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## **PASSING THROUGH: CONCERT & ALBUM HIGHLIGHTS**

KIRK MACDONALD AND HAROLD MABERN ease out onto the floor of the Peggy Corkum Music Room, watching some late arrivals to the hall brush the snow from their shoulders. It's March in Halifax and weary people have dreary weather on their minds and under their skin. In the middle of an East Coast swing, the veteran New Waterford tenorman and his venerable American companion are no doubt thinking of the road ahead. Quite literally, too. It is also a very immediate way to open up their conversation with the audience. But the weather quickly fades as the two musicians settle to their instruments, the conversation changes character, and Mabern begins one of the striking extended introductions that characterize almost all of the arrangements we will hear tonight.

It is relatively straightforward to identify at least some of the main ingredients of these large-minded threshold spaces, a lot harder to get at the precise recipe or configuration in each case, the combinatory brilliance and experience expressed in a million choices and departures. Let's say, to begin, that Mabern, an extremely physical and percussive pianist as well as a cerebral and learned one, throws us a lot of clues and red herrings while pounding out a meditation on romanticism and stride, on modality and pulse, that includes broad or precise hints of McCoy Tyner, Art Tatum, Frédéric Chopin, Duke Ellington, and perhaps Johann Sebastian Bach (who very definitely materializes later) in a terse and just-about-effortless opening exposition at the Steinway. By the time MacDonald—coming to his mouthpiece with what seems like a bit of awe and shared swagger—gets to state the head of Harold Arlen's "My Shining Hour" the near-capacity audience knows that it has come to hear something powerful.

Between the first and second numbers Mabern glosses the Arlen tune's history and makes a connection between the year of its composition and the

birth of John Coltrane, even asserting passionately that the song's structure is laid out in exactly the way Trane would come to improvise. This is a perceptive, idiosyncratic, and earned insight, and we sense that the concert could easily turn into a lecture. But it does not, and Mabern's periodic verbal digressions, like his fun, striped socks, hint at the range of possibilities that he clearly wants to leave open for himself as a player and a thinker of this music. The inner agility and focus required to generate so much sound, so many ideas, so much structure, and so much generous opportunity for his collaborator is a powerful and moving sight.

Kirk MacDonald plays at the highest level. His approach is one of sweet constriction, of constraint recast as liberation, as he channels certain inevitable models while proposing an emotional and thoughtful rediscovery of a repertoire that he completely possesses. There is a wonderful contrast and complementarity in what we hear of fioriture and brightness along with depth and dark nuance. The severity of MacDonald's whole being as he addresses the horn, embodying its possibilities, is in its own way as impressive and inspiring as the more senior Mabern's commanding presence at the piano.

There is admirable, perceptible work on every single note—its weight, its emotional amplitude, its positioning on the beat. There is a sense beyond the particular notes, too, that each phrase is a unique and precious event and that each building solo is a modest but assured reassembly of so many elements of a long and well-earned idea of the music, endlessly open to restatement and reformulation with joy, and some terror, at every single moment.

Some further highlights of the long and pleasurable concert include Mabern's playing on Arthur Schwartz's "Alone Together" as he forcefully shovels (forgive the returning winter metaphors) into the standard's harmonic possibilities. He uses a lot of glissando not as a kind of over-excited punctuation but rather as a well-drawn and sharp demarcation, like quickly pulling a curtain on a mini-episode of something larger unfolding. The programmed or perhaps spontaneous medley of Bronisław Kaper's "On Green Dolphin Street" and Coltrane's "Naima" is good-humoured and emotionally rewarding. Nat King Cole's "Weaver of Dreams" is the penultimate tune. I only have a vague memory of a Sonny Rollins version on an early album, but it receives a more up-tempo and expansive treatment here, feeling to my unaccustomed ears like a lot of reimagining is happening. It is great to have

the song revealed in this way.

The concert ends with Ray Noble's "Cherokee." "We'll do it up?" asks MacDonald almost under his breath before the duo begins a deceptively relaxed, high-tempo excursion through this notoriously difficult blowing piece. Here, as throughout the concert, the prodigious processing power of these hard-driving musical minds shines through.

An invigorating late winter blast from two admirable mid- and late-career improvising artists. Every so often at a small, intimate concert one feels that there is no more compelling music being made anywhere. This is one of those nights.

The self-titled album by jazz supergroup Hudson was released on the eve of their June concert at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. Brought together by the tutelary, federating spirit of drummer Jack DeJohnette, the great funk guitarist John Scofield, the once-in-a-generation upright bassist Larry Grenadier, and the jam-band master keyboardist John Medeski, Hudson began jamming and performing together in Woodstock in 2014. *Hudson*, 2017's album and tour, were explicitly conceived as a 75th birthday passion project by and for DeJohnette.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, but it surprised me, these four denizens of Upstate New York, representing three generations (DeJohnette is 74, Scofield 65, both Medeski and Grenadier 51), can fall back on a massive range of jazz and roots styles but have chosen to centre on the music of the 1960s, particularly that associated with the legendary festival held so near their current homes. Both the live performances and the album bring songs by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Jimi Hendrix, and The Band to the fore. These classic pop tunes of a revolutionary era, reinterpreted, sometimes quite radically, by the quartet, are balanced by new instrumental tunes composed by DeJohnette and Scofield and one collectively-written piece, again entitled "Hudson."

The palette here, especially live but on the recording as well, combines the earthy, organic sound of unadorned acoustic bass with funky, effects-enhanced electric guitar, largely familiar from Scofield's body of work, and an exceptionally pumped-up keyboard rig, including Hammond Organ, massively overwritten Fender Rhodes piano, and some prepared acoustic piano as well. The overall aesthetic takes the risk of distortion, dissonance, and disturbance, but there is also elegance and measure in this warping sound-

scape, much of it provided by DeJohnette's authoritative, impeccable drumming, which can bring his collaborators back to a perfectly-centred, main-line contemporary swing or the knife-edge security of a funky backbeat just when the neo-psychedelia threatens to overwhelm musicians and audience alike.

Has a drummer ever sounded better or more distinctively himself? That question could launch a lot of debate, but with just one hit of the sticks on his kit the concert immediately has a specific character, a specific leadership, and an unmistakable core. On the record, listen to the beautiful stick work and the textures he gets from the cymbals on Bob Dylan's "Lay Lady Lay"—simply spectacular! Scofield's cheeky, admiring title, "Tony Then Jack," gets us some way toward what I am trying to say here with its suggestion of a passing of the torch from the great Tony Williams to Hudson's leader.

The NAC performance provides continuous excitement and revelation of this version of jazz-funk-rock's possibilities: the unbearable tension of Scofield's prolonged "El Swing" and the four friends' version of Robbie Robertson's "Cripple Creek," with Medeski's pushed-to-the-breaking-point stride piano introduction and DeJohnette's unexpected, natural, and heartfelt vocals, are just two particularly memorable examples. There is also Larry Grenadier simply refusing to stop and continuing—perhaps in error, but with undiminished conviction and joy—his grooving after everyone else has stopped on the final song of the main set. This quartet is loose enough to laugh and go places they do not intend yet tight enough to remain together with an almost unimaginable focus and complicity from beginning to end.

There is a DeJohnette connection to another of this summer's best recordings: *Passin' Thru* by the Charles Lloyd New Quartet. *Passin' Thru* is the second release since Lloyd's return to the Blue Note label after several remarkable recordings for ECM. The CD liner notes begin with two long quotations setting the album under the double sign of dreaming (from the Upanishads) and persistence in a loving apprehension of the world (one of Lloyd's own texts). His New Quartet, featuring Jason Moran on piano, Eric Harland on drums, and Reuben Rogers on bass, is captured in live performances from Montreux (the first track) and Santa Fe (the remaining six pieces). This appears to be the first time that he has used the qualifier "new" (which appears on several of his recordings of the past ten years) for an

album title/cover for this group, and I had the immense pleasure of hearing this well-broken-in yet still vitally-new foursome at the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal in 2013—a performance that will likely forever rank as one of the best jazz shows I’ve ever attended.

The moniker “new,” which the quartet has acquired for this outing, may well be in smiling acknowledgement of a kind of high-altitude career overview, looking back to Lloyd’s first albums of the mid-1960s when he was seen by more than a few critics and fans as the future of the music—a potential bridge between jazz and the counterculture. His first widely-successful quartet included the burgeoning youthful talents of no less than Keith Jarrett and Jack DeJohnette. *Passin’ Thru* indulges in the waking dream of revisiting some of that earlier repertoire with the new quartet.

The opening track, “Dream Weaver” (not to be confused with “Weaver of Dreams”), was first recorded with Jarrett, DeJohnette, and Cecil McBee (on bass) on the album of the same name in 1966. The opening section of the tune’s 2017 iteration is meditative and loud, full of gravitas and pregnant with possibility, emphasizing sonic washes and deep-sourced drum fills; it suggests a Coltrane-like depth of spiritual and psychic examination. Harland’s drumming is formidable (and beautifully recorded), and it is a worthwhile exercise to compare with DeJohnette’s overture from 1966.

Other highlights of this wonderful live album include an even earlier Lloyd composition, “How Can I Tell You.” It has been noted that Lloyd rarely records or performs standards, but who needs the Great American Songbook or Broadway or radio hits when you can write a ballad like this one? It is achingly tender and perhaps all the more so for not having any words to interrupt our relation to the composer-performer’s own voice. Moran’s piano solo is also poised and structured, gambling on luminous beauty with a daringly behind-the-beat attack and then tailing off in what seems like an impossible, dragging phrase before rejoining the quartet, steady and ready.

Here again, going back to 1964’s *Discovery!*, where this tune first appeared, can tell us much about the consistencies and departures—ruptures even—in Lloyd’s evolution. Most of all, it conveys a joyful but undecidable sense of both achievement and non-achievement. Coming full circle is not quite the right way of putting this, but there is at once something of a cycling back and a surging forward, the *wild* (old) *man* (a recent album title) now *dancing* freely out past the somehow, impossibly, reconsidered original utterances. He is taking them with him somewhere else.

Mabern, De Johnette, and Lloyd are three prolific, influential, and persistent octo- and septuagenarians weaving dreams and singing beyond words, and they are surrounded by thirty-, forty-, fifty-, and sixty-some-things who are taking on the tradition, themselves both moved and movers. Exemplary adventures in late style!