

Tom Baker Quartet

Look What I Found

Tom Baker Quartet

The opening of the Tom Baker Quartet's debut CD, *Look What I Found*, may be indicative of the guitar-playing bandleader's life these days. He starts the album with "Swampled" and a choice three-note mid-range phrase that immediately gets battered by drummer Greg Campbell's bass drum and an interjecting cymbal crash and snare-drum snap. Then comes a nudge from Jesse Canterbury's clarinet, underneath which Brian Cobb's bass presses. A give-and-take ensues for more than a minute, as if Baker, a consummate guitar-slinger for sure, can't (or won't) outrun his band. He digs them too much, their jostling, their sense of how a group thinks. In turn, they create a woodsy vibe, all rich colors with a swirling warmth.

"These guys...are so perfectly suited to this music," Baker says in response to a question about how someone assembles a clarinet-guitar-bass-drums quartet. Yes, he loves "the colors of clarinet and guitar," but even more, Baker enthuses over playing with "world-class improvisers who are well versed in contemporary classical music, world music, and traditional jazz." And therein lies an important part of his own story: He's steeped in academe as a performer and composer. You could surmise, given Baker's past, that he'd be writing post-symphonic tone-rows – not that there's anything undignified in that. He's living, though, outside the academy now, thriving on playing and composing and thinking about music.

On *Look What I Found*, you find 10 tracks that indulge improvisation while living within tunes that have distinct rhythmic tilts and tugs. Coming from someone whose recorded output includes an experimental opera and two solo fretless-guitar albums, the Tom Baker Quartet sounds brilliantly collective: It's a band, of course, riffing off and playing with each other. It's also a collective in that it freely weaves together composition and improvisation. Or, as Baker puts it: "The line between notated complexity



Tom Baker Quartet: Tom Baker, Greg Campbell, Jesse Canterbury, Brian Cobb

and improvised complexity seems very, very thin to me, and the extra energy or spirit that improvisation brings to the table is something I've always tried to use as a composer."

While a distinct success on *Look*, Baker's past efforts at commingling improvisation and composition have led to strange occasions: "I wrote a piece for four improvisers when I was in grad school," he says, "using a graphic notation that mapped out only the density/intensity/activity over time. The piece was indeterminate in length, and the energy of the improvisation was exactly what I had hoped." Even so, Baker knows that such lofty conceptual objectives can be misapprehended. "The piece," he says, "was not very well received by my colleagues and professors, even though the players really liked it and I thought it worked well."

Rather than consider himself chastened, Baker pushed ahead with what he calls the "merge" of improvisation and composition. "Flow is the most important thing," he says.

Baker spent the last 13 years teaching in the University of Washington's music composition/theory department, a place where music can be composed, performed, and put to bed with barely any notice outside the academy. Although he didn't leave the UW in order to pursue a different musical path as such, the change

has reverberations. "For right now," he notes, "I am trying to compose and perform as much as I can and trying to be as honest as I can about the music I am making. Crafting a musical life."

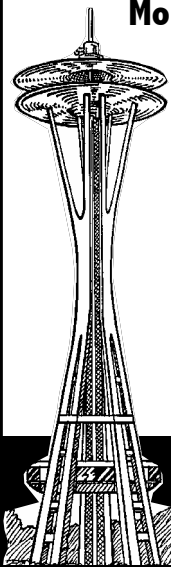
That objective Baker learned in full blossom while a resident artist at Florida's Atlantic Center for the Arts in 2005. "I had the transformative experience of working with Henry Threadgill, and it was one of the most thrilling and important musical experiences of my life." A famously maverick composer, Threadgill insisted first he wasn't a teacher, and, Baker notes, "he proceeded to be the best teacher one could ask for."

As with so many great teachers, Threadgill's lessons exceeded their stated purpose. He covered music: "Flow, intervallic consistency, counterpoint, orchestration, all of it," says Baker. And then, "Henry would come in talking about Stravinsky one day and Dizzy the next, and then on to world politics and the outdated mode of transportation that is airline travel. And all of it with purpose. With great intention. That is Henry's real gift. Everything he does is intentional and has a purpose, even when it isn't clear right at the outset. Intention is everything." Detailing the experience, Baker clearly slips into its intrinsic rhythms, its creative energies. Those are the undercurrents for all that he has done since.

The apogee of the post-Threadgill ac-

Monthly Jazz in **The L.A.B.**

@ **The Seattle Drum School**



**THE JIM KNAPP
ORCHESTRA**
EVERY FIRST
MONDAY
@ 8PM

**Geoff Harper Presents:
Last Mondays**
every last Monday
@7:30 pm
www.lastmondays.com

206.364.8815 - 12510 15th Ave NE - www.thelabatsds.com

Saxophone, Trumpet, Trombone, Violin, Piano, Guitar, Bass, Drums

all ages welcome • full dinner menu • private suites • valet parking
9:30PM SHOWS AND LATER ARE 21+ MAINSTAGE DOORS OPEN 2 HOURS PRIOR TO FIRST SHOW

tue/january 11 • 7:30pm
a northwest tribute to ray charles
let the good times roll!

2005 Muddy Award for Best Performance of the Year.

fri/january 12 • 8pm
joe louis walker

Deeply rooted in gospel and experimental rock, blues guitarist Joe Louis Walker blends musical styles from his past.

sun/january 14 • 7pm
brothers of baladi

Grounded in centuries-old Middle Eastern musical tradition.

mon/january 15 • 7:30pm
carlton holmes trio
featuring jumaane smith & ben roseth

One of nyc's greatest pianists with two of the countries finest jazz prodigies.

thu/february 1 • 7:30pm
dr. lonnie smith

A distinctive presence on the soul jazz scene, for his especially high energy style on the Hammond B-3 organ.

fri/feb 2 & sat/feb 3 • 8pm
roy rogers & norton buffalo

"All it takes is a sampling of the slide guitar/harmonica dialogue to comprehend how potent and exciting the chemistry is between Rogers and Buffalo." -Downbeat

fri/february 16 • 8pm
leroy bell

A multi-talented acoustic soul artist with an abiding 20-plus year career.

thu/february 22 • 7:30pm
jacky terrason

one of the more exciting and entertaining young jazz piano players out there, with a style all his own.

Door open 2 hours prior to first show.
Full dinner menu and award winning wine list.

206 | 838 | 4333 tickets
216 UNION STREET seattle

online ticketing now available!
thetripledoor.net

THE
**triple
+ door**
musicquarium
lounge

tivity is *Look What I Found*. The album bears the marks of Threadgill, the halting rhythms, the wide-open spaces in the middle of a tune – big enough to picnic in but never a misuse of territory – and the sibling focal points of tonalities and tune-fulness. Woods are a huge part here, with Baker reveling in his guitar's rich middle and the clarinet floating and weaving like a closely huddled fog. Campbell's percussion is rumbly, not snappy, and when prone toward the clang of cymbals almost always opting for bell-like tones. Brian Cobb's bass has an acoustic bound that's a pontoon, everything else atop it.

At one point in our exchanges, Baker points out: "I am always inspired by the music of Charles Ives and Morton Feldman. And if I need to refocus, Ornette is always there to get things realigned." Conjuring Ornette Coleman as a force for re-alignment says a lot about the sound here, because Baker certainly has embraced a version of Coleman's harmonodics. These tunes don't speed like "Blues Connotation" or slow way, way down like "Lonely Woman," but they do have an internal spring-loadedness that's electrifying.

The ideal place to craft a musical life is, of course, the stage. And that's an omnipresent subject with musicians. "You play every chance you get," Baker says, "and you try to play gigs that fit the kind of music you are making." Audiences come and go, though: "Seattle has lost a lot of great venues for experimental music in the past several years or so (the Penny Cafe, the OK Hotel, the Speakeasy). There are new ones, and there will always be cycles for a scene of this size." Whether the gigs are plentiful or not in the present moment, Baker's an optimist: "I have a hunch we are on an upswing, though. I think that people are starting to come back out for live music experiences, and it will continue to get better."

Now, if only we could get that out-moded airline travel thing fixed for Henry Threadgill.

– Andrew Bartlett

The Tom Baker Quartet will hold a CD release party (venue TBA, see Earshot online calendar nearer date: Saturday, January 27th, 2007).