

REUBEN HOCH

Taken & transcribed by
Ludwig van Trikt

CADENCE: Where and when were you born?

REUBEN HOCH: I was born in Brooklyn, NY, to Aaron and Nettie Hoch in February 1959. My dad was a truck driver for the Schaeffer Brewing Company in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. He was a very musical individual and great supporter of my musical interests.

My mother also supported my interests and allowed me to study music privately in spite of the cost of lessons. We lived in a two bedroom apartment in the Sheepshead area of South Brooklyn. I have two elder siblings. Although my dad did not play an instrument, he had great respect for instrumentalists and enjoyed the music of the big bands. His brothers did however play but not professionally. One of them was apparently a very good drummer.

At the age of sixteen I began playing professionally around the New York area and had to join the Musicians Union, Local 802, accompanied by my dad. Union membership was necessary to play club dates in catering halls.

I became mesmerized with the drums at 12 years old while in elementary school. I was a student at Torah Vodaath, a very Orthodox Jewish Yeshiva in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn. Our school was above the Munkatcher Synagogue. The Munkatch are a very large sect of Eastern, European Hungarian Chassidim. We davened (prayed) in their synagogue every morning. It was this experience with Chassidus that led to my interest in Chassidic music and Chassidus in general. The school that I attended taught Torah studies in Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jewry. To this day my Yiddish speaking skills are quite strong.

Jewishness has become a very important element in contemporary Jazz. Any number of divergent cats are exploring their cultural identity through this music. What explains this, in your view?

We all want to touch base with our heritage; it lends an element of credibility to who we are as musicians. I actually give a great deal of credit to Wynton Marsalis. He has in many ways served as a guiding light to my development. I felt even more strongly about him after *Blood in The Fields*.

Jews and Blacks share a very strong sense of pride in their ancestry. Bringing our elders into the musical arena allows for a tribute to the eternal struggle of cultures.

I think that Zorn was the catalyst for this cultural trend. Jews as a people possess a very rich culture and history. Once it became apparent that there was an interest in the music of our people it opened the door for Marty Ehrlich, Eric Friedlander, Borah Bergman, and many others to tap into their cultural roots. From a

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of Blues artists, check out The Omaha Blues Society's wonderful website, www.omahablues.com. *The Omaha World Herald's* Thursday editions "Go" section, and the *Lincoln Journal-Star's* Friday and Sunday editions cover the regional entertainment scenes well. However, newcomers to the city should pick up free weekly newspapers *The Omaha City Weekly* (www.omahacityweekly.com) and *The Reader* (www.thereader.com) at restaurants, hotels, entertainment venues, and convenience stores, to find out about the music and arts scene (Thursdays-Wednesdays) in the tri-city area. Or call **Dan Cervany** at the Omaha Musician's Association (402/553-5818). In addition, members can list their performances on the organization's website at www.omahamusic.com. The website also posts the free music in the parks summer series. In addition, Christopher Cooke, who programs Jazz for two weekly radio programs for KIOS-FM (91.5), maintains a calendar of events on his website, www.christopher-cooke.com. . . . Lincoln. The Nebraska Jazz Orchestra 2008 - 2009 season (402/477-8446: njo@artincorporated.org) begins 11/7/08 with "L.A. Legend," **Bill Watrous** (tnb); 1/22/09 with "Learning from the Master," **Mike Tomaro**, Duquesne University director of Jazz studies performing with the NJO and the 2009 Young Lions All Star Band; 3/24 with "It's Not Rocket Science . . .," **Dana Hall** (perc) a former aerospace engineer who performs with the Chicago Jazz Ensemble; and 5/19 with "Plays Well With Others," **Wayne Bergeron** (tbn) with NJO and the winner of the 2009 NJO Young Jazz Artist Competition. In addition, NJO schedules holiday

practical point of view Tzadik records allowed the artist a platform to create. The Tonic, The Stone, and Michael Dorf's original Knitting Factory also provided an outlet for the music. Zorn remains the champion. He's to create Jewish music what Wynton is to straight ahead. I remember hanging out at the Knitting Factory on East Huston Street and marveling at the creation of Tzadik Records. This was demonstrated through the CDs in Tzadik's brochure. Dorf definitely had a lot to do with it. He provided Zorn with a place to experiment and create. It probably would not have happened without both of them. As I recall, Zorn used to have a weekly gig at The Factory, I believe, on Thursday's. This was a workshop to get the Jewish music movement off the ground. I must say that Dorf is a hero in his own right. He's very serious about his Jewish music identity as exemplified by the New York Jewish Music and Heritage Festival. I was fortunate to participate with my group, The Chassidic Jazz Project, two years ago. These factors have been very significant in allowing for the development and increasing success of the CJP.

I think that the Jewish cultural trend in New York's downtown scene is also due in part to the very large Jewish population and the rich history that the Jews possess in the lower East Side. Remember that the Jewish population in New York is one of the largest in the world. You therefore have a very large group of people that support the creative Jewish music movement. Many of these people are third and fourth generation Jews whose parents and grandparents populated the downtown area. During the turn of the Century, the Jews created lives for themselves on the lower East Side of Manhattan. It makes sense that this area would be the hub of the movement. The Tonic was the old Schapiro Winery. I actually knew Norman Schapiro as a kid growing up in New York. Who would have thought that this would become a music venue featuring creative Jewish artists.

So the trend is due to individuals who cared enough about their roots to make this happen: logical locations, rich history.

Going back to your youth, when you first started playing drums at 12 and developed an interest in Jazz. What type of Jazz were you exposed to? Certainly at that time the so-called "New Thing" was getting press with its brand of Black identity.

I was initially exposed to Jazz through radio. It was midtown Les Davis with WRVR. They played Jazz 24 hours a day. My very first exposure to Jazz was at age 14. I saved up some money to buy a boxed record set called *The Drums* on ABC Impulse 1974. It was a three record set, that opened with Art Blakey and ended with some

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staples, "Christmas & All That Jazz," 12/18, and 2/14 "Valentines Dinner & Dance." All programs are at 7:30 p.m., at Cornhusker Marriott except the Christmas program, at Embassy Suites. Zoo Bar (402/435-8754; www.zoobar.com) schedules local, regional, and national blues acts. The current schedule is listed on the website. The Berman Music Foundation (www.bermanmusicfoundation.org/mission.htm) continues in the wake of founder Butch Berman's death (1/31/08). He left readers with a column just before his death (www.bermanmusicfoundation.org/pzsz.htm) and his legacy continues to be posthumously documented as BMF newsletters continue to be produced. E-me at pcpserrros@cox.com for Omaha area improvised music, and Jazz art and photography, anywhere on the planet.

—Polidoros C. "Bill" Pserros

PHILADELPHIA, PA – This column deals with news and Jazz events that originate in and around the Philly area, however at times boundaries are extended and the New York City scene is included. One event in that city that always qualifies for reporting is the Vision Festival, a 5-day orgy of Free Jazz and arts that takes place in the Lower East Side. This year marked its 13th-year of existence and a new location, the very hot and humid Clemente Solo Velez Cultural Center, a step-up acoustically but not esthetically from the last venue, the Angel Orensanz Foundation. I was able to catch the 6/11 and 6/13-14 shows and was once again impressed with the uniformly stunning performances. Each session had 4-5 performances, showcasing Downtown's finest and a smattering

of the more out drummers like Sunny Murray, Barry Altschul, and Rashied Ali.

I remember getting the record home and putting it on my record player. It opened with Art Blakey "Alamode," a Curtis Fuller composition. I was 15 years old and boy was I blown away. I listened for about 10 seconds to Art's drum intro and picked up the arm on the turntable. I said to myself, "I have no idea what he was playing but I want to be able to do that one day." I knew from that point that I wanted to be a Jazz musician.

My original interest was in straight ahead, interestingly. I went on to play with a bunch of guys from Art's band about four years later and then began to digest the playing of the drummers that came later on the record: Barry Altschul, Ed Blackwell, Paul Motian, and others. The New Thing bit me pretty hard with the loft scene, Ali's Alley, Studio Rivbea and others, I was catching Arthur Blythe, Hemphill, Oliver Lake, and many others. It was a period of incredible creativity. People were still reeling from the music of Trane, Miles, Ornette, Don Cherry, and Dolphy. It was definitely heavy Black identity. The world was pretty screwed up at the time as if it's not now. Racial tension, Vietnam, and Civil Rights, all played a great role in Jazz music reflecting the cacophony of the era. One guy who was a great influence and probably would have been the next Coltrane was saxophonist, Arthur Rhames; my buddy Frank Antico played with him. The cat was possessed. He played guitar like John McLaughlin and a student model plastic Selmer saxophone like Trane. He died at the age of 32 in 1989.

During the time that you became a professional at the young age of 16, what was it like being on the scene in New York City?

It was going to school. I literally learned to play on the streets. I did study privately with some great cats but hanging out and playing at jam sessions was essential to my development. I played all the time. I used to play every Thursday night with a core group of guys at the Original Systems Two Recording Studio in Brooklyn every Thursday night. It sort of became a music lab. We always had guests come out to sit in.

The core group consisted of pianist Frank Antico and bassist Steve Jones. Frank and I grew up together as teenagers playing and listening to everyone. Steve Jones was a student in the music department at Brooklyn College. We had guys like Richie Vitale, John McNeely, Gus Mancini, Marty Rosenberger, and many others play with us.

I also hung out at the Jazz clubs from a very early age. I heard

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of visiting dignitaries. Among the many stellar groups that played, special mention goes out to the **Kidd Jordan/Hamiet Bluiett/Dave Burrell** 3 and the Kidd Jordan/**Billy Bang/William Parker/Hamid Drake** 4, which jammed as part of the Kidd Jordan Lifetime Recognition celebration on 6/11, the **Gebhard Ullmann/Steve Swell** 4, the **Wadada Leo Smith** Golden Quintet (**Vijay Iyer; John Lindberg; Don Moye; Pheeroan aLaff**) and the **George Lewis/Joelle Leandre** duo. The top prize was split between the **Sonny Simmons/Bobby Few** duo, **Connie Crothers** solo piano and the **Paul Dunmall/Henry Grimes/ Andrew Cyrille** 3. The biggest surprise however was not a musical revelation, it was finding enigmatic legend **Giuseppi Logan** sitting alone in the bar with a broken alto sax. If I hadn't asked him his name I suspect he'd still be sitting there waiting for someone to say hi. He was overjoyed to catch up with old friends Bernard Stollman and Dave Burrell, once they were brought over to him. Stay tuned for the next big comeback story! Props out to Arts for Art and its director, **Patricia Nicholson**, in particular, for arranging the well run event. Nicholson was recently announced, for the second year in a row, as winner of this year's Jazz Journalist Association's award for event production. A well deserved recognition for her tortuous swim against the current in the battle to keep improvisational music/arts relevant in NYC...The following weekend had Philly jumpin with the 5th annual West Oak Lane Jazz & Arts Festival (6/20-22), the largest free (\$) Jazz and arts festival in the nation and

Mingus, Philly Joe, Arthur Blythe, George Coleman, Clark Terry, Art Blakey, Milt Jackson, Al Foster, Ben Riley, Ron Carter, Buster Williams, Kenny Barron to name a few. I used to hang out near or in the bathroom at Sweet Basil's so that I could check out the drummers. The bathroom was right near the stage. I also used to frequent the late night jam sessions hosted by Ted Curson at the Blue Note. I went wherever I could play. I was still in high school at that time.

Whatever happened to the "Jazz Brat Pack" that was the core group from the Brooklyn Studio?

I have not had any contact with any of the musicians from the weekly Brooklyn Jazz rehearsal sessions that we did at Systems Two Studios. To my knowledge, pianist, Frank Antico, still lives in Brooklyn. I have no clue regarding the whereabouts of bassist, Steve Jones. Bottom line is that these two guys were instrumental in my development as a Jazz musician. We played together all the time and supported each other greatly. Many of our guests, such as Richie Vitale and John McNeil, are still on the scene.

Your personal musical life took an interesting trajectory in 1984. You went to Tel Aviv to attend medical school while also becoming immersed in the Israeli Jazz scene.

I graduated from Yeshiva University in New York in 1982 with a degree in chemistry. All through college I was very active musically on the NY Jazz scene. After graduating from Yeshiva University in 1982, I continued to play while working in medical research at The Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York. This experience led to an interest in the practice of medicine.

In 1984 I attended medical school at Tel Aviv University's Sackler School of Medicine. While living in Israel, I was fortunate to meet musicians Harold Rubin, Mark Smulian, and Tommy Bellman. We were all Anglo Saxon coming from different parts of the globe: South Africa, England, Canada, and the United States. To date, Zaviot (the group), was one of the most rewarding musical experiences of my career. We rehearsed several times per week and were constantly developing new material in a very critical manner. This is where I broke my teeth as a composer. We traveled extensively throughout Europe and were the ambassadors for Jazz from Israel.

What effect did going to Israel have on both your music and spirituality?

Israel had a great effect on my music as a result of my membership in Zaviot. Zaviot was probably the most significant experience in

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the jewel of West Oak Lane. This happening has non-stop music across 4 main stages and 5 smaller venues along Ogontz Avenue from 8:30 AM to late night. The bands appearing run the Jazz spectrum from smooth to Latin, Afro-centric, fusion, blues, traditional, bop and modern. Most of the throng (reported by the police to number approximately 450,000 spread over the 3 days) was lured by the sweet honey that was the non-Jazz offerings of Mandrill, The O'Jays, Ashford & Simpson, War and The Whispers amongst others. The massive event, a potential nightmare if not extremely well organized, was a rousing success. Three of the main stages were active at most times and there were plenty of merchants, a good variety of food to be had and loads of shuttle trolleys providing free service to off site parking. There were some issues to report, however. In addition to the poorly represented avant-garde genre, there were some glaring scheduling clashes. The three most adventurous groups booked to play on 6/22 (the **Orrin Evans** 4, the **Carl Grubbs** 4 and the **G. Calvin Weston** band) were all scheduled to play against each other at the 3:15 – 3:45 PM block. The clashes on 6/21 occurred with guitarists **Kevin Eubanks** and **Monette Sudler** competing and, later in the day, Philly's favorite organist, **Trudy Pitts**, was up against the **Sun Ra Arkestra** and headliner **Benny Golson**. In reality, all these shows were free so there's little to bitch about. Kevin Eubanks was on break from the Tonight Show and thought it was great to be playing out in the street in front of so many family and friends. He announced, "I'm so happy to be home I don't know what to do." With

my musical development. Zaviot was totally out of the box. I arrived in Israel from New York with a bunch of straight ahead stuff in my back pocket. But the truth is that I always had an inclination to more conceptual music. Ergo, my deep affection for Miles Davis. Miles was the ultimate inventor—in a way, the Albert Einstein of Jazz.

Israel did have a very significant effect on my music. I don't know that it actually had a profound effect on my spirituality. I've always been a spiritual/intellectual kind of person. I very much feel that spirituality can in many ways come out of the intellect, intellect leads to spirituality and vice versa.

More than spirituality, Israel created a very strong sense of Jewish identity and pride. It was thrilling to travel through Europe as the representatives of Jazz from Israel. This is how Zaviot was perceived in Europe. We were the ambassadors of Israeli Jazz.

When did you first conceptualize the idea of mixing Jazz and Chassidic melodies?

In approximately 1990, my good friend, Charlie Fishman, who managed Dizzy, felt that I could create something very authentic due to my extensive Orthodox background and significant exposure to the Chassidic Jews. I had a real big vote of support from bassist, Jeff Andrews, as well. It's pretty interesting for me to witness the success of Chassidic Reggae star, Matisyahu. He's actually not fusing Chassidic melodies with Reggae, He's more about infusing Reggae with Chassidic ideology. He's been an Orthodox Jew for only a few years. He was inspired by the Lubavitcher Chassidim who reside in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. They are very big into Jewish outreach. I guess Matisyahu feels that he will be able to reach a lot of Jews through his music. It appears that he's reaching out to the non Jews as well. After all, Bob Marley was a very spiritual person. Reggae and spirituality go hand in hand.

Please explain for the layman what the Chassic musical tradition is about?

Chassidic music is first and foremost liturgical in nature. All Chassidic melodies come from the Siddur (Jewish prayer book) or Psalms of David (Tehillim). Many Jewish prayers come out of the King David; Psalm in any event.

Chassidic music is spiritual in nature the Chassidim movement was created by Israel Baal Shem Tov, a Russian Jewish Kabbalist. He felt that spirituality and Kabbalistic concepts should be made assessable to the ordinary Orthodox Jew prior to the Baal Shem Tov, Kabbalistic practice was delegated to the greatest Talmudic schol-

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that, a voice from the large audience yelled out, "Clean your room!" Eubanks also said, "I saw a girl [in the crowd] I had a crush on in 6th grade and she's still fine." Once he got into the music, his guitar work was steeped in down-home soul, Blues, and a touch of fire. His brother Robin was part of the quintet, balancing out the band with his creatively sly trombone and, for the first time in awhile that I'd seen, he played without the use of electronic devices. Drummer **Marvin "Smitty" Smith** also made the trip east to appear. Kevin Eubanks' "JB Meets JW," a tribute to fallen idols James Brown and pianist James Williams, had plenty of Funk, R & B and some New Orleans growl. Later that night, the Sun Ra Arkestra played their hearts out, wowing the uninformed in the audience with their singular brand of spirited merriment, sequins, dance steps, hot sounds, and song and **Marshall Allen's** bright red beard. Allen remains in top form and there is little doubt that the Arkestra is the most dedicated group of artists around. Too bad their touring schedule is so paltry. One wide-eyed fan flew in from North Dakota specifically to see them and happily left wearing a purple Sun Ra T-shirt. Down the street on the main stage, Benny Golson had himself a nice quartet that included pianist **Mike LeDonne**, bassist **Peter Washington** and drummer **Carl Allen** and an audience the size of Cleveland. Golson is undoubtedly one of the remaining greats but having had the opportunity to see him perform live five times over the past seven years; it's hard not to be underwhelmed by his tired anecdotes and lack of fiery play. Does

ars. The Baal Shem Tov's approach led to a schism between the Lithuanian Jews, namely the Jews who followed the Gaon of Vilna who vehemently opposed this approach. In short, Chassidic music can become trance like. Melodies will be repeated over and over and often joined with dance. A belief; Ivdu Hashem B'Simcha. . . serve God through joy.

We very seldom hear about Israeli Jazz stateside.

Israel boasts some really great players and a growing school of Jazz — The Rimon school. It's the Berklee of Israel. I'm not really up on the school's activities at this time. I'm sure that Dave Liebman knows more through his recent performances in Israel and clinics at the school. I believe that the school participates in IAJE.

Another very fine group that existed in Israel when I was there was Kadima, with Jerry Garval, Steve Paskoff, and Jean Claude Jones. They were out of Jerusalem. Zaviot was located in Tel Aviv.

At this point there are some great Israeli players on the scene: Avishai Cohen, Omer Avital, Anat Cohen, Eli Degibri, Avi Lebovich, Danny Zamir. These guys are Israeli home boys and have infiltrated the American scene. One cat whom I played with when I returned to New York in about 1991 was pianist, Ari Strauss. Wonderful player. I have no idea where he is at this time.

There is much talk about the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe.

Have you experienced this during your travels?

Only once. I did a gig in Salzburg with Zaviot in about 1987 during one of Israel's Intifadahs. A guy got riled up in the audience and announced out loud that our music was as chaotic as the country that we originated from. He was upset about Israel's treatment of Arabs. He was quickly silenced. I have to say that we were treated quite well throughout Europe.

Going back to some of your past sideman work—you performed with M-BASE artist Lonnie Plaxico and Greg Osby. What was that like in terms of being a drummer?

Lonnie and I go back a long way. I met him when he first came to New York from Chicago at 19 years old. I think that I was one of the first people that he played with in New York. He was close with Ray Brown and super talented. I recall that he has perfect pitch. We played together with a great piano player, Frank Antico, who also, has perfect pitch. Frank and I came up together as very young players in Brooklyn. Soon after Lonnie's arrival in New York, he played with Art Blakey and Wynton Marsalis. I recorded with Lonnie on two records (1990 and 1992) with the group West End Avenue which

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he ever let it all hang out?... Multi-instrumentalist **Byard Lancaster**, as always, is busy doing a hundred things at once. Lancaster, 66, says he will go into semi-retirement and register as a lobbyist in order to organize Philly Jazz musicians. He has been a longtime, selfless promoter of his local talented peers which include Khan Jamal, Odean Pope, Monette Sudler, and the late Rufus Harley. He says he will have to cut back on his performances since, "if we're all playing, there's no organization," and also, "Jazz is oil, it's the only thing we make that sells in 90% of every city in the world." After playing for 60 years, he's getting a bit bored so he's okay with the cut back in his live performances, although you may still catch him busking on the street corner. He also said that it no longer made sense to get paid \$9000 for a gig in Paris and only \$90 to play in Philly. This free time will also allow him to finish his opera that has been 30 years in the making...Chris' Jazz Café introduced their Sunset Sessions in July. This is a 2-hour live music happy hour that runs from 5-7 PM each weekday and is produced by vocalist (& club waiter) Ron Talton. He plans to feature a Jazzy blend of Funk, R & B, and Soul in order to appeal to a young crowd. There will be a focus on vocalists and some of the talent will come from local music programs such as the University of the Arts and Temple University... England's **Norma Winestone** sang at Chris' on 6/25 as part of a rare U.S. tour. The vocal pioneer first made her name with such avant artists as Kenny Wheeler and John Taylor and a number of the die-hard Free Jazz faithful came out to experience her live. Her trio with German **Klaus**

featured German pianist, Christoph Spendel.

Playing with Lonnie was always a great treat. He possesses an amazing groove and is always on top of the time. He's very rhythmic and pushes hard. He's also very creative and can adapt to any playing situation. He plays great electric as well.

I met Greg after returning from Israel in 1988. I met him through Lonnie. We played together in a group of mine called Repercussions, which also had Joey Calderazzo, Tom Chang and Ed Schuller or Scott Lee. I did some work together with Greg, Leni Stern, Jeff Andrews, and Christoph Spendel as well. Greg is one of the greats of our time. Playing with him is a learning experience. He's a master of odd time signatures as well as very advanced harmonic concepts. Once again, playing with Greg places great responsibility on a drummer. You need to be tuned into what's going on around you.

Another M-Base artist that I played with was guitarist, Kevin McNeil. Kevin appeared on a live recording that I did at the Knitting Factory in 1989 with the RH Factor which also featured Dave Liebman, Christoph Spendel and Jeff Andrews.

Another one of your more intriguing past collaborations was the band West End Avenue featuring Native American saxophonist, Jim Pepper.

West End Avenue was a collaboration between myself and German pianist, Christoph Spendel. Christoph and I met in Tel Aviv in 1987. He was a guest on one of Zaviot's recordings, *Tel Aviv Connection*.

In 1989, Zaviot did a tour in Germany together with Jim Pepper and Christoph. Christoph replaced guitarist, Tommy Bellman, who returned to Toronto. I met Pepper in 1986 at Jazz Ost West in Nuremberg. We were both playing there. We all hung out and became friendly. This is when I met Ed Schuller as well. Pepper and Ed were playing with trombonist, Marty Cooke. John Betsch was playing drums in that band.

We asked Pepper to join us on the '89 tour since he was in Germany finishing up a tour with Mal Waldron. What an experience! Pepper was one of a kind. He could melt ice with that big broad smile or knock your lights out with his right hook. There was never a dull moment with him. Naturally, we did "Witchi Tai To" on every gig of the tour. I never heard anyone with that sound on tenor. He played with Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra alongside guys like Joe Lovano. I know that most players, myself included, were mesmerized by his tone. Sort of like the thing you get from Dewey Redman and the late great George Adams. We played together every

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Gesing (b d, ss) and Italian **Glaucio Venier** (p) made the second set a very satisfying and intimate merger of chamber music and improvisational Jazz. "Giants Gentle Stride," a Coltrane tribute, was soothing yet soulful and her words very endearing. The Peter Gabriel cover "Here Comes the Flood" was completely transformed in her hands. Winstone slowed the song down, letting her clearly enunciated words flow forward, adding extra significance to their meaning. Gesing's low, growling bass clarinet and Vernier's lyrical piano backing were a nice touch...

Julian Pressley, a late fill for Clifford Adams, who apparently was called away for his steady gig with Kool and the Gang, didn't play like a second banana at Chris' Jazz Café on 7/11 as part of the **Webb Thomas Superband** (Thomas, d; Monette Sudler, g; **Pete Chavez**, ts; **Tim Thompson**, tpt; **Dan Kostelnik**, kybd). Pressley's tight-lipped alto sax stretched mighty deep into bluesy heat, just daring the audience not to cheer. The Philly-reared saxophonist who left town years ago after hooking up with Illinois Jacquet said, "I work just about every night in NYC, that's how you keep your chops up." Thomas, or Webb T as he likes to go by, is one of Philly's most charismatic Jazz dudes and in addition to delivering always tasty percussion, he is a master at getting a high effort out of his band, consistently transforming clubs into up-beat Hard Bop parties... That same night, Ortlieb's Jazzhaus hosted another drummer led hot band throw down. Italy's **Peppe Merolla** had brought down some major honchos he frequently gigs with from the NYC club Smoke. The major name was trumpeter

night for three weeks and traveled in a big Mercedes truck. Pepper was famous for his phrase which described his approach to music: "Rhythm, Melody, and Sweet Harmony." I've held onto this phrase since then and allow it to guide me through lots of musical situations. His untimely death in the early '90s was a real shocker. I often think of him and miss him. Ed Schuller and I have reminisced many times over Pepper.

When I returned to New York in 1989, Pepper and I kept in touch. Christoph also kept in touch and also came up with the idea of a group with Pepper. Our first recording (1989) was at Jimmy Madison's studio on the West End Avenue, ergo the name of the group. That session also had Ron McClure on bass. After Pepper's death, the second recording (1990) had tenor player, Lance Bryant, and Lonnie Plaxico on bass.

Since there are so many Jazz trio recordings, how do you manage to say something fresh in this context?

Good Question! My musical career has been dedicated to always striving for something new. Miles has always been my mentor in this regard. He never remained complacent. He always strived to make the heaviest statement that he could through the music.

Thematically, I dedicated this effort to some of the great contemporary Jazz composers of our time: Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny, Brad Mehldau, Steve Kuhn, Sam Rivers, and Ornette. Therefore the title, *Of Recent Time*.

The trio recording Of Recent Time is recorded for the Naim label instead of being self produced?

I'm very honored to have recorded on the Naim label. I've always respected Naim's commitment to musical and recording excellence. Engineer and producer, Ken Christianson, and I go back a long time. He's one of the most gifted recording engineers out there. He's a Rudy Van Gelder of our time and on par with David Baker and Jan Erik Konshaug of ECM Records. Ken records with two mics in a non studio setting. He looks for ambient rooms such as empty concert halls or churches. He's a master of microphone and instrument placement. He records to a very old open reel recorder called The Nagra. Therefore, Naim's recordings are AAD. That means that they're extremely analog.

Naim has also recorded great artists such as Charlie Haden, Kurt Elling, Laurence Hobgood, Paul Wertico, Antonio Forcione, and Jim Gaillorero to name a few. I'm quite fortunate to be amongst such great company.

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Eddie Henderson who, except for an appearance with the Mingus Big Band at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2006, had not played this town since the '70s. It was obviously our loss as his work on the last set's "Maiden Voyage" was pure class and his muted trumpet on the finale "All Blues" was confident, cool, and captivating. He said he doesn't do a lot of one-off appearances out of NYC like this because he's so busy (only 3 weeks off in the previous 11 months) but he did it out of respect for Merolla. There was a large cheering section for the leader, one of whom frequently took flash photos inches from the musicians' faces and seemed to be having a really great time. Merolla was adept at kick-starting the band as they ran through proven standards in a feisty Hard Bop mode. It would have been nice to hear Henderson play more but tenor saxophonist **John Farnsworth** was also in a liberated mood this night and impressive...**Richie Cole** is back! Well, not back in the area. He had to sell his home near Trenton, N.J., after the death of his wife awhile back and now lives in Illinois, but he sounded better then he has in years during his appearance at Chris' on 7/25. Looking lean and sounding clean and hungry on alto, he played with one of the numerous configurations of his Alto Madness Orchestras. Unfortunately, the band was not all that sharp although they did entertain. After warming up with two numbers to start the late set, the very pleasing "Song of Tahiti" followed, slowly snaking luxuriously along with an exotic melody. "Beauty School Drop Out" was fun and something you don't hear performed every day. Another highlight came

Do you hear a parallel with Jazz modality and some of this Jewish music?

Not totally. Jewish music tends to be in minor keys. That's not necessarily true of Jazz. Jewish music also, lends itself to Middle Eastern rhythms which is not unique to Jazz. In other words, the music pulls in its own direction with Jazz being a great vehicle for creative interpretation. What you do see as a parallel is that expressive Jewish music such as Klezmer and Chassidic music, are very improvisational. In these forms of traditional Jewish music, there's a tremendous degree of blowing by the lead player. The role that the clarinet and violin hold really drive home the improvisational nature of these styles. I became interested in music while in elementary school and it was Chassidic music that turned me on. I was drawn to the up tempo rhythms and sheer energy required to play this music. This music inspired me to become a drummer and I listened to it continuously.

My first experience as a professional musician was in the Chassidic music business. I'd play Orthodox Jewish weddings that had one hour sets of continuous music. We'd play these medleys with six to ten piece bands without any charts. The cats knew these pieces by heart. Some of the guys that I played with were very well respected, such as Rudy Teppel, Shelly Gordon, Pete Sokolow, Howie Leese, and Eddie Leshaw. We'd jam like crazy. I would always superimpose swing rhythms to the freilach beats due to my developing love of Jazz. Interestingly, it worked. The musicians on these gigs were old pros. They knew a lot and infused the music with different influences. They played with big bands, TV/radio orchestra and vaudeville. This experience paved the way in part of my development as a Jazz player. It certainly worked the hell out of my chops. I would say that Klezmer and Chassidic music could be compared to the Blues.

Now that we have the internet, what was your experience with RH Factor Records in terms of sales and distribution?

RH Factor Records is my own label. The internet has definitely been helpful thanks to selling on my site and E-Bay. The nice thing about inside is that you have total artistic and financial control. It's a lot of work to get it out there but the rewards are probably equivalent to working with a label.

How did that disc fare in terms of sales (how much money did you put into it/how much have you gotten back) and artistic reviews?

I used to lead a group called The RH Factor in the late '80s and early '90s. We released a CD recorded live at The Knitting Factory

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unexpectedly from the piano bench as **Peter Lauffer** came forward to sing two very tongue-in-cheek efforts including "Artificial Flowers."...World Café Live presented the **Charlie Hunter** Trio (**Erik Deutsch**, kybd; **Tony Mason**, d) in residency at their upstairs venue on 8/2. The club has taken to booking the tricked out guitarist/bassist in this unusual fashion over the past couple years – three separate nights spread over three consecutive weekends. On this night, Hunter sat down on stage and immediately picked up on the pre-set music, a country rocker about "Tobacco Road." He warmed up by playing to the song which actually led quite nicely into the trio's first two tunes that were in the chunky country rocker mode (along with funk and blues). Their 3rd song was a slick temptress with some off-the-hook Joker-esque/spooky effects from Deutsch, who was wonderful all night at adding meaningful accents. Next up came "One Bad Apple," a ditty from those noted hoologans of rock-n-roll – The Osmonds. In Hunter's hands, it was rendered happy and fun. Upon completion, he asked if the audience could name the band that first performed the song and said, "I gotcha – You thought it was cool!" Although the majority of the group's music had the same slow tempo, the set never dragged and the two hours flashed right by. Hunter was often content to hold down the bass part for long periods, hitting on a groove, breaking out occasionally to let some technically impressive riffs fly. A late fast-steppin' groove piece with some high cosmic Deutsch activity had the waitresses dancing off to the side and then a new composition entitled "Astronaut Love Triangle" was

and another entitled, *If I Only Knew*. Both CDs featured Dave Lieberman, Christoph Spendel, and Jeff Andrews. Guitarist Kevin McNeil appeared on the Knitting Factory recording and Leni Stern on the studio recording. Interestingly, Roy Hargrove later came out with his group also titled RH Factor. This was brought to my attention some years ago and I never pursued it. So in essence, there are two Jazz groups with the same name. From my point of view I could potentially release another RH Factor CD in the future. At this point however there are no imminent plans. We probably both had the same idea as we share the same initials, RH. It might be a thought for us to collaborate but again, no plans or probably no awareness from Roy about any of this. I have also published all of my originals under RH Factor Music and have filed them this way with BMI.

I therefore decided to call my record label, RH Factor Records, with the release of The Chassidic Jazz Project's CD, *Live at The Broward Center for Performing Arts*. This gig was sponsored by The Broward Center's Arts Access Program. The program supports South Florida performing groups in theater, dance, and music to present new works to the community. They provided the use of the venue at a very reasonable price and included technical and marketing assistance. They also promoted the performance by direct mailing to their subscribers as well as listing the performances in all the local art directories. In any event, this was a self-promoted gig which I did to create a live setting for the recording. The engineer was a really talented guy, Kevin Kaufman, who has done sound for Mike Stern for years. He recorded to a digital recorder and then he mixed and mastered. This recording featured Don Friedman and Bobby Thomas, Jr.

It probably cost about \$5000 to put the CD out. This is based on recording costs, editing, mastering, graphic and art and DC production. So the compelling question is, does one do better with an indie production? I think that there is great potential with indie releases but it requires money. You need to have strong PR and a good publicist to get the work out. Having a posting on your web site is probably not enough. The advantage of doing your own thing is that you have total artistic control as well as enough copies to get it to whomever you want. Record labels usually give you twenty complimentary copies, which does not go very far, especially if you have your own contacts that you need to provide with product. It is also great to have your own supply of CDs for selling at gigs. This can be very significant as gigs are a great opportunity to sell. On the subject of reviews, I feel very strongly that you have to work in tandem with a good publicist. I recently affiliated with an excellent

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unveiled...The big excitement this summer was the reunion tour of fusion pioneers Return To Forever (**Chick Corea**, kybd; **Stanley Clarke**, b; **Al Di Meola**, g; **Lenny White**, d) after a 25-year hiatus. Their 4th to last performance was at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, Philly's only outdoor cultural arts venue and one of the largest of its kind in the country. Many of the 5,500 listeners who eagerly packed the facility were hearing the band live in a whole different setting than they had in the '70s – drug-free, although there were some strong wisps of pot in the air around my area during the final encore. Expectations were set incredibly high by the press and fans and, for the most part, the super group delivered. The big presentation was not overly ostentatious and included an ever-changing light show. The music was loud but not harsh and the quartet received the rock-star treatment, Di Meola and Clarke had stage handlers available to lift their axes off their shoulders so as not to risk personal injury. Much of the band's most popular compositions were featured in a reworked and updated manner. Clarke's "Vulcan Worlds" was an early pleaser. Starting with thunder, led by Clarke's rumbling electric bass, rotating lights and posterior smoke display; the group had their way with the old piece. Corea was especially strong flying around his multiple keyboards. Their third tune was introduced by Clarke who said that White would not let him announce it because everyone should know the name. It turned out to be "Sorceress." The rendition was funky and heavily saturated with Clarke's plucky trademark bass and Corea's symphonic electronic

publicist, Ann Braithwaite, out of Massachusetts. Ann did not work on The CJP CD. I definitely had reviews but not as much as I would have had with Ann working on the project. Keep in mind that the publicists usually require one hundred to one hundred fifty CDs. So if you do your own CD, you have to be prepared to come up with a lot of complimentary pieces.

I probably broke even at this point from a financial perspective. But more importantly, The CJP's CD served as an entry into the market. The group has made its way onto the map as a result of this recording and definitely is within the radar of reviewers, promoters, and publications. I plan to come out with a new CJP recording in 2007. I would hope that I can make an arrangement with NAIM. If not, then I would probably do the next one again on RH Factor Records with some backing through grants from The Alliance for Cultural Composers (TACC), a not for profit organization which I established several years ago. I started TACC in hopes of trying to accomplish what Ben Allison has achieved with The Jazz Composer Collective.

Do you plan on doing a project beyond the usual context, say with strings or an orchestra setting?

You hit on my essence. Conceptually I feel that chamber music plays a great part in my attitude toward Jazz as an art form. The Chassidic Jazz Project exemplifies my approach toward strings. The group contains viola and cello. The addition of the strings allows for a fusion of Jazz, chamber, and world music. It's a marriage of all these styles without compromising any of them.

I think compositionally. I hear large sound. I hear orchestras when I conceptualize my music. I even try to approach the drum set harmonically. I attempt to be the best piano player that I can be on the drums. I try to solo around the harmonies as opposed to the time. I have always had tremendous respect for orchestral music and feel that Jazz players would probably benefit more from classical music education, as people like Donald Byrd did. After all, Gil Evans probably used many great classical composers as a point of reference.

So let's consider the big band as an orchestra rather than how we normally perceive a big band. Let's also consider three very important composers: Duke, Mingus, and Charlie Haden. All of them were about the music more than their instruments. Of course we won't refer to Charlie in the past tense. Duke wrote an opera toward the end of his career. You just have to listen to "Mood Indigo" to realize the greatness of the man. Shut the lights off one

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musings prior to changing to standard piano for some atonal mischief. White left his Plexiglas cage long enough to announce, "we gotta take the music back from all the 'boy bands.' This is a man's band!" The rest of the two-hour set featured exciting music, although not as raw as it came across in the '70s, and many virtuosic displays of daredevil feats. Clarke scored the largest cheer with a flamboyant double bass solo during the first encore's "Romantic Warrior." Di Meola placed a close second with some intense, fiery displays and rock star extreme posturing scattered throughout the night. Backstage, Clarke commented on preparing for the tour after not playing together for so long. "The hardest part was remembering everything. We really had to look at the charts [rather than listen intently to the old records]. We didn't want to go on stage with music although we did use little scraps of paper until about the third performance." Return To Forever was preceded by **Bela Fleck & The Flecktones** (Fleck, banjo; **Jeff Coffin**, rds; **Victor Wooten**, b; **Futureman**, Drumitar, RoyEl) who were asked specifically by Corea to open for the band in Philly and the next night in Boston. Fleck was happy to oblige even though the band wasn't touring at the time. Fleck's crew was quite the circus side-show act with the leader plucking away on his turbo-charged banjo, Coffin's searing tenor sax, ZZ Top beard and late simultaneous huffing on two horns, in addition to, Wooten's spidery fingering of impossible passages and the pirate-costumed Futureman playing his self-created odd instruments. These guys played all-out and comfortably fit in the Jazz and rock world...Sundays

night, and I guarantee that you will be taken to another place. It was divinely inspired. Listen to the muted T-bone and the singer. Man, it changed my outlook. You just have to want to listen to what these giants were reaching out for.

Mingus is one of my idols. He was able to turn a larger group into a smaller improvising unit. He took it to another level. "The Fables of Faubus" was another one of those amazing pieces. He was an extension of Duke and we all know that he idolized him. Other than The Mingus Dynasty Band, you don't hear too many people playing his pieces. That's because it's too darn difficult to reproduce what he had going on with Danny Richmond. It was magical. I don't think that you can play Mingus' stuff without a lot of thought. Same deal with Monk. It's very deep. I don't know that those cats necessarily considered it deep, they just had a very special gift and were very adventurous souls. This is truly exemplified in Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra as well. After all, when Mingus was wheelchair bound toward the end, he called on Charlie Haden to be involved with the double big band. Charlie was a definite torch carrier with the Liberation Orchestra.

So my approach is to take the orchestra, or big band if you prefer, and create an implosion that allows for a dialogue between big and small. In other words, try to create a conversation between the instruments rather than the compartmentalization between horns and the small group. I hear unison lines being played by all instruments, harmonies being played by strings and horns, while the rhythm section holds the bottom. Imagine a saxophone solo playing over harmonies being played by a horn section using three and four part harmony. The horns would comp for the soloist. There may not be any reason to use piano or guitar. It's approachable using a totally different model. One could even consider group improvisation by two lead instruments either alternating or playing at the same time. The possibilities are endless. Check out "Scatterbrain" on Jeff Beck's *Blow By Blow*. I think that it's one of the most important albums of our time. He touches on this great potential.

So, I hope to largely increase my contribution to modern music through this outlook. This would most likely occur through The Chassidic Jazz Project, which already sets the stage for a larger orchestral or chamber music approach. I hope one day that the CJP can do something backed by an orchestra.

*New York City, NY
July 31, 2006*