

Why Do We Duo?

by Andy Milne

The duo configuration in jazz is both common and uncommon. Countless musicians have performed in stand-alone duos and as featured duos within larger ensembles. What is the allure of the duo and what drives us to revisit it frequently? On a basic level, I believe it reflects something powerful about human nature. Why do we couple, car-pool, share books, music, recipes and generally impart profound discoveries to those around us? From my time on the planet, it appears that we often experience a deeper meaning of the events in our lives when we are able to share those experiences with another being. Perhaps the growing tide of narcissism I often cynically attribute to technology is merely in service of our human nature rather than a reprogramming of that nature. Assuming our kinship for the duo is in no danger of being challenged, can its multiple forms within music offer helpful insights for humanity as we grapple with increasingly complex issues related to global sharing?

As a pianist, I have often envied the ease of how two or more musicians who play the same instrument can interact. I have known numerous horn players who would frequently get together to practice or share experiences on the mechanics of their horn. In the drum world, there is support for several annual events where players gather to geek out and celebrate their instrument and their approach to it. Pianists occasionally get together to play for one other but it is rare that we actually play together because of how difficult it is to find two pianos in the same room, let alone same venue. Pianists do, however, perform frequently as part of a duo. Sometimes these duos are formed purely for artistic reasons while other times they are merely a result of financial pressures or sound restrictions placed upon us by a venue.

When I stop to consider the number of duos I have performed in over the years, it is actually quite staggering. Regardless of my perceived inspiration for the formation of these duos, I am actually more intrigued with considering the underlying resultant potency the format offers. As an educator, I often instruct my students to explore duo playing to help develop better listening skills. Duos force us to interact using musical behaviors and reactions that solo playing does not require. Duos also leave us exposed just enough, so that we remain connected to the responsibilities and vulnerabilities associated with our

solo playing. I think it is this heightened proximity to group and solo playing sensibilities that makes the duo such an exhilarating configuration.

In trios, quartets, quintets and larger, sometimes musicians reference the challenge they occasionally experience connecting with one musician over another. Of course, the past and present of this music have been robustly populated with bands whose chemistry embodies the ideal 'hookup', so I am certainly not making a case for the duo being the only place where this exists. I am instead celebrating the delicate proportions of the duo and the inherent challenge it creates for satisfying our desire for freedom and the hookup. I think the societal framework within which all humans exist plays a role in cultivating our dual desire both to be free and connected. Perhaps that is the wonderful gift jazz has given humanity, as it represents a highly sophisticated form of democracy where somehow the needs of the individual and group exist in balance. I am not ruling out the possibility that some musical performances might not live up to this ideal, but I do often wonder what the world would be like were our systems of governance headed by improvisers, artists and creative types.

Although there are significant logistical challenges for piano duos more than duos between pianos and other instruments (or two players of the same instrument), piano duos do flourish. I think the first piano duo I experienced was the one between Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. In the '90s, Harold Mabern, Mulgrew Miller, Donald Brown, James Williams and Geoff Keezer toured as a rotating four-piano summit. Earlier this year, on WBGU radio, jazz historian Bill Kirchner examined the lineage of piano duos, profiling duos ranging from Dick Hyman and Dick Wellstood to Bill Charlap and Renee Rosnes. During the last decade, both Merkin Hall and The Jazz Gallery presented piano duo series. Of course, Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz* program on NPR has long been an opportunity for listeners to experience piano duos.

Despite the efforts of musicians and presenters, our ears are not particularly used to the sound of two pianos. When I began to explore the format seriously, it was very clear to me that I had to learn to adjust my ears to react to the sound of another person playing 'my' instrument. It was somehow foreign and familiar at the same time. It requires that each pianist be willing to surrender temporarily a portion of 'their' instrument AND redefine their role and function. There are issues of how to share the physical space available on stage, as well as the sonic space in the room. It's a little bit like having to share your tiny studio apartment with a friend who needs to crash for a couple of weeks. You

are happy to have their company, but the arrangement requires that you relearn how you navigate your space.

It is possible the piano duo may never become as common as the piano/bass or piano/voice duo. Left to our own devices, pianists might yet find new ways to explore co-habiting their musical worlds for the simple reason of what we gain through giving something up. Perhaps this is a lesson the duo within music can offer humanity as we struggle to reconcile the necessity for sharing space, resources and diverging philosophies. ❖

For more information, visit andymilne.com. Milne is at *ShapeShifter Lab* Nov. 28th-30th in duo with Benoît Delbecq and with guests. See Calendar.

Considered one of the most respected voices in jazz today, pianist Andy Milne composes for multiple projects in which he is a principle performer and improviser. His music spans everything from contrapuntal, odd-metered grooves, free improvisation and multi-form structures to an orchestral-inspired palette and prepared piano textures. Awarded The 2009 Civitella Fellowship to compose a new orchestral work, Milne is a 2012 PennPAT roster member and the recipient of numerous commissions and awards from The Canada Council, The Japan Foundation, New Music USA and Chamber Music America. Milne's group *Dapp Theory*, which lives at the meeting-point of lyrical jazz piano, funkified polyrhythmic exploration and spoken word poeticism, is currently recording their next CD with Grammy-winning producer Jimmy Haslip.



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VOXNEWS

by Katie Bull

Jazz vocalists in this month's VOXNews highlights are connected to elemental core energy in the body; a life force energy that moves the breath swirls and impels truthfully expressive sound. It is a vibratory center, part of the whole body flow of electricity pulsing through the heart, around the solar plexus and centering down into the gut of the belly and pelvis.

The chakra system in traditional Indian singing involves the exploration of energy centers generating sound. In Korean pansori singing the master points to "the core" in the belly and says, feel your power here, breathe with your heart rhythm and let everything else go. When a jazz singer or a spoken word vocalist comes from their core energy, the listener's core resonates. You can 'feel' them singing.

"If you have a heartbeat you have rhythm," says the vibrant **Rebecca Vallejo** who calls herself "a jazz singer with a Flamenco flair". Hailing from Spain,

using her own body to incorporate percussive accents, she is an earthy grounding rod for some powerfully streaming wattage. Hear her Jazz Flamenco Fusion Trio at Drom (Nov. 16th). There is a bluesy and funk-edged roar at the core of smooth and easy flowing **Gregory Porter**. His lion-like presence will fill Dizzy's Club (Nov. 8th-11th) and Littlefield (Nov. 17th).

Rambling over towards the 'out' side, wild virtuosic Austrian **Katja Cruz** pairs with percussionist Howard Curtis for *Lightning and Thunder* (Ein Klang) in improvisations about the elements. From the ear-opening perspective of shamanistic ritual, this album sounds like a channeling. Cruz' mercury-fast unbound range resounds like echoes in mystical canyons.

Andrea Wolper's leaderless trio on *TranceFormation* (New Artists) is comprised of free jazz veterans like pianist Connie Crothers and bassist Ken Filiano. As unified as an harmonic overtone series, their energy moves in synchronous impulse. Hear them organically spill together in sonic landscapes at I-Beam (Nov. 9th).

Electronic-edged violinist, singer and spoken-wordist **Sarah Bernstein** releases *Interactive Album Rock* (Phase Frame Music) with her trio, Iron Dog. Playing an EKG of the modern world, her violin sings as her spoken poetry frames an arrestingly intense Rorschach for our times. Andrew Drury's drumming and Stuart Popejoy's electric bass and synthesizer form a bed of harnessed mayhem. Hear them at JACK in Brooklyn (Nov. 10th).

And, speaking of spoken word, saxophonist **Oliver Lake** will 'harmonize' in collaboration with poet **Cornelia Eady** and singer/poet **Sabrina Hayeem-Ladani** at St. Augustine's Church (Nov. 18th).

As November comes to a close, consider producer Cobi Narita's invitation to "Speak to me of love. Speak to me of Truth." 60 improvising singing voices scat with saxophonist Billy Harper's Sextet at Saint Peter's Church (Dec. 1st)! Narita, a producing 'shaman', has been keeping the intangible alive, forever. Bow down and feel it. ❖