



The blood of Aphex Twin, the bones of Ornette Coleman and the brains of three lost pilgrims align to form the anatomy of Ergo. The collective sound of trombonist/laptop-jockey Brett Sroka, keyboardist Carl Maguire and drummer Shawn Baltazor, Ergo's music criss-crosses glitchy loops and enveloping electronic textures with plaintive melody and improvisational empathy.

After releasing his debut CD, "Hearsay" in 2002, Brett Sroka began performing around New York, hiring his friend from Boston, Damion Reid, to play drums. With a nascent attraction to experimental electronic music Sroka bought a Prophet analog synthesizer, a laptop computer and began studying various methods of electronic music and synthesis. Fascinated by the process of trying to reconcile the six hundred years of technology between trombone and computer, he began composing music for what would become Ergo. After a mutual friend introduced him to the cerebral compositions and organic playing of Carl Maguire's CD, "Floriculture", Sroka sought out Maguire to join him on Rhodes electric piano. As the band toured the Northeast and throughout New York City an idiosyncratic dynamic began to cohere and Ergo was born.

With their debut CD, "Quality Anatomomechanical Music Since 2005", Ergo proffered a statement of purpose. Soon after the CD's release in 2006, Reid was replaced on drums by Shawn Baltazor, Sroka's bandmate from the group Atiquis. The renewed Ergo debuted at the 2006 Williamsburg Jazz Festival, with Baltazor bringing a sharpened focus and propulsion to Maguire's prismatic improvisations and Sroka's oblique architecture. They are now working on material for a second recording, expected to be released in 2008 on their own Actuator label.

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Selected Press

". . . part of a generation for which Autechre and Sigur Ros are as pressing concerns as Armstrong and Sun Ra. That's certainly evident in the timbral sophistication, spacey contours and slinky grooves of the band's self-released debut CD, "Quality Anatomical Music since 2005", the cause for celebration tonight."

Steve Smith, **TIME OUT, NEW YORK** (critics pick)

". . . atmospheric collective, which takes full advantage of electronic programming and cross-genre appropriation."

Nate Chinen, **THE NEW YORK TIMES** (critics pick)

"An Ellington fiend who likes to get his computerized space-dub on, the trombonist has lots of sound sculpture in him. His rather dramatic art music is both texturally rich and compositionally engaging."

Jim Macnie, **THE VILLAGE VOICE** (critics pick)

". . . explores the intersections of electronic music, Jazz improvisation, and smart Rock bands like Radiohead or Sigur Ros. . . Sroka has huge ears and catholic tastes, using these to good effect on this moody and memorable recording."

Jason Bivins, **CADENCE MAGAZINE**

"And for music of this ilk – where electronics are often abused or overwrought – this trio professes a seamless electro-improv alignment of the musical spirits. "

Glenn Astarita, **EJAZZNEWS.COM**

"Solid musicianship and a vision are what ERGO is all about, and they absolutely are on to something very special."

Steve Caputo, **INSIDE CONNECTION MAGAZINE**

"Brett Sroka has found a way to turn the trombone into the coolest instrument since the bass clarinet. He plays in a band called Ergo, which blends blip-hop electronica with jazz."

Christopher Muther, **THE BOSTON GLOBE** (editor's picks)

"The city has always been known for its under-the-radar jazz talent. This gig — happening tonight only — is a great example of how substantial that talent can be... Here's a great chance to check Sroka's dynamic and distinguished ideas in action, while catching a glimpse of the underground."

John McCormick, **FLAVORPILL.NET**

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

J. C. Lockwood, **THE MERRIMACK RIVER CURRENT** (Northern Mass.)

"Many types of jazz allow you to lose yourself within them, and Quality Anatomical Music Since 2005 most certainly does that, but from quite a different angle."

Budd Kopman, **ALLABOUTJAZZ.COM**

Reviews and Citings for

Quality Anatomical Music Since 2005

BEST DEBUT – All About Jazz – NY

A Look Back At The Best of 2006

2006 playlist: We listen to a lot of music, privy as we are to advance releases and publicity teases, so narrowing the field down to our most-played 30 albums is actually quite a winnowing. . . Here's what filled our ears this year.

Roberto Friedman, BAY AREA REPORTER (San Fransisco)



Trombonist Brett Sroka has created some excellent post-Bop stuff in the past (check out his fine album *Hearsay*), but with his new combo **ERGO** (Brett Sroka, tbn, computer; Carl Maguire, kbyd, elec; Damion Reid, d) he explores the intersections of electronic music, Jazz improvisation, and smart Rock bands like Radiohead or Sigur Ros. Their **QUALITY ANATOMICAL MUSIC SINCE 2005** (Actuator 1) is a fine document of their music (Elephants [& Sychophants]/ Cecropia Song [for Janna]/ Salt/ Metaphilia/ "Today the Americans"/ Earthlings/ Trees on Top of Buildings. 52:42. April 2005, NYC, NY). Sroka has huge ears and catholic tastes, using these to good effect on this moody and memorable recording. It's a bit of a shame that you don't get to hear more of his or Maguire's improv chops, but that's not the point of this band. Maguire uses Rhodes and Prophet (along with non-keyboard electronics) to create all kinds of sinister effects on "Elephants (& Sycophants)." The excellent Reid creates a nice snappy house music pulse on "Cecropia Song,"

with Sroka using a mute quite deftly, though the drummer also impresses with his textural work (as on the dark clouds of "Metaphilia"). They run the voodoo down a bit—or at least saunter alongside it, with some of Sroka's most expressive playing on the disc—on "Salt." And "Earthlings" has a lovely chord progression (a relative rarity on this disc) and exudes cosmic emotion. Very fine.

Jason Bivins december 2006



The inside cover describes Ergo being a word that implies a transition between an idea and the action it inspires. Having never met the members of this band, it is safe to say the ideas are far out there. This is not said in a negative manner; however, the music that we hear on this release will most definitely take you to a higher level. Brett Sroka, who leads the way with extraordinary trombone playing and Microsoft computer skills, presents a new approach to composition that is absolutely groundbreaking.

The opening composition, "Elephants," raises the eyebrow at first note, but quickly brings you into a canvas of sounds that won't let you out. Sroka is joined on the CD by Carl McGuire on Rhodes and other synth gadgets, and drummer Damion Reid, who has been recently playing with a who's who in the world of jazz, adds a phenomenal rhythmic backing.

The CD is produced at a very high level and the clarity is quite evident. "Salt," "Today the Americas" and "Tress on Top of Buildings" round out this unique recording with three exceptional arrangements for the world of ERGO. Solid musicianship and a vision are what ERGO is all about, and they absolutely are on to something very special with this release. Check them out at www.ergoisaband.com.

---by Steve Caputo



CD Reviews: ERGO Quality "Anatomechanical Music Since 2005" CD-2006 Actuator

Pianist Carl Maguire's debut solo release for the German "Between the Lines" record titled "Floriculture" was one of the true modern jazz surprises of 2006. Yet, with this trio effort recorded in New York City, we are presented with a horse of a different color. Here, Brett Sroka mingles largely; probing trombone lines with Maguire's synth and electric keyboard treatments. It's a sinuous blend of subtle effects, firmed up by Damion Reed's asymmetrical rhythmic maneuvers.

And for music of this ilk – where electronics are often abused or overwrought – this trio professes a seamless electro-improv alignment of the musical spirits. Some of these works sport a chromatic edge, whereas gently rolling hills, spiked with dynamically-oriented peaks present a rather bizarre, yet irrefutably enticing vista. They soar into the red zone every so often, but the music crosses that indefinable frontier, teeming with intuitive experimentation, probing jazz dialogues and EFX-drenched avant-garde stylizations. Uncannily cohesive and an enormously compelling listening experience... – Glenn Astarita



Review Courtesy AllAboutJazz.com

Quality Anatomemechanical Music Since 2005

Ergo | Actuator

By Budd Kopman

Ergo, lead by Brett Sroka, has been performing for about a year, and *Quality Anatomemechanical Music Since 2005* is a terrific album of sounds, moods and emotions. The trio is completed by Carl Maguire, who recently released the outstanding *Floriculture* (Between the Lines, 2005), on various electronic keyboards and synthesizers; and Damion Reid, a very fine drummer who had very close relationship with Billy Higgins and has appeared on Robert Glasper's *Canvas* (Blue Note, 2005).

As you might be able to tell from the title, this music is not anything that you might hear at Jazz at Lincoln Center, or your local mainstream radio station, for that matter. Labels are only as good as the information they provide, so saying it is on the "fringes of jazz" or "beyond jazz" is a bit meaningless, but suffice it to say that there are a lot of electronics beyond what a Fender Rhodes can do, and there is nothing remotely close to a 32-bar AABA structure to be found here.

You are entering a sonic universe, but more importantly, a music which reveals itself as most definitely structured and well thought out. As much as you can just revel in the sounds on this record, a little close listening will uncover memorable themes which develop over time. Each track has a life cycle which carries it forward, so rather than just spacing or tripping out for the duration, this music can be followed and appreciated.

The action is not in the form of soloing in the normal sense, but rather a collage of sounds, with Maguire's keyboards and synthesizer creating a bottomless ocean or an endless expanse of space (depending on which way your mind works) punctuated by flashes of light from Reid's cymbals. Within this dense flux floats Sroka's trombone (when he plays) at various distances from the front of the mix.

Sroka's trombone rarely sounds immediately recognizable as such, except on "Trees On Top Of Buildings" and "Salt," where not only the sound, but also the phrasing and meter of his lines become almost regular. When this happens, and Maguire does it too, it jumps out and almost feels out of place.

Reid's drumming is everywhere, and he provides a kind of glue which holds things together. Much of the music has no pulse, and so Reid provides more a layer of percussion than drums per se. In "Metaphilia," for example, his lower sounds work with the low tones of the keyboards, while the cymbals interact with the higher ones.

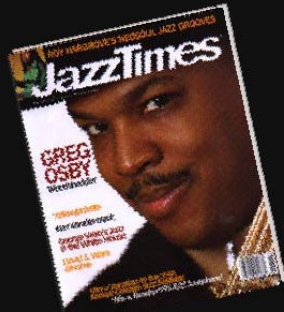
Many types of jazz allow you to lose yourself within them, and *Quality Anatomemechanical Music Since 2005* most certainly does that, but from quite a different angle. Recommended.



Track Listing: Elephants (& Sycophants); Cecropia Song (for Janna); Salt; Metaphilia; "Today The Americans"; Earthlings; Trees On Top Of Buildings.

Personnel: Brett Sroka: trombone, computer; Carl Maguire: Rhodes electric piano, Prophet synthesizer, electronic effects; Damion Reid: drums.

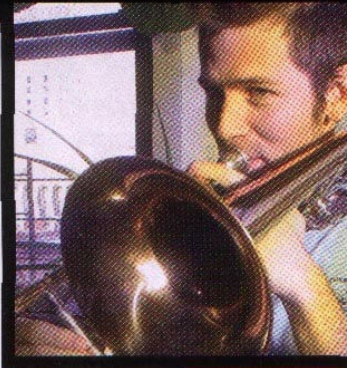
Feature Articles



JazzTimes

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

BRETT SROKA



When trombonist Brett Sroka recorded his debut CD, *Hearsay* (Fresh Sound New Talent), he and his five bandmates had only played one club date together, and inclement weather kept drummer Eric Harland from one of the two practices prior to the session. Nevertheless, the lack of intensive preparation brought

out the spontaneous best in the band, which also includes trumpeter Avishai Cohen, tenor saxophonist Aaron Stewart, pianist Jason Moran and bassist John Sullivan.

Hearsay isn't jam-session material, though. The CD is filled with detailed but open arrangements that allow for group interplay as much if not more than individual solos. Attention to ensemble playing and compositional form have been gaining popularity among up-and-coming music-school grads, and Manhattan School of Music alumnus Sroka is no exception. Sroka's pensive "A Sound Caresses the Breast of the Negress," for example, has a freedom that allows the players to fluctuate between soloist and accompanist. On this tune, Moran switches from acoustic to electric piano, which creates a moody texture together with the strong harmonies of the three horns. Moran sits out on a

version of Charlie Shaver's "Undecided," where the group plays with tempo like Miles Davis' legendary '60s quintet, beginning slow and cautiously before picking up serious speed. "Beloved" jettisons the rest of the band in favor of a brief drums-and-'bone duet where Harland rolls gently under Sroka's inquisitive lines. The tune sounds like it could be spontaneous or composed, a quality for which the trombonist strives. "I like the idea of mixing it up, where you have something written or predetermined, with improvisation, so that it goes back and forth between the two," he says.

This quality is apparent in the title track, a Duke Ellington-Billy Strayhorn composition that appeared as part of their "Deep South Suite" in the 1940s. The original piece consisted of an overture and the main theme, with no improvisation. The trombonist's rearrangement focuses on the melody, and the band stretches out for nearly 14 minutes, allowing Sroka, Stewart, Cohen and Moran plenty of solo space. Sroka says he's primarily a self-taught composer, mostly through studying his favorite scores and recordings by Ellington.

A promising debut, *Hearsay* confirms that Sroka is more interested in charting new musical territory than simply revisiting the traditions of J.J. Johnson. "My influences were more often sax players and trumpeters and composers," the trombonist says, "hopefully helping me to not sound like any other 'bone player."

—Mike Shanley

The Gazette

On the Beat - November 6, 2003

Thomas Staudter

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

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.

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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. 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 Crimonesque 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."