

## Sonic boom

*By J.C. Lockwood*

Friday, February 6, 2004

### **Jazz lovers may bristle at Brett Sroka's new electronic sound, but he's willing to take that chance**

Ergo is an unusual and, for traditional jazz fans, unlikely trio of drums, keyboards and trombone, whose arrangements are augmented by electronica thanks to an unseen collaborator: An SCI Prophet 600 synthesizer used textually to add color and build a sonic architecture.

Founder Brett Sroka, a New York-based trombonist who spends part of every summer with his family on Plum Island, calls the band's sound "a b\*stard child of experimental electronica and avant-garde jazz" - a phrase that may be as off-putting as it is colorful. The music, which includes reinterpretations of compositions by Billy Strayhorn and Ornette Coleman, can be at once melodic and abstract - and, at times, disorienting.

"I'm still not sure how people who liked my first band and CD will react," says Sroka, who will bring Ergo to Ryles Jazz Club in Cambridge. Feb. 26. "It's a logical transition for me personally, but it may seem like a big leap for others."

The first band, of course, was Hearsay, which brought out "Hearsay," its first - and only - compact disc, during a release party at PITA Hall on Plum Island in 2002. The quintet had a distinctive sound and aesthetic, yet remained firmly rooted in jazz.

But the critically acclaimed album, which included four Sroka originals, also contained hints of everything that would follow. Jazz Times, for example, noted that the New Sounds Records release "confirms that Sroka is more interested in charting new musical territory than simply revising the traditions of J.J. Johnson."

Which is exactly right, the trombonist says.

"I'm interested in hearing new things brought into jazz," says Sroka. "I'm curious about things that are happening today rather than 20, 30 or 40 years ago."

## Sound subject

Sroka, who also performs for Atiquis, a New York septet, first picked up the trombone as a 10- year-old. He played in various bands in the award-winning Lexington High School music program, then moved on to Manhattan School of Music in New York City, where he studied with Britt Woodman of the Duke Ellington Orchestra and Steve Turre, a ubiquitous presence on the city's jazz scene. He also studied composition and took an Ellingtonian approach to structure, color and rhythm.

After graduating in 1997, the trombonist, the son of Bobbi and Jerry Klima of Salisbury, returned to the area for a while, but quickly moved back to New York and began freelancing. He found plenty of work in a variety of styles, but a contact he made back in Boston turned out to be significant: drummer Damion Reid. He and Sroka met in Boston in 1999 and quickly became friends. Later both moved to New York City.

Reid, who attended New England Conservatory and Thelonious Monk Institute, began working with people like Greg Osby, Terrence Blanchard and Ravi Coltrane. Sroka released the album "Hearsay," and began playing around New York with Reid on drums.

In 2002 Sroka composed "Voices I Heard," a suite written in 2002 for the Queens Council on the Arts, funded by the New York Department of Cultural Affairs. The piece used the vocalizations of residents - Japanese, Greek, English and Spanish people of various ages and backgrounds - from his neighborhood of Astoria, Queens, for the melodic and rhythmic basis of five pieces.

But Sroka's musical interests and influences have always been varied - and not just limited to jazz, ranging from Ellington to Radiohead, from Bjork to Supersilent, a Norwegian band whose improvisational sound can be described as ambient with a bite, which falls somewhere between experimental rock and jazz. He had already moved on musically, entranced by electronica.

### Getting plugged in

The possibilities of incorporating live electronica into jazz opened up when Sroka met Mike Rosenthal, a New York-based sound artist who performs experimental and improvisational music on the laptop computer. Rosenthal, who makes occasional guest appearances with Ergo but will not appear at the Ryles gig, uses his laptop and music software called Max/MSP, an object-oriented programming language for sound, for live improvisational performance either by himself or other musicians.

Sroka and Rosenthal began improvising together, attempting, the trombonist says, to reconcile the 600-year technology gap between his instrument and the laptop. Three Rosenthal-Sroka compositions - called Improvisations with Temp - are available at [www.brettsroka.com](http://www.brettsroka.com). The collaboration, Sroka says, was a real eye-opener.

"When I was recording 'Hearsay,' I could never have imagined this. It's been the best musical experience I've ever had," he says. "I approached my playing in a completely different way, not just with chord changes or melody, but with textures and interaction. It was amazing. I was walking on air the first time we played together."

### Sounding off

After working with Rosenthal, Sroka bought a synthesizer - an SCI Prophet 600 - on eBay and started designing his own soundscapes and patches. His interest in electronic and experimental music continued to grow. Ergo came together soon after Sroka picked up a copy of keyboardist Carl Maguire's debut album "Floriculture." With Sroka's encouragement Maguire began his first foray into electronic music.

When Reid entered the musical fray in the summer of 2003, Ergo was born. The music doesn't fit easily into any musical category and, even within the Ergo oeuvre, there's plenty of room to maneuver musically.

The band serves up another a reinterpretation of the Strayhorn-Ellington composition. "Today the Americans" - which comes from Sroka's "Voices" project and echoes the talk about Middle- East politics he had with a Greek man in his Astoria neighborhood - is necessarily conversation with spare melody lines floating over a stew of complex rhythms.

"Earthling," on the other hand, fully incorporates other-worldly aspects of electronica, with Crimsonsque washes and colors that almost put you in mind of King Crimson. The three-piece band sounds much bigger than it actually is.

"I don't know if the music I'm playing is jazz in the traditional sense," says Sroka. "I don't know if it fits into a category. And it doesn't matter to me."

"What are you going to do?" he says. "You can't please everybody. There are new technologies, new expression all over the world. Instead of jazz being a regional thing, it's developed internationally. It's happening all over the world."