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My Perfect Situation: Jason Rigby Speaks



From L to R: Gerald Cleaver, Cameron Brown, Jason Rigby.
Photo courtesy of the artist.

This Saturday, April 29th, versatile, and high-flying saxophonist Jason Rigby returns to The Jazz Gallery to release *One*, his latest CD on the Fresh Sounds label. The new album features Cameron Brown (bass) and Gerald Cleaver (drums) in a configuration they're calling the Detroit-Cleveland Trio. Known for his 'inside-outside' style of playing (which we discussed at length), Rigby strives to sound at home in many styles, leading to an authoritative and multidimensional sound. Rigby also teaches at Towson University, where he maintains a saxophone studio and premieres new music. At the Gallery this week, Rigby will perform new tunes from *One*, as well as music from a brand-new unnamed suite of music in response to our volatile and mercurial social climate. We spoke about all of the above in a recent phone interview.

The Jazz Gallery: I know you've been on the road for a while. Have you been getting together with the guys in the trio to work through the material from the latest album?

Jason Rigby: I'm going to get together with Cameron to work on some unison stuff that we have together. But I actually try not to rehearse too much with this group. I feel like it's better to just let it happen.

TJG: Interesting—was there a time where you felt like you killed the energy by rehearsing too much?

JR: I don't know if 'killed it' is the right phrase, but I chose these two musicians because I feel like I have a strong individual and musical connection with them. Putting the band together, it was a situation where intuition would be crucial. The times we have rehearsed, I immediately knew that we should just learn the structures and ideas, and not go too deep for rehearsal purposes.

TJG: It's good to know how to rehearse to sound your best.

JR: Yeah, it took a little while to figure that out. The default is to think, "Oh, we gotta rehearse all the time to sound great." That sentiment goes hand-in-hand with composing. I've learned a lot about how to compose for this group. After a few performances I realized I had to change some things. It's about writing enough of a structure and themes to give the piece an identity, maybe multiple sections if it happens that way, but the group is so improvisation-based that if I over-write, it can get in the way.

TJG: If you were introducing your newest

album to an uninformed listener, how would you say One follow your previous releases, Translucent Space and The Sage?

JR: First of all, for tenor players, the trio is one of the historically favorite formats over the last sixty years of recorded jazz. There have been a lot of awesome collaborations in this format. One of the first recordings I'd ever heard was Sonny Rollins Live at the Village Vanguard, which I think was actually the first live recording of a show from the Vanguard, sometime in the mid 50s. It has a couple different groups and sets, so it's sort of a mishmash of different groups. But I think that's the first live recording from the Vanguard. So, to an uninformed listener, the format stems from a long tradition of tenor trio albums. It differs from my earlier stuff because, on the previous two records, there was a lot of focus on composition and orchestration with the band. I feel like I'm a fairly different player now than I was on those recordings. This project is more about stretching out. I don't feel like I allowed myself a huge amount of space on the first two records, and that's the focus of this group. We've played together a bunch, I never know what's going to happen. It's really cool.

TJG: It's kind of your playground then?

JR: [Laughs] Yeah, it kind of is! I trust them a lot, too.

TJG: So the same question, but for the hyper-informed listener: How would you describe the new album?

JR: It's improvisation-based. With all of my previous material, I was focusing on combinations of four, five, six instruments. Rhodes, piano, cello,

lots of harmonic preset material, no standards at all. This album has a few standards, and is focused on improvisation. I'm trying to make a statement that you can play both original music and music from the repertoire, because both are part of my identity. It's the first record with at least some material I didn't write.

TJG: 'The Picture of Dorian Gray,' which happens to be one of my favorite books, is a lovely tune off the new album. Were you inspired by a part of the story, the color of the prose, Oscar Wilde himself, something else?

JR: I was inspired by the dual personality of Dorian. With the character, you see this high-society person, but in secret they're totally different. This piece has this 7/4 feel in the beginning, then this halftime bassline ostinato. It intrigued me, having these two seamless things merged together. So it felt like the tune had these two personalities at once.

TJG: One phrase surrounding your playing keeps emerging from journalists and jazz writers: You're known for an 'inside-outside' style of improvisation. Could you talk a little about what this means to you?

JR: Well, I really developed my playing out of the bebop language, the tradition of the music. My earliest influences were Sonny Rollins and Joe Henderson. I was then introduced to Ornette Coleman and Dewey Redman, people like that. When I moved to New York, people I met had already been listening to that stuff for a long time. So the inside/outside thing comes from that I play in so many different formats. I play performances with people where it's just thrashing, free sound, no pretense whatsoever, just raw emotion,

nothing is set. Then I'll play in very organized, tonal, 'inside' situations. I find that it's an interesting challenge to bring my own personality to all those situations.

TJG: So if you could pinpoint it, what do you think has been the most influential musical concept on your playing?

JR: On my approach to improvising? You know, there have been a bunch, but the one thing that sticks in my mind is that I recently started playing drums, just for recreational purposes, about four years ago. It totally changed my time concept. Just trying to do simple timekeeping exercises, I would play along with the Coltrane Plays The Blues, I think it's Blues To Elvin. Trying to play in the pocket with Elvin was such a mind-opening experience. It's really influenced my saxophone playing, my rhythm, my awareness about how people think of time.

TJG: As an improviser, so much of your live show is about what you bring in the moment. The last time you were featured at The Gallery was in October with Heavy Merge, a trio you co-lead with pianist Russ Lossing and drummer Jeff Davis. How does that project differ from the trio with Brown and Cleaver, in terms of what you're bringing to the stage in real time?

JR: With my current trio, I'm in the driver's seat. I'm not muscling the two other guys around, per se, but I'm kind of the person in charge in that situation. With Heavy Merge, it's a true collective. There's nobody really in charge. So my perspective changes a lot. Also, Russ Lossing, who is an incredible pianist, and Jeff Davis, a really special drummer, have this comfort level but

also a raw sense of risk-taking. Russ will be playing piano, will move his hand over to an acoustically-treated Rhodes, and all of these different sounds make me approach the live situation differently than I do with my own trio. So that's a true collective.

TJG: And you just returned from a tour with Mark Guiliana. That must be a third thing entirely.

JR: I love playing with Mark. I play saxophone in his band Heernt. It's a really cool band, it's a totally different thing. Mark's compositions are unique, really beautiful. It's been cool getting into his music, trying to find the balance of bringing my own identity while fitting into the group sound. He told me the first day: "I want you to play like yourself." We actually just got back from Memphis, where we played at the Memphis Drum Shop. There was this gong chamber, with these huge gongs, 84 inches, 60 inches, this quasi-museum with all these things. It was ridiculous.

TJG: All this drum talk... You said it was mind-blowing to pick up sticks and play drums for the first time, and that you were playing for "recreational purposes." Playing the drums is always recreational, it's so physical! That physicality must really change your sense of space and time, right? With the saxophone, you've always got your hands on the keys, and the position never changes.

JR: Yeah! [Laughs] That's a really interesting viewpoint. And with the drums, especially with the cymbals, there's a lot of residual effect to what you do. Whereas on the saxophone, you have to constantly make the sound happen. Playing cymbals and combinations on the drums was eye-

opening. Another thing about the drums is that I assumed playing the drums was just a coordination game. But at least for me, I realized that 'this hand' and 'that hand' and 'that foot' are all part of me. So it's not necessarily a coordination thing, but it's a combination of physical gestures. I don't know if that makes any sense. But it opened up my rhythmic sense because of that.

TJG: I fully expect your next album to be a solo drum record.

JR: [Laughs] We'll see. The first track of the new record is actually a duo with Gerald, it's a dream. My perfect situation.

TJG: So you'll mostly be playing tunes from One at The Jazz Gallery this week?

JR: Yes, and I actually wrote this suite in a frenzy of emotion about changes in our society. I wrote a bunch of new music that kind of came out over the course of two days. So we'll be playing that stuff in addition to choice tracks from the new record. I'm excited about it. It's only been played at a concert once at Towson University with the trio in February. Other than that, it hasn't been performed out yet, and it doesn't have a name.

TJG: We're excited to hear it!

JR: We're excited to play there. The Gallery is one of my favorite spaces, and Rio does such an amazing job curating the shows. We can't wait.

Jason Rigby's Detroit-Cleveland Trio plays The Jazz Gallery on Saturday, April 29th, 2017. The group features Mr. Rigby on tenor saxophone, Cameron Brown on bass, and Gerald Cleaver on

drums. Sets are at 7:30 and 9:30 P.M. \$22 general admission (\$12 for members) for each set. Purchase tickets here.

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