

Accelerated Jazz Development

Vancouver born jazz clarinetist/composer James Danderfer has been called “one of the best kept jazz secrets in Canada.” An accurate enough description, except that he's no longer in Canada but here in Shanghai. Zat Liu met the musician to find out more.



Why did you decide to move to Shanghai?

I'd been travelling a lot in the previous years and was interested to stay in one place for a little while. At the same time, I wanted to experience something new and interesting, somewhere where I could find other musicians to play with. Then, coincidentally, an old friend of mine sent me an email from Shanghai and it just sounded like the perfect fit for me. After a few months here, I started writing music inspired by the city and that's when I got the idea for this project, a kind of musical portrait of Shanghai. I proposed the idea to the Canada Council for the Arts and they agreed to fund the project.

What makes you interested in Chinese culture, language and music?

China is on everyone's lips these days. Whether it's business or culture, fashion or food, you'll always find news from or about this country because it's this new entity to most of us foreigners: an emerging power, a major world player on every front which only relatively recently has begun opening up to the West. It's this powerful effect on the world, coupled with the substantial Chinese influence in Vancouver, which made me want to learn more. There is also a kind of mystique about China, and Shanghai in particular, that I find attractive. There's a feeling of discovery here for me.

What differences have you found between the scene and the music industry here and that of your home country?

I never realized just how quiet and peaceful my city was until I came to Shanghai! The noise and chaos of daily traffic is what hits most foreign visitors right away. From my first taxi ride into town I was just astonished. "Why is my cab driver turning straight into a group of pedestrians? Why are we driving so fast and in the wrong lane?...and why on earth is everybody honking?!" Also, this is one of the busiest and most populous places in the world: nobody's waiting – time and space are too precious. You can't wait, because if you do, the other guy's going to get that last square foot of space on the subway car! As for the music industry, I'm not sure. It's developing quickly here (like everything else), with new bands, studios, and record labels forming every month. But I'm no expert on the 'industry' really, I just focus on the music.

What progress have you made with your studies of Chinese culture, language and music so far?

One year is really only enough to scratch the surface of these subjects and realize just how much more there is to learn. Being introduced to Chinese traditional music was an eye-opening experience for me in terms of beginning to understand the music's depth and wide range of emotions. It's a fun process, too, putting together bits of historical information, learning to associate a sound with its respective instrument. At first, it all sounded the same but I just kept going, identifying what I liked and disliked and, inevitably, I found some music that really meant something to me. To share that connection with someone's music, especially when they come from such a different background than your own, is a great feeling.

What is Accelerated Development (AD) all about?

Accelerated Development is the name I've given to this collection

of music since it all ties in with my experiences living in Shanghai which, as everyone here knows, is in large part characterized by its phenomenal rate of development. To reflect this, I wanted to write music that was fresh, modern, and exciting. In contrast to that is music written for the other side of this city, the less glamorous side of street vendors, cab drivers, migrant workers, and other less publicized groups who have built this city and who give it character. It's still jazz music but incorporating many influences ranging from traditional music and electronic music, to the sound of six o'clock rush hour Shanghai traffic.

My goal with AD, beyond simply working with musicians from another background, is to write tuneful, groove-based songs that will introduce outsiders to this fascinating city while providing local Shanghainese listeners a point of reference to understand and enjoy new music, even if they're not jazz fans per se.

How did you pick the AD cast of musicians?

Finding musicians to interpret your original music is a very personal thing, and the guys I chose for this six-piece band all possess the strong character and musical flexibility that I need. The Canadian musicians were easy to choose because I've worked with all of them before. I had to put more thought into which Chinese musicians to work with and then imagine how their character would fit into the music. Much like in sports, it's not just about how proficient the individuals are, you've got to strike the right balance within the team to get the best results.

How has life in Shanghai inspired your music? How has your style changed since moving here?

Shanghai is an intense place where the drive for success and progress is almost palpable. What makes it all the more intense is the stark (sometimes bordering on ridiculous) contrast between those people building this city and those who are really benefiting from it. I do get a lot of inspiration by walking through the streets of this town, from looking at all of the new architecture, from the smells and the food but, most of all, from the people. I feel like everyone here is really driven, whether it's the well-to-do businessperson driven to succeed in an exploding economy or the guy carting around used styrofoam on his bike to make a few kuai for dinner. There's a feeling of urgency here, day and night, which has made my writing for this project more poignant I think.

The clarinet is rarely seen in jazz, why? And is there anyone else doing this in Shanghai?

I don't think there's anyone else doing this in Asia! And if there is, I'd like to meet them! The clarinet played an important role in early jazz music, before saxophone even, but the fact is it's a difficult instrument to play and extremely hard to play in the context of contemporary jazz. Unlike sax or trumpet, you really have to work to make the clarinet fit into modern jazz in a way that sounds natural. For me, it's worth the effort because I love this instrument, and it's also kind of fun to do something different.

What was the first time playing with Chinese like?

My first night on stage in Shanghai, I was a bit nervous, up there with three Chinese musicians I'd never met before and one I couldn't even communicate with. I just didn't know what to

expect. We agreed on a song that everybody knew, I counted off the tempo, then 1,2,3,4 and we were off. I mean, think about it, you're on stage in front of an audience and you just have to start conversing musically, on a very abstract but personal level, with complete strangers who come from an entirely different musical background. It took a few minutes to identify their styles and vice versa but we all listened and adapted to each other quickly. It sounds clichéd, but I remember marveling that night at what a universal language music is.

Some say Chinese modern music lacks originality and, often, Westerners find Chinese pop songs too cheesy. Meanwhile, more and more Chinese are receptive to different music genres such as hip hop and electronic. Thoughts?

I've heard a lot of Chinese jazz musicians and I can say, with all sincerity, that creativity is not a problem! In fact, the originality of local players is one of the things that has impressed me most; that and the ear-training some of these musicians have is incredible. If there's a problem, it's that musicians need to copy more to learn this music. I see too many players trying to reinvent the wheel and not spending enough time on a foundation: that kind of foundation comes from imitating the masters of this music. Once you have a strong understanding of this musical language, then it's time for innovation. However, modern jazz is still pretty new here so I'm sure this will improve over time.

As far as pop music goes, (and I have to preface this by saying I haven't done much research on the subject) from what I've heard it does seem pretty cheesy... sorry. It's not because of the hyper-sentimentality of it; I mean, if people like that then who am I to say they're wrong? What bothers me is the widespread use of synthesized instruments; too many computer-generated drums, violins, wind instruments, and piano. It's fake and lacks any depth or substance. Most of what I hear on the radio or in passing sounds like a karaoke track and unfortunately that seems to be an acceptable standard here. I don't lose sleep over this, but I do worry a little that appreciation for real acoustic instruments is being lost.

The James Danderfer Quintet will be performing songs from Danderfer's Accelerated Development project at JZ Club, 47 Fuxing Xi Lu, on April 30. RMB 70. For tickets or more info, contact Aaron Low at lacunaentertainment@gmail.com. Tel: 6277 4417; 130 2328 7014.

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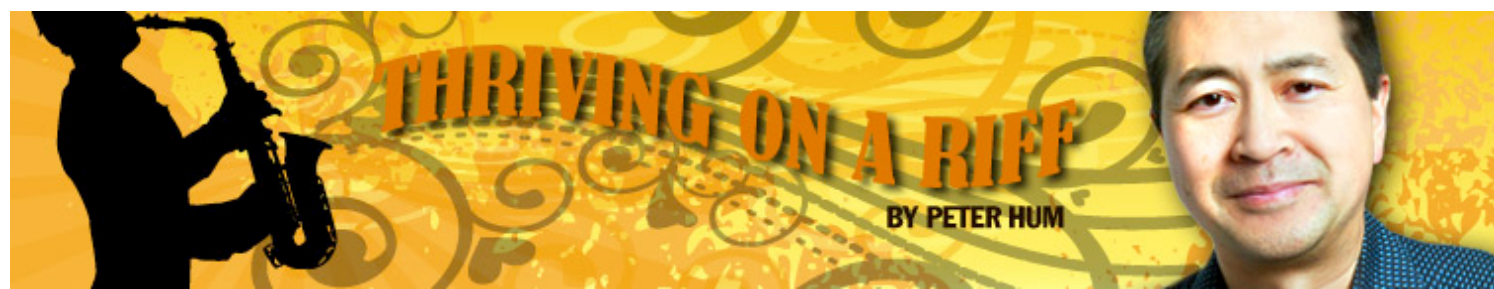
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James Danderfer: Inspired by Shanghai



I gave my first listen to James Danderfer's CD *Accelerated Development* without so much as a glance at his extensive liner notes. I really liked what I heard. Its mix of horns (Danderfer's clarinet and flute, Chad Makela's baritone sax and Brad Turner's trumpet) was distinctive. Chris Gestrin's piano and keyboard work was masterful -- vital, I thought, to

help realize the compelling, contemporary original material. I liked the bits of captured street sounds and exotic percussion that found their way into certain tracks. With some songs, the unique blend of timbres was so evocative and fresh that I wanted to play them repeatedly to savour them. You can hear a few snippets here and make your own observations

Once read, the liner notes solved a few mysteries. (I read them, in English, by the way, not in the Chinese mixed in with the copy.) Danderfer, a Vancouver native, had relocated to Shanghai a few years ago and then composed his stirring music based on his impressions of the great Chinese city in its throes of transformation. Had the timing been right, I might have worked Danderfer into last week's blog posting on jazz in China, or into last month's discussion about jazz and multicultural jazz.

I've found Danderfer's disc yielding more pleasures and prompting more insights with repeated listenings. It's consistently full of strong, provocative compositions and hearty improvising. I like too that its allusions to China are more a matter of imagination than classical or stereotypical. There's no erhu (Chinese two-stringed violin), no arrangements of Asian folksongs as Kenny Garrett, the most celebrated of jazz's Asiaphiles, often offers.



Instead, Danderfer, who is just 30 and has recently moved back to Vancouver after two-and-a-half years in China, is being true to the Shanghai he experienced, conveying a newcomer's sense of wonder and urgency, track after track. There's not a dud in the bunch of them, but for me, the standouts are:

Blues Migration -- the CD's opener is easy on the ears but substantial, setting a chattering melody over an earthy groove. There are solos all around, but everyone is definitely playing the song rather than their favourite cool lines over the chords. The rhythm section is nice and interactive, and Gestrin on keyboard and piano has a really orchestral way of adding to the music.

The title track -- a furious jam first for Danderfer's clarinet and Makela's bari, and then for Turner's trumpet and Gestrin's distorted keyboard. The energy and sophistication here remind me of some of Dave Douglas' recent music.

Memory Loss -- an insistent, melancholy odd-meter song driven by a spiraling piano figure, and perhaps because of that feature reminiscent of Brad Mehldau's composing.

Freecracker -- Foreboding from its opening gong, its mysterious, processed keyboard intro and Danderfer's ominous melody.

The Constant River -- A poignant ballad that keeps building and changing, balancing Turner's pinched trumpet with cinematic piano and background horns.

Throughout, the music is spirited and deeply resonant, with Danderfer's clarinet prominent and deservedly featured. Don Byron notwithstanding, the clarinet seems under-utilized in modern mainstream jazz, more associated with Buddy DeFranco or Benny Goodman. On Danderfer's CD, the instrument's less familiar sound plays the foreigner very well. Gestrin gets the music's MVP award for his versatility, all-round expertise with groove and harmony, and his striking facility for manipulating timbres. He's up there, I think with those keyboardists like Craig Taborn, Jamie Saft and Adam Benjamin who, following Joe Zawinul's great example, impress above all with their sounds but have every other musical detail in place as well. In other words, Gestrin's playing is pretty close to magical.

Accelerated Development is a CD that gets your skin. I can only imagine that Shanghai does too.

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Filed under: CD reviews, Multiculturalism, James Danderfer



better and more varied songs. More are guest artists such as Jay-Z and Beyoncé and an intro, so he hasn't left a winning formula altogether. But there is change as Usher makes a play to be taken more seriously.

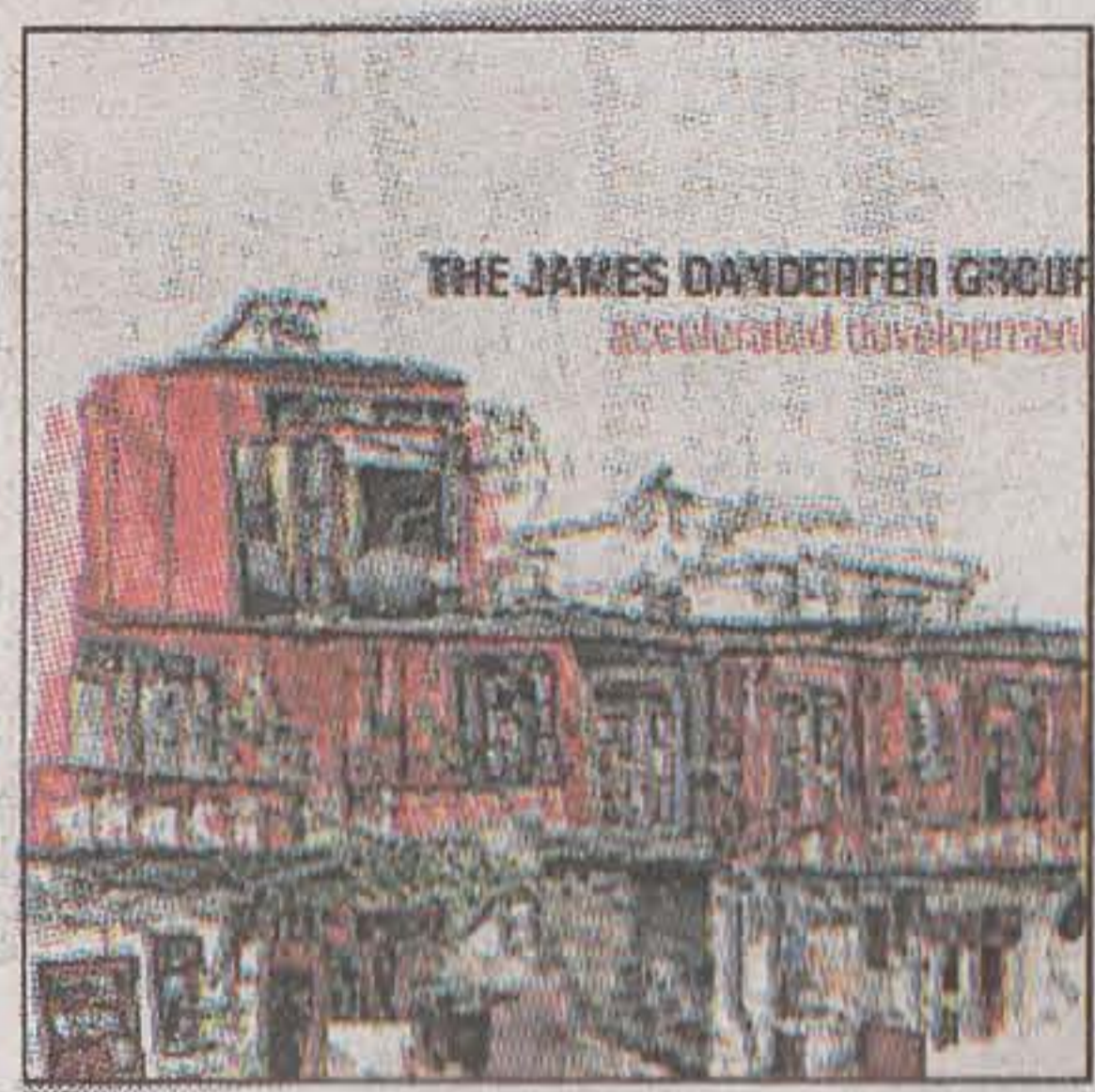
the young Usher claim to fame. It might not be a hit, but "Something Special" has a jazz flavour that is different and appealing.

minute album and a kind of summary. Ostensibly, it's a love song, but it could be interpreted as spiritual as well.

plenty of notes that this a spiritual and musical growth. The quote from Corinthians, for example.

BOTTOM LINE: B More Usher than anyone might need.

JAZZ



JAMES DANDERFER GROUP
Accelerated Development
(Cellar Live)

This talented clarinetist last wow'd with 2005's underappreciated *Run With It*. Living in Shanghai, China, for the past three years hasn't kept his profile in the public eye, either. But it did allow him to let his studies in the dynamics of modern Chinese urban culture infuse his writing. Backed by ace locals such as trumpeter Brad Turner, pianist Chris Gestrin and others, his nine originals display incredible writing. From the angular drive of "Blues Migration" to the pensive swing of "Memory Loss," this is beautiful and moving. **A-**

— Stuart Derdeyn
At the Cellar, tonight

COUNTRY

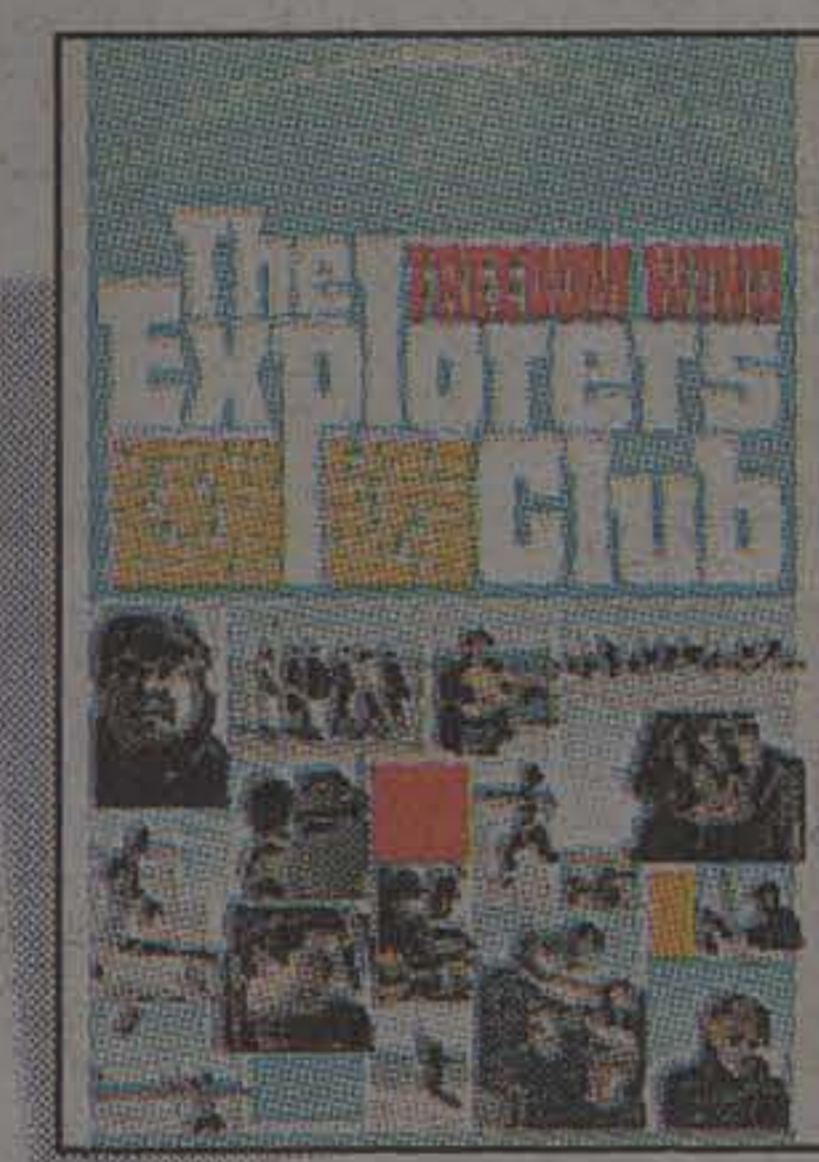


RICK TIPPE
The Power of One
(www.ricktippe)

Through the '90s, a lot of ups and some downs, our own Rick Tippe built himself a very nice Canadian country career. He's kept a lower profile these last six years but it looks like the itch for more activity has got the better of him. The sound he's getting with long-time production collaborator Chris Rolin is the best they've managed thus far, while Tippe has expanded his writing focus. There's still the love stuff as on the tender "Forever," but he's touching on redemption with "Long Way to Paradise" and his "She's a Guitar" is fun and hit-bound. Good stuff. **B**

— John P. McLaughlin

POP



THE EXPLORER'S CLUB
Freedom Wind (Dead Oceans)

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then The Explorer's Club are the most sincere Beach Boys since Wondermints teamed with ex-Beach Boy, Brian Wilson. The six-piece band has listened to every era of The Beach Boys, but particularly from 1966's *Pet Sounds* onwards. Their harmonies not only have that melodic sweep and suitably are angelic but they occasionally have the later gruffness, too. Although the band tries to offer more (other pop-rock influences), it's still possible to pick out what Beach Boys song became the basis for this arrangement or that. **C+**

— T.H.

COUNTRY-ROCK

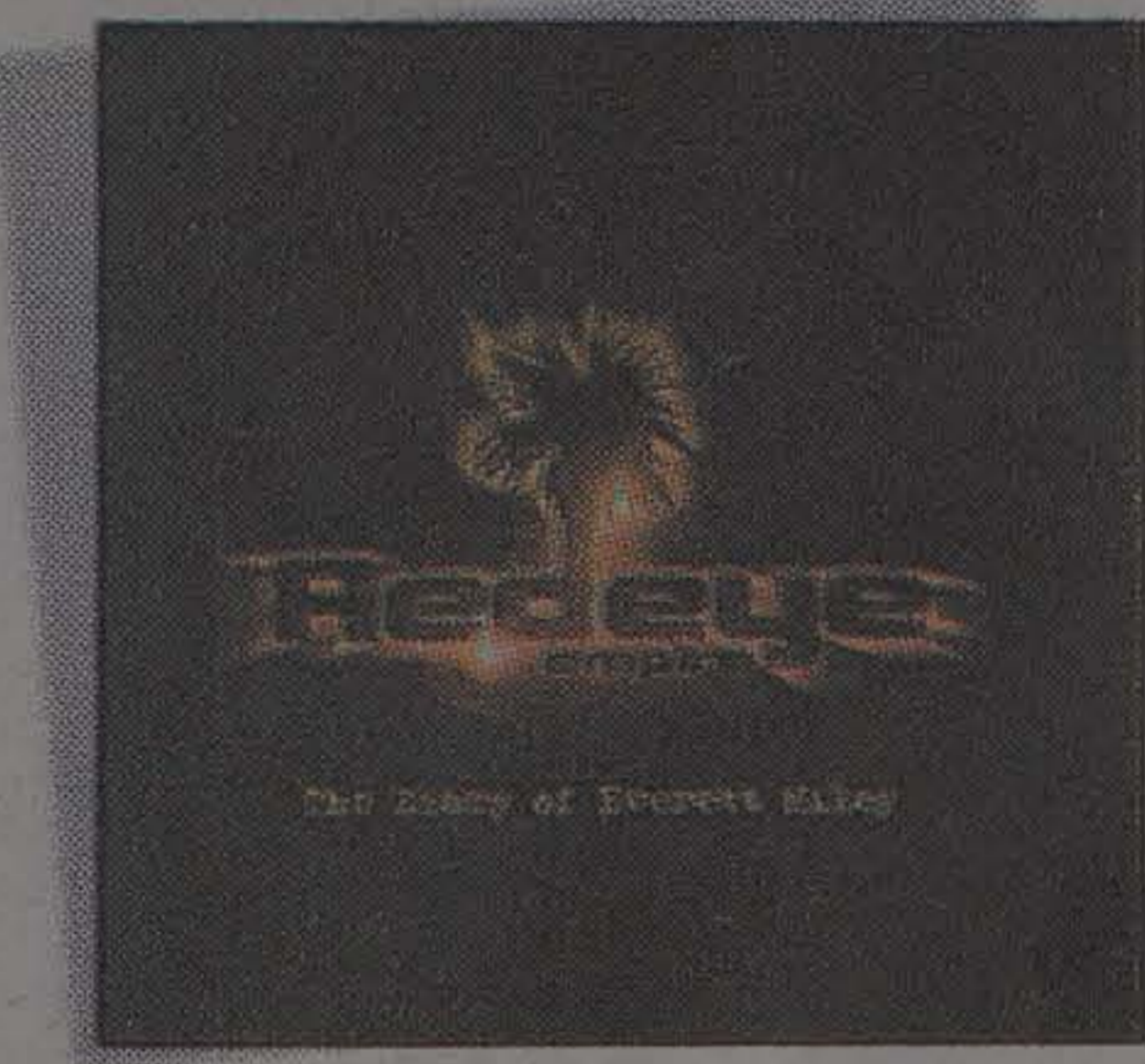


MUDCRUTCH
Mudcrutch (Reprise Records)

It took more than 30 years but Tom Petty's original band before the Heartbreakers finally has its debut album out, recorded last summer. It's in that country-rock vein so popular in the '70s starring Petty, Heartbreakers Mike Campbell and the brilliant Benmont Tench, plus Randall Marsh and Tom Leadon, former Eagle Bernie's brother. They open with a very cool take on the traditional "Shady Grove" followed by Petty's excellent "Scare Easy." Leadon's "Queen of the Go-Go Girls" is surprisingly lame. Best thing here is Petty's outstanding "The Wrong Thing to Do." **C+**

— J.P.M.

ROCK/REGGAE



REDEYE EMPIRE
The Diary of Everett Miley (29)

There are several Vancouver bands mixing their rock with a heavy dose of reggae — The Daniel Wesley Band and Critical Element to name two. Redeye Empire is another, but it sounds harder than the others as there is a discernible blues in Wesley and Critical Element is more varied. There is a modern pop awareness in Redeye Empire but there also is an occasional ska influence. The guitars figure prominently and the drums are emphatic, but the band is firmly reggae. It is writing from an understanding rather than just copping a rhythm. This makes for stronger songs. **B**

— T.H.

CHAMBER POP



SHEARWATER
Rook (Matador)

Having left Okkervil River, Jonathan Meiburg can devote his all to this intense, dramatic group. Not that its last album, *Palo Alto*, was in any way half-realized. It blew away all who heard it. But the new disc is an even more expansive and fragile collection of songs. As before, a core quartet is backed by 14-member orchestra adding swathes of textured strings to join the glockenspiels, organ, lap steel and Meiburg's soaring tenor. On a tune such as "Leviathan, Bound," the results are captivating. It's cinematic music that goes perfectly listening with your eyes closed. **B+**

— S.D.
At St. Andrew's-Wesley, Mon.

QUICKSPINS: Capsule reviews of this week's new CDs

SHARON MINEMOTO
You Can See the Ocean From Here (Pagetown Rec.)

NOMO
Ghost Rock (Ubiquity)
Calling what this group does

ENOCH KENT
One More Round (Borealis)

VARIOUS
Variations In Time: A Jazz Perspective (PTR)

WISHBONE ASH
The Power of Eternity (Sanctuary)

RYAN MCMAHON
Weeks Months Years (Strings)

James Danderfer

THE ATTRACTION

I listened to popular music and rock when I was a kid. The first time I was introduced to jazz was through a childhood friend who was also playing in the Grade 6 band. Because I had already begun learning about the clarinet, I was very impressed to hear it being played with such beauty and virtuosity on recordings. The first records I heard were by Benny Goodman, The Dukes of Dixieland, and Charlie Parker.

MY STYLE

I'd say I play contemporary jazz, but that's such a broad term. My music is contemporary in that I like to incorporate some rhythmic complexity and modern harmony; however, it's still pretty easy to listen to. I always like a strong melody and it's got to groove!

MY APPROACH

Playing jazz clarinet makes me stand out as a bit of an oddity, I suppose, but the only thing unique about my music is the way in which I combine influences and/or different approaches. I believe that any musician who creates sincere music, music that comes from heart, will be communicating something unique because we are all unique individuals in some way.

SPECIAL MOMENTS

Writing songs with a particular group of musicians in mind and then performing that music at a club is always extremely rewarding for me. Being a sideman is also a lot of fun, and certainly easier, but when I'm writing for my band, I feel like I'm not only adding a colour to the picture but building the canvas, choosing the colours, and creating a world for the musicians to interact with and play within. That's always a very unique and rewarding experience.

WRECKS, CATASTROPHES & MADDNESS

Yes, to all three! Those things happen, especially when you're playing creative music and not just reading from a page. But I think those experiences can largely be avoided by choosing the right musicians in the first place. Even then, the music will get "derailed" sometimes, but professional players know how to discreetly get back on track by adjusting to and working with the other band members.

NOW

I'm not performing with any headliners right now. Currently I'm working with various musicians in

Asia, mostly in Shanghai, China, where I've been fortunate to play with some very talented local musicians.

IN THE PAST

I haven't worked much with national headliners. I've played in the band for the Ozournes, the



Photo by Steve Mynett

Nylons, the Coasters, and Herb Reed and the Platters, but those were short engagements.

IN THE WORKS

I recorded my first CD in December of last year and have plans to record another, larger band either this summer or the following December. Recording my own album taught me a lot of things, one thing being that I've got more practicing to do before my next CD!

WHAT CHANGED ME

Leaving home in Vancouver, Canada, when I was 16 years old to go study at the *Interlochen World Center For the Arts* in Michigan was a life changing experience. The combination of a great faculty, beautiful location, and a large number of unbelievably talented and dedicated students from all over the world gave me an inspiration that I keep today.

WHAT I LIKE

What I like most about this business are the people that I get to meet and work with. Wherever I travel in the world, musicians seem to share a common respect for each other, probably because of the sacrifices we all make to pursue this career, and they always look out for one another.

WHAT I DON'T LIKE

I don't waste too much time thinking about the negative aspects of the industry because doing so won't really change anything. I think the main complaint of the jazz music industry is that there's not enough work because there's not enough support for this art form; but that's just the way it is! It's a tough business, and if you're going to be a part of it, you have to find ways to make it work.

WHO'S DOIN' IT FOR REAL

I think Cory "Scene" Weeds, owner of the Cellar jazz club and Cellar Live records, deserves a lot of credit for his contribution to the jazz community in Vancouver. The Cellar provided Vancouver with a top quality jazz music venue when there was nothing like it. Having this kind of place sparked a lot of creativity in the scene; new bands formed, new music was written and recorded, largely due to the fact that all the fantastic local musicians had a club where they could present their work and people would actually listen! It took a lot of hard work and expense to create such an

environment, and I don't think anyone but Cory could have pulled it off so well.

FAVORITES

Miles Davis, *Live at the Blackhawk*; John Coltrane, *Crescent*; and Mahler - *4th Symphony* performed by George Szell with the Cleveland Orchestra. My favorite colour is red; anything my mother cooks is my favorite food, and my favorite performance venue is The Philharmonic Hall in Berlin.

WISHES

That everyone have a strong sense of humour.

DISCOGRAPHY

List and describe any CD or DVD project(s) you have been involved with in the past?

- 2004 *Run With It*, James Danderfer Quartet, Cellar Live
- 2001 *Hot Air Vol. 3*, Mike Zachernuk Quintet, CBC Radio
- 2000 *Live at the Cellar*, Chris Gestrin Trio, Maximum Jazz
- 1999 *Blue Miles*, W.M.U. Big Band, Western Jazz
- 1995 *In Session*, Interlochen Jazz Combo, IAA Music

Email: james.danderfer@gmail.com

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