

Players

Jeff Albert Crescent City's Next Wave Rolls Through Chicago

While trombonist Jeff Albert's 20-plus-year career features music played with some first-generation musicians who helped define his hometown of New Orleans' funk and r&b, he's recently been collaborating with the free-improvisers who've built a community in Chicago.

"My initial connection to Chicago was through recordings," Albert said. "I picked up some early Ken Vandermark 5 things, and really dug what Jeb Bishop was doing."

Trombonist Bishop joined forces with Albert to form the Lucky 7s, which released *Farragut* (Lakefront Digital) in 2006 and just released *Pluto Junkyard* (Clean Feed).

"Jeb's trio was here in the fall of 2003, and that performance opened my mind and ears," Albert said. "It's not that I started to copy Jeb's stuff so much as hearing his stuff helped me find mine. Right around that same time, [saxophonist] Fred Anderson and [drummer] Hamid Drake did a show in New Orleans with [saxophonist] Kidd Jordan and [bassist] William Parker which was amazing, and it pushed me into exploring more of their music and the music of their associates."

At that time, Albert's already multi-faceted career had included recording stints with Deacon John's Jump Blues, Gatemouth Brown and



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Aaron Neville, among other New Orleans greats. He also worked in horn sections behind Stevie Wonder, Bonnie Raitt and Ronnie Milsap, and touring with the Tommy Dorsey and Harry James orchestras. Cruise ship and salsa gigs, playing with the reggae band Cool Riddums, Sista Teedy, and performing as an extra and substitute with the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra took him down other avenues altogether.

Albert said that he and Bishop "eventually developed a friendship through some online trombonist communities. Initially, it was around exciting topics like the best way to remove the lacquer from vintage Conn trombones, but it

moved into a genuine friendship that isn't music-dependent."

Hurricane Katrina's disastrous impact on Albert's hometown made this friendship a life-saver.

"A couple of weeks after Katrina I was talking to Jeb about ideas for places to book my quartet in Chicago, because there wasn't anything happening here yet, and I needed badly to play music for a variety of reasons," Albert said. "He suggested that when I come up, we also do a co-op group with my band and some Chicago guys. This idea became the Lucky 7s. Quin Kirchner, who was the drummer in my quartet pre-Katrina, had

Ben Wendel Intertwined Coasts

This past spring, saxophonist Ben Wendel returned to Los Angeles after a stint at New York's Jazz Gallery in support of his debut, *Simple Song* (Sunnyside Records). For him, it was a typically busy week. Between juggling a self-managed solo career and various other side gigs, he also teaches weekly private lessons at University of Southern California as an adjunct professor. But even with a diverse resume that includes gigs with drummer Ignacio Berroa and rapper Snoop Dogg, writing music for film and co-leading the modern jazz combo Kneebody, Wendel, at 33, considers himself a late bloomer.

"I'm not a spring chicken in terms of having been on the road a lot," Wendel said. "But this is my first experience, specifically, as a leader, dealing with a tour, booking flights and hotels."

While Wendel says that he kept busy as a sideman, it took a while for him to feel confident in presenting music onto a disc that was specifically his. "With some people, it comes naturally; other people kind of fall into [a solo career], because they're lucky or some hyper-talented

prodigy," he said.

His debut disc exhibits a strong presence, not just in terms of displaying his flinty tenor sound and supple, conversational improvisations, but also his compositional guile. Except for a soft-hued but rhythmically kinetic rendering of John Coltrane's "Lonnie's Lament" and a version of Billy Strayhorn's "A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing," on which he overdubs himself on various saxophones and bassoon, *Simple Song* showcases all originals.

Featuring members of his West Coast band (bassist Darek "Oles" Oleszkiewicz and guitarist Larry Koonse) and his East Coast ensemble (drummer Nate Wood and keyboardist Adam Benjamin) as well as pianists Taylor Eigsti and Tigran Hamasyan, *Simple Song*, as the title suggests, places a premium on compositional craft. But when asked if he sees himself more as a composer or a saxo-



KIM FOX

phonist, he argues that those artistic sides are intertwined inside. "I think Wayne Shorter is the perfect example of that. He's someone who is an incredible composer and a distinctive saxophone improviser," Wendel said.

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, but raised in Los Angeles, Wendel studied music at

returned to Chicago, which is his hometown, and bassist Matthew Golombisky also ended up in Chicago after being forced out of New Orleans by the flood. The three of us made up the New Orleans portion of the band, and Jeb asked [vibraphonist] Jason Adasiewicz, [cornetist] Josh Berman and [saxophonist] Keefe Jackson to be the Chicago component. We met for a week in late February, early March of 2006, and rehearsed and played four gigs that we recorded.”

At the same time, Albert expresses hope for musical diversity growing in his hometown.

“There is a gathering movement of creative musical activity in New Orleans,” Albert said. “One aspect of that is the Open Ears Music Series, which I founded and co-curate with Justin Peake and Dan Oestreicher. The idea of Open Ears is directly descendent from some of the musician-run series in Chicago, specifically the Emerging Improvisers presentations at the Hungry Brain. I spent some time picking Josh’s brain about what made their stuff work at the Brain, and his advice and guidance have been crucial in our success with Open Ears, which has been running for about a year-and-a-half now.

“I haven’t really given much conscious thought to the traditional New Orleans–Chicago connections,” Albert continued. “There seems to have always been some flow between the cities, but my initial draw to Chicago was simply that I liked the music that was being made there. The first Lucky 7s performance, which happened to be Mardi Gras 2006 at the Empty Bottle, elicited an appropriate line from [percussionist] Michael Zerang: ‘The last time New Orleans cats started coming up here, it was pretty good for the music.’” —John Ephland

Eastman School of Music in New York. Whereas many aspiring jazz artists who make it to the East Coast tend to migrate to New York City—especially if they’ve gone to school in Manhattan—Wendel headed back to Los Angeles, which provided him with a diverse pool of musicians who weren’t necessary jazz players.

“It’s such an industry town; you get a lot of experience doing commercial film work, you can also end up in different genres—hip-hop, rock—that’s why my resume is pretty wide-ranging.”

The city also allowed Wendel to focus on developing a singular voice.

“Here, people are more isolated and it gives you the space to hone your craft without all the intense, crazy pressure of New York. In New York, there are so many brilliant musicians—you can get lost in the mix and lose your sense of identity or a sense of where you’re headed. I feel lucky, because I’m entering my solo career a little older and I have a good network of friends. It won’t be like starting from ground zero.” —John Murph

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