semantics, more about marketing than music."

He also observes that jazz makes demands on listeners that can be problematic for audiences who have been force-fed popular culture all their lives, which could explain why jazz is arguably appreciated more as an art form in Europe than in the society where it was born.

"This is not pop music," he says. "Anything cool in life, sometimes you have to take the time to go find it. I really believe that."

For those reading these notes, congratulations. You've found Ben Allison.

Rick Mitchell

