

The Gazette

On the Beat - November 6, 2003

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Jazz trombonist Brett Sroka and some other stuff

Younger musicians often can respect tradition without being limited by it, This seems to be especially true for Brett Sroka, a 28-year-old trombonist living in Brooklyn, whose music stands just outside the aesthetically acceptable post-bop sounds that most record big jazz record labels find commercially viable. Inventiveness, in the true spirit of jazz, resonates loudly in his playing and arranging.

The plight of the up-and-coming jazz artist is such: Sroka recorded his first album as a leader, Hearsay, back, way back, in February 2001, yet it took nearly two years for the recording to be released. Finding a label to support new recording projects is almost impossible these days for jazz aspirants, except for a handful of signed talents (all promoted heavily worldwide as God's gifts to music, and fans need not look/listen further), so Sroka had to bankroll the studio expenses and pay his sideman out of his own pocket.

Sroka finally landed his recording at the Fresh Sound New Talent label, which is based in Spain and provides little marketing help to its artists. The shame of it, of course, is Hearsay brings together many of the salient features of jazz in a winning, highly creative manner, with brilliant musicianship, but few will go out of their way to seek this art out on their own.

The title track of Hearsay is a composition penned by Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington from the mid-1940s that is part of the Ellington Orchestra's rarely heard "Deep South Suite." While Sroka was studying at the Manhattan School of Music he had access to a lot of the charts used by Ellington, and before long he fell under the spell of Duke's music.

Ellington was a big influence on my writing and arranging," said Sroka by phone earlier this week. The way he and Strayhorn composed while keeping in mind the dynamics of instrumentation in the orchestra was something I began to apply to my own work."

After familiarizing himself with the compositional structures that Ellington utilized, Sroka said his next challenge was to interject the flair of improvisation into the frame of these structures, and his guides in this regard, he admitted, were pianist Andrew Hill and reedman Sam Rivers, two of jazz's leading vanguardists from the 1960s, both who were intrigued with the notion of taking musical tradition to new vistas.

So, on "Hearsay," the melodic structure serves as malleable matter to the assembled musicians, who pull the song this way and that, returning to theme now and then, but for the most part showing how flexible musical ideas can often be. The effect, in the end, is a nearly fourteen-minute-long ebb and flow of melody, its variation and improvisation galore-just like what you'd hear in a small jazz club. The fact that Sroka's arrangements and own compositions don't follow the well-

beaten form of tightly written sections sandwiching sequential soloists certainly puts him in line with Ellington and later, the Duke's most progressive acolyte, Charles Mingus.

Sroka grew up in Lexington, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, and started playing the trombone in fifth grade. "The instrument was bigger than I was," Sroka exclaimed. The top-notch music program in the public schools there helped push him along, he said, as did lessons with Tom Everett, the bass trombonist and band director of Harvard University, and Phil Wilson, an alumni of Woody Herman's Swingin' Herd, perhaps one of the finest big bands ever assembled.

He received his bachelor's degree from the Manhattan School of Music in 1997, and while at the college he became friendly with a number of the other jazz musicians who were studying there, including vibraphonist Stefon Harris, pianist Jason Moran and drummer Erich Harland, the latter two appearing on Hearsay. Also on the album are trumpeter Avishai Cohen, tenor sax man Aaron Stewart and bassist John Sullivan—all part of the new, young set of musicians bent on taking jazz forward.

"I had the sound of Jason and Eric's playing in my head, especially the music from Jason's first album (Soundtrack to Human Motion) and the stuff they've done with (alto saxophonist) Greg Osby, when I was writing a lot of the material for Hearsay," said Sroka. "When it came time to record the album I felt very comfortable in the studio with them."

Playing the trombone is perhaps one of jazz's most thankless occupations. The instrument has had its great practitioners over the years, beginning with Kid Ory and Jack Teagarden and stretching through the giants who played with the Ellington Orchestra—Tricky Sam Nanton, Lawrence Brown and Britt Woodman—but the instrument is better suited for coloration than soloing. Past the great bebop players, like J.J. Johnson, Al Grey, Slide Hampton et al there is little room for the 'bone in today's jazz language that doesn't keep close to what has already been said by the instrument's forebears mentioned above, and although it may be impolitic to say so, a lot of the avant-garde trombonists from the 1960s onward are conceptualists rather than innovators and sound like they'd be better suited for the circus anyway.

"Yeah, the trombone is hard to figure out," Sroka agreed. "It's weird trying to find a style that fits how you think. What's worked for me is just trying to play as melodically as possible, while at the same time I've done a lot of work checking out what, say, Charlie Parker and McCoy Tyner, have had to say in their music."

Considering how little work there is out there for jazz trombonists, Sroka has stayed pretty busy since he left college. He formed a piano-less quintet a few years ago, which played a lot of the material off Hearsay, but then finances and scheduling became too much of a burden, and delays in the release of the album complicated things even more so. Earlier this year, Sroka said, he decided to scale things back.

He's now joined in a trio with keyboardist Carl Maguire, who plays mainly the Rhodes electric piano, and drummer Damion Reed, and judging from a recent set at the Cornelia Street Cafe in Manhattan Sroka's music is more interesting than ever. The improvisation stretches more readily in different directions with fewer individuals on the bandstand, and Sroka even augments the arrangements with various electronics effects courtesy of an analog synthesizer, which he uses "texturally, to hear more sounds," he said, adamant that he's not intending to go anywhere near fusion jazz.

Good news is Sroka hoping to bring the trio into the studio soon. Let's hope the recording sees the light of day before too long.

Brett Sroka and his trio will perform on Saturday, November 8 at One Station Plaza, 38 N. Division St., Peekskill, NY. The music begins at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$15/\$10 students. For more info call (914) 737-4059