

FRANK KIMBROUGH



BEN ALLISON

Time

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MICHAEL BLAKE

to Unite

# The Jazz Composers Collective Builds A Body of Progressive Music by Empowering Musicians

Ten years ago, bassist Ben Allison had a “eureka!” moment “I was reading a biography of Alban Berg,” he says, referring to the early 20th century Viennese composer whose opera “Lulu” is about one of Jack The Ripper’s victims. “He and his friends were frustrated that their music didn’t fit the scene. They’d program a concert with Webern besides Bach and Brahms, and the audiences would freak.

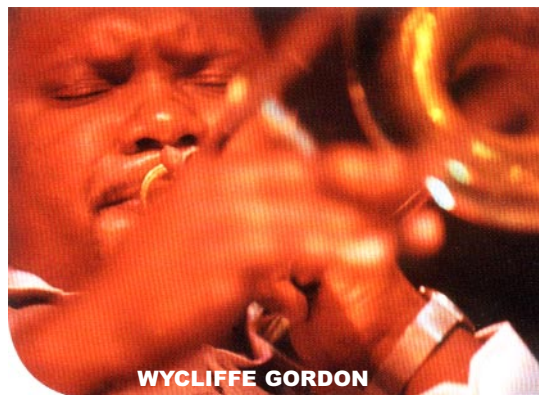
“So Schoenberg set up the musician-run Society for Private Musical Performances. They found a private patron to donate his apartment as a salon, put on their own concert series and published a newsletter edited by Berg. That’s where it hit me: Musicians could do this for themselves. It was an empowering thought, a message jazz sorely needed. It was a moment of clarity,” Allison says with as much juice now as he evidently had 10 years ago when first discussing the artists-directed, not-for-profit Jazz Composers Collective (JCC).

In fact, Allison’s even more thrilled with it now that his brainstorm has been realized. Usually such notions struggle into existence for a season or two then die, victims of impracticality or incompatibility. Jazz, however, has had a share of successful efforts, if “collective” can be taken to embrace everything from Buddy Bolden’s bands through Sun Ra’s Intergalactic Arkestra, Carla Bley and Michael Mantler’s Jazz Composers Orchestra Association and the Chicago-based Association for the Advancement of Creative Music. In 1992, at age 24, Allison didn’t know much about any of them. But thrilled with his thoughts, he called his friend Frank Kimbrough.

“When Ben came to me with the idea, I was all for it,” says pianist Kimbrough, a decade the bassist’s senior. “But I didn’t expect it to last more than six months. The only collective I’d been involved with before was a loosely organized bunch in the ‘80s, the Higher Primates Orchestra. It was short-lived.

“It wasn’t organized in the sense that the Collective is, but these organizations tend not to last. People get busy or jealous, somebody isn’t holding up their end of the bargain or an ego gets out of control. For this to have lasted 10 years is amazing. When you think this started with four frustrated guys (he and Allison, Ted Nash and John Schroeder) each struggling in the tough realm of music commerce, it’s not bad.”

Not bad at all. In fact, the still-young Jazz Composers Collective has become the very model 21st century creators cooperative, a low over-



WYCLIFFE GORDON

head, street-savvy operation complete with experienced advisory board (including Andrew Hill, Lee Konitz, Dave Liebman and Joe Lovano), hip performance series (monthly at New York City’s New School), starchy mission statement (“dedicated to advancing the development and presentation of music by forward-thinking composers ... working to construct an environment where participating artists can exercise their ideals of creating and risking through the exploration of new music, while building new audiences”), enviable top position on college jazz radio charts, impressive web site ([www.jazzcollective.com](http://www.jazzcollective.com)) and good reviews for Strange City (Palmetto), the third volume of its ongoing Herbie Nichols Project.

Saxophonists Michael Blake and Nash, and trumpeter Ron Horton are the core JCC composers-in-residence, besides Allison and Kimbrough. They are self-selected, so the Composers Collective functions less as an open organization than a select fraternity—but it does not propose itself as an elite. Composers-in-residence also serve on the JCC’s board of directors, concocting



TED NASH



RON HORTON

group activities during free-wheeling discussions while they fold newsletters and lick stamps at five-times-annually mailing parties. Chairperson Suzanne DiMaggio (who does not take a musical role) distills and implements their suggestions, and there's a larger circle of gifted musicians—including new Nichols project trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, drummers Jeff Ballard, Tm Horner and Matt Wilson, and vibist Joe Locke—who frequently participate in Composers Collective ensembles. Besides the composers-in-residence, 45 guest composers—stylists as diverse as Jane Ira Bloom, Steven Bernstein, Eddie Gale, Dave Tronzo and Tom Varner—have been represented in a total of 300 works over 90 concerts, featuring some 160 instrumentalists in all.

“It was always our idea to structure our concerts so each would be devoted to a composer-in-residence and an invited guest artist to balance off of us, to expand our horizons, bring new people into the mix and maybe a different audience base,” Allison says. “We keep our definitions of ‘jazz’ and ‘composer’ as broad as the scene is in New York. Our esthetic guidelines are subtle—we all have opinions about what we like, but they aren't driven by external factors, they extend from the music we love.”

Accomplishing such inclusion and diversity with no responsibilities to any bottom line but its members' own, the JCC has grown beyond its original intent of helping members qualify for public and private philanthropy, piggy-back gigs and gain name recognition through group identification. It's earned respect as a network with connections for self-employed musicians struggling in the tough world of music commerce. It's a voluntary affiliation for those who honor traditions but don't typically relish institutions, who search for their own sounds and resist being typed by esthetic as much as by age, gender, race, politics or place of birth. It's not that the Composers Collective has no ideology—there's a tilt toward rugged if upbeat individualism, progressive urban variety. But practicality rules.

“When we started,” Allison explains, “our main incentive was there weren't that many places in New York to play. Of the several levels of places to play, the top level was not available to us. We also didn't want to play in places where we couldn't play with any dignity at all, or where there's no inspiration.

“A lot of musicians were searching down the traditional music industry channels, and not fulfilling their needs. There was a strong neo-conservative movement I didn't feel part of, and a burgeoning downtown scene I didn't want to completely identify with. I worked uptown, downtown, everywhere, all different kinds of music, but I didn't want to ‘choose a side.’ I wanted to create a scene that would be defined on a daily basis, purely by the music we created.

“I've always been organizationally inclined,” Allison adds. “But the Jazz Composers Collective idea came from a sense of necessity. You're only as healthy as the scene around you. I knew some angry, bitter jazz musicians. It seems like we were sitting around for years, complaining a lot. Staying that way takes a lot of energy. When you form an organization to do something, you make a conscious decision to redirect that energy in a positive way.”

That last statement might be offered by any arts organization heavy—including Wynton Marsalis, artistic director of the much better-endowed Jazz at Lincoln Center. (Marsalis has been known to sit in at the Collective's concerts in the comfortable fifth floor New School performance space it uses for concerts.) Kimbrough describes how the Composers Collective is different: “We've been

able to very efficiently produce our projects; I've made two records, finished masters, for under \$500. That's unheard of, but possible by recording the concerts. We have financial support to put them on [from the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust], and if we're efficient on the night of the concerts it can work out well.

“It's been in our favor to keep our aims realistic, and keep it at a grassroots level. It's easier and cheaper to rent a 100-seat hall than to do something at Alice Tully, [which holds 1,400].”

**E**nthusiastic if less than arena-sized audiences seem likely to keep bankruptcy at bay as the Collectives' wealth of creative energy, skill and spirit has become a dependable draw. Well over 100 avid listeners showed up at the New School last October when the Composers Collective Herbie Nichols Project septet celebrated the release of *Strange City*, which alternates between lyrical and rollicking arrangements of previously unknown works by Nichols, patron saint of under-appreciated jazz giants. Allison made announcements, Kimbrough commanded from the keyboard, Wilson kicked up drum beats and the four horns—Blake and Nash, Horton and Gordon—spilled forth the meandering line of “Moments Magical” and the syncopated sway of “Some Wandering Bushmen,” two previously unknown Nichols tunes Horton discovered in 1995 on the shelves of the Library of Congress.

The crowd was attentive, engaged and responsive to the players' loose camaraderie; the Herbie Nichols Project swung with something like the innocence of dixielanders, but with the sophistication of modernists practicing collective improvisation anchored in swing and bop as well as more abstract expression.

“Is there a Composers Collective sound?” Allison considers. “No, there's no stylistic sound that's exclusively the Collective's. Yes, in the sense that all our music has a kind of wider-reaching sensibility. I'm being purposefully vague: We follow a connecting line that's constantly changing, that we like to redefine, so it's not locked into any one particular style.”

If that's the Composers Collective concept, they couldn't have chosen a better hero to champion than Nichols. By all accounts he was a quiet but articulate, intellectual and creative man, doomed to slip through his day's stylistic cracks.

Homeboy to Thelonious Monk in Manhattan's San Juan Hill neighborhood, Nichols was of West Indian descent and as a child studied classical piano but was forbidden to delve into jazz. He emerged as a jazz professional in Harlem in the late '30s, worked at Minton's where the bebop revolution was brewing, became adept at accompanying vocalists and, eventually, fascinated by African musics. He penned Billie Holiday's last theme song, “Lady Sings The Blues,” and recorded three enduring but long-ignored sessions in trios with bassists Al McKibbin or Teddy Kotick, drummers Art Blakey or Max Roach for Blue Note in 1955 and '56, plus a date for Bethlehem in 1957. He died of leukemia in 1963, mourned especially by young avant-gardists such as Roswell Rudd and Sheila Jordan who he'd befriended.

“Herbie Nichols' music is complex and enigmatic,” says Kimbrough, who has transcribed 85 of the 170 compositions Nichols is believed to have finished and submitted as lead sheets for legal copyright, “incorporating oblique melodies, unusual harmonic progressions, extended forms, all in very personal ways. Basically, we do his music because we love it. Our hope is that his music becomes part of the common repertoire.

While all of the JCC composers-in-residence subscribe to Nichols' worthiness, they also have their own fish to fry. Allison's albums with the ensemble Medicine Wheel (including Kimbrough, Blake, Nash and Horton) expand from his subtle folksy quality; Kimbrough's duos with Locke are serene, though his quartet on Noumena (Soul Note) has plenty of edge. Nash's recent Sidewalk Meeting (Arabesque) features his reeds with William Schimmel's accordion; Miri Ben-Ari's violin, Gordon's tuba and trombone, and drums (either Ballard or Wilson). Horton's Genius Envy (Omnitone) presents 10 of his challenging, meticulously arranged originals. Blake's Drift (Intuition) leans toward rock and r&b, and Kingdom of Champa (Intuition) draws on his experiences in Vietnam.

Though the Herbie Nichols Project remains its best-known group effort, the JCC has also taken up the challenge of pianist-composer Lennie Tristano's legacy, and in 2001 convened an orchestra (which Palmetto plans to record in 2002) to perform old and new works by another pianist-composer whose works are complex and enigmatic: Andrew Hill. By temperament Hill is not a joiner, but he has lent his name to the Jazz Composers Collective's letterhead and has been generous in offering counsel. He appreciates their initiative.

"What the Composers Collective has been building over 10 years—increasing its audience base, getting some attention for its members, getting its members to compose—is all good," Hill says.

"It's up to the musicians to get themselves together. Earlier groups organized like this are finished, or reside at schools now, or are more retrospective, using their same old formulas which have dated. Today, the Jazz Composers Collective is a viable organization."

Beyond viability, it's proved inspiring. Last December, Allison received an e-mail from a correspondent who'd launched an indebted Chicago Jazz Composers Collective with a concert at the Green Mill for about 35 paying customers, featuring works by two emerging composers.

Kimbrough warns of one danger of collectivity—a surfeit of success. "We'd like to keep it lean and mean," he says. "Once you get past a certain point, it becomes a full-time administrative job. We have no employees, so we do everything. If you want a job done right, do it yourself, even if it gets done on the fly."

Allison, who takes on a brunt of the administrative work, agrees. But he denies there's any other downside, such as a blurring of identity within collective membership. "For one thing, it's important to have a leader at the concerts, performing his or her own music," he asserts. "Furthermore, the Collective is a group of musicians who are leaders in their own right working together, but we all spend the majority of our time working on our own groups. It's amazing that after all this time our music has not homogenized. Each of our bands has sounded increasingly dissimilar, as each composer/band-leader has focused more on projecting a personal voice." **DB**