

Reviews Marc Mommaas

rtikel in 'All About Jazz' (Sept. 2003) on Sunny Side Records.

".....Last year Zalacain (Sunny Side) met the Dutch saxophonist player Marc Mommaas." (Armen Donelian) didn't play solo all the time because he invited Marc up for some duets. It was obvious to everyone in the audience that this guy was extraordinary." Mommaas happened to be finishing up a project and he didn't have a label. Sunnyside is releasing his album Global Motion this month....

~Celeste Sunderland (2003)

Quote on CD 'Globalmotiontrio'

'Wonderful compositions, great concept and a beautiful tone on the horn. Marc and his group have made some delightful, intimate music that is first class. You are in store for a pleasant listening experience'

~David Liebman (2000) Quote on CD 'Globalmotiontrio'

'Its a pleasure to encounter the warm sounds and feelings of the *Global Motion Trio*. Their music is full of intimacy and exploration.....'

~Joe Lovano (2000)

People play as they are. Simple.

On the 4th of July Marc gave me a swimming lesson. He showed me an arm stroke that utilized economy of movement combined with a continuous breath. As I watched him swim the lake I was amazed at the fact that he was moving through the water very fast but looked as if he was in slow motion.

Ha, Global Motion, a trio with a continuous breath, seems to be in slow motion. Like a magician the trio gives an illusion of non-effort while performing the most difficult of tasks. The compositions blend into one another like water. They shift between meters with a seamless ease. The composition becomes the improvisation. The improvisation is the composition.

It has brought me great joy to see Marc's growth as a player and composer over the past few years. With the exception of Sunflower, all of Marc's tunes utilize a specific bass line played beautifully by John Hebert. Once again, John has the knack of making Marc's bass line sound as if it's his own. Meanwhile, his improvisation sounds as if it's part of the written line. Listen carefully to John's opening interpretation of Sunflower. His playing is simple and elegant, bringing a special beauty to the melody.

I can't say enough about Nikolaj Hess. We met a few years ago when he took a lesson from me. The lesson turned into Nikolaj teaching me about African dancing and his rhythm studies in Africa. He is the perfect pianist for Marc's music, combining a beautiful touch and deep sense of harmony with a joyful, humorous dance through the music. Marc's sound is as beautiful as he is. His dedication to being an artist is profound. I have such admiration for the qualities he personifies in the way in which he lives his life. I hope that this trio of Marc, John and Nikolaj can bring all it's melodic, harmonic and rhythmic *motion around the globe*.

~Garry Dial (2000)

MARC MOMMAAS With NIKOLAJ HESS - Balance (Sunnyside 4001; USA)

Featuring Marc Mommaas on tenor sax and Nikolaj Hess on piano. Dutch-born saxist, Marc Mommaas, moved to NYC in 1997 and got a full scholarship at the Manhattan School of music. He put together a group called Global Motion with Nikolaj Hess, John Hebert and Tony Moreno and Sunnyside released their debut disc in 2003. This is Marc's second disc for Sunnyside and it is a duo with the pianist Nikolaj Hess.

Marc has a strong, warm tone on tenor and the duo work together with an almost telepathic empathy. Marc appears to have all of the songs here, yet both musicians are an integral part of the duo. "Amissirac" is a sublime ballad that begins with stark piano as Marc's robust tenor builds to a grand display on slow-burning power, with a beautiful, bluesy solo from the piano. Marc plays solo sax on two tracks and sounds well. His rich, warm tone and robust execution are superbly recorded, he sounds mighty fine just by himself. Although much of this is laid back, I found this disc to consistently touching, quietly engaging and delicately inventive.

~BLG, Downtown Gallery (2007)

Review JazzImprov January 2006 Issue

Marc Mommaas is one of those uncompromising musicians who lives the jazz life, and lives life for jazz, to the extent of gaining admiration from longer-on-the-scene musicians like Garry Dial. Totally dedicated to his art, Mommaas has some interesting things to say musically, as many listeners found out on his last CD, Global Motion (which seems to have received universally favorable reviews from the writers who heard it). Even though Mommaas has pared down his group to a duo for Balance, his aesthetic of mixing meters—even within the confines of a single composition or within the length of several measures—and of writing unconventional modulations continues. Once again, pianist Nikolaj Hess, living in Copenhagen but meeting Mommaas in New York, joins the saxophonist. Indeed, an empathetic pianist like Hess is all that Mommaas needs to bring to life the ideas that he intends to record.

Part of the fascination of Balance (such an appropriate name, for several reasons) is Mommaas' balance of composition with free improvisation, so fine a balance that the line between the two is hard to detect. Though the two musicians follow the outlines of Mommaas' written thoughts, the only times that it becomes evident that Mommaas and Hess are following lead sheets are during their unison passages—passages which challenge both musicians with the difficulty of their execution—execution which they nail with alacrity and empathetic understanding of the other's direction. Moreover, Mommaas and Hess are equally distinctive talents. Each one of them is capable of creating their own spell upon the listener through effective use of dynamics, unusual sonorities, and halting and then surging movement, which are noticeable especially on the first track, Mommaas' theme from the movie Funny Bones, called "Funny Bones Jones." Backed by Hess' crashing chords and angular interjections, Mommaas is left with sufficient space to develop his own improvisation, free and yet accessible.

Part of the reason for Mommaas' unexpected accessibility, in spite of his freedom to go his own way when he winds improvisatory lines, is his attention to tone and an unspoken narration. For Mommaas does have stories to tell through his music. His use of clipped phrases, upward sweeps, intervallic leaps and approximations of the human voice create segments within the lengths of his tunes that bear wordless explication and exclamation. In addition, Mommaas maintains a connection with his listeners through tonal qualities that vary in shadings and colors throughout the course of a composition. In contrast to "Funny Bones Jones," the next track, "Amissirac," attains a more melancholy and tentative quality over lurching and then hesitant modulations of a minor key to be sure. But because of the indeterminate movement, the listener needs only to sit back, rather than to analyze, and let the music wash over, as altissimo swoops and contrapuntal interplay adding to the piece's sense of mystery and also its beauty.

"Sorcerer's Dance," too, consists of studied compositional originality. It starts with Hess' free, sparkling piano solo until Mommaas comes in with his theme, melodic in its initial statement before he proceeds into the remainder of the performance, consisting of variations backed by Hess' light, flowing chords of subtly transforming meters. "Dialogue" finally allows Mommaas and Hess to play entirely freely, without

the pre-determined structure of a written outline, and their understanding of the other's technique is evident as they spontaneously develop a tune by listening to the other and then elaborating upon it. Mommaas includes two of his own solos on *Balance* as well. "Solo No. 1" is an elaboration upon a sussurant, repeating note in the lower register of his horn and "Solo No. 2" is a more folk-based tune that Mommaas plays as if singing.

Even though Mommaas' initial studies were in business while he still lived in Holland, his studies with the likes of Dave Liebman and Dick Oatts led to his final ambition to pursue the jazz muse, even though wide-scale recognition still escapes him. It shouldn't. With a sound someone akin to Joe Lovano's, with boundless imagination and with fearless independence despite the odds, Marc Mommaas is a saxophonist deserving of a wider audience. *Balance* is just one more fact in Mommaas' resume that builds to the conclusion that he should be one of the current generation's leading musicians, both in recognition by the public and in recording activity

~By Bill Donaldson (2006)

Review WNUR 89.3 FM Chicago Sound Experiment - Pick of the Week.

This record of duo recordings showcases the Dutch saxophonist at his very best playing over nine of his own complex compositions. His penchant for mixing meters within a single tune and employing what he calls "polychords" make for a continuously interesting listen and the playing of Mommaas and Hess is continuously beautiful throughout the record. His composition and soloing technique place him firmly in the realm of the avant-garde, but that is not to say "*Balance*" carries an energy music aesthetic. Quite the opposite, really, as the selections here are subdued and truly pretty. The innovation is rather in his approach, in his harmonic conception. The album itself is incredibly coherent and stands as a perfectly realized project. All of this makes "*Balance*" a refreshing reminder of the still unplumbed depths of harmonic improvisation within jazz.

~By Justin Glick (2006)

Review All Music Guide - 2007

European tenor-saxophonist Marc Mommaas and pianist Nikolaj Hess perform nine of Mommaas' originals on this consistently intriguing duet project. The music follows Mommaas' themes and guidelines but is mostly comprised of fairly free improvising, sometimes by one of the two musicians (Mommaas is showcased on "Solo No. 1" and "Solo No. 2") but usually both. The music travels through a variety of moods and occasionally becomes quite intense and emotional, but it is mostly relaxed, lyrical, a bit witty and swinging in its own fashion. The communication between the two musicians is strong, neither sounds like any of their predecessors, and this music is refreshing, spirited and full of surprises. One won't come away from the CD humming any of the tunes but the interplay between Mommaas and Hess is outstanding

~Scott Yanow (2007)

Review All About Jazz June 2006 Issue

In classical music, people distinguish between "program music," which is "about" something, and "absolute music," which is not. Someone has probably worked out what would be meant by a jazz version of "absolute music": I suspect it would sound a lot like *Balance*, the excellent new record by Dutch tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas, in a series of duets with Danish pianist Nikolaj Hess. Let me explain what I mean.

Consider a textbook piece of program music, like, for example, Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (1898). Strauss's tone poem presents a series of precisely narrated events in the hero's life: going into battle, performing "works of peace," and, my favorite, "gaining wisdom." (Have you ever thought of what "gaining wisdom" *sounds* like?) In contrast, absolute music, in a philosophically challenging way, is self-referentially only "about" itself: about its internal architecture, about its temporal development of themes. More intellectual and less emotional than the crowd-pleasing story telling of the programmatic guys.

This dichotomy breaks down in the face of a piece of music like James Brown's "Sex Machine." "Sex Machine," if it is "about" anything, is about a group of musicians performing a song called "Sex Machine." It is every bit as rigorously absolute as *The Art of the Fugue*; our aesthetic delight stems from an amazement at the way the blocks of sonic material are compiled. But at the same time, "Sex Machine" is decidedly crowd-pleasing and emotionally charged, unlike its classical cousins. Indeed, any good instrumental jazz reading of a thirty-two bar song is more like "Sex Machine" than Bach in this respect—self-referentially non-programmatic, but emotionally evocative at the same time. So divorcing the musical performance from story-telling in jazz or R&B doesn't have the same intellectual and philosophical effects it does in classical music.

If they want to create "absolute" music, perhaps jazz musicians must eschew conventional elements, especially sentimental or emotional elements, even if they do not eschew "form" altogether (as some schools of free jazz have done). Then the musician could more clearly call attention to the music's formal structure without the intrusion of the emotional or sentimental baggage that generally accompanies more oft-used formal elements.

That's what Marc Mommaas seems to want to do on *Balance*, his second release on Sunnyside. In his words, "All the compositions were written with this recording in mind and include polyharmonic and mixed meter material, which is extremely effective in this spacious setting but not often utilized. The space created by this instrumentation gives the polychordal voicings the necessary space to breathe and the opportunity to connect with the horizontal melodic movements."

The resulting music is decidedly intellectual; it's closely composed and slightly unfamiliar sounding. But the mixed-meter and polychordal elements are not at all difficult to listen to: on the aural evidence, these are devices used with some frequency by other jazz musicians, though perhaps more instinctively and anarchically than in Mommaas' case. What makes their use here distinctive is Mommaas's earnestness in isolating these compositional elements over others that he leaves aside from now. That is, the mixed meters and the polyharmonies are deployed with skill but they are not what make this music sound intellectual, even if their systematic use tends toward musical absolutism.

No, what makes the music sound intellectual is a certain cool reserve in the playing. There is passion and abandon here, but carefully rationed. There is a little tenderness in "Remind Me," a little sweetness in "Amissirac." Mommaas' saxophone tone is controlled, firm, sober; he can slip in a little atonality, a little shriek, but he does so sparingly. On *Balance*, his playing is remarkably effective and his two unaccompanied solo numbers are beautifully constructed.

What strikes me about the artistic manifesto quoted above is not the formal elements upon which Mommaas insists, but the fact that the music for this record was composed as a whole. The unity and coherence of the set comes not from mixed meter or polyharmony, but from a more general compositional harmony. "Heart of Winter," a piece occurring in the middle of the set, is a template containing many of the musical elements that are developed in the others: a meditative mood, a slightly elegiac feeling. (There I go, desperately trying to impose programmatic elements on what I've claimed is absolute music.) "Aftermath" and "Dialogue" are all about the performance; while "Sorcerers' Dance" and "Remind Me" hint at more programmatic, if not fully narrative, material. Perhaps the surest reference point for the music on the disc is Miles Davis's "Circle," from *Miles Smiles*, which approached, but never coalesced into, a mournful ballad, drawing attention to its unusual structure.

Hess plays strongly throughout, perhaps slightly more conventionally and with more variety than does the leader. A kind of Red Garland-ish warmth seeps into his solo in "Amissirac"; while his percussive clusters underneath Mommaas on the wonderfully free "Dialogue" are perfectly placed but draw upon a completely different lineage. (Hess studied with Horace Parlan, and it implies no criticism of the student to note that the teacher's influence shines through at times.)

There is an implicit pejorative sense to labeling something "intellectual": *Balance* is intellectual jazz with no such reservations. Mommaas has created an unflinching suite of compositions that express new things while studiously avoiding, for the most part, the free-jazz route. I'm not sure we need absolute jazz, and I'm even less sure that this record is an example of such a thing. Mommaas would almost certainly object that he would not mind if the music evoked emotions and sentiments, or at least, *Ein Heldenleben*-style, the gaining of wisdom. But Mommaas and Hess present a compelling case that we may have only begun to scratch the surface of the formal and communicative capabilities of the form. Add to this the fact that both musicians' playing is damn good and you have an important record.

~By Jeff Dayton-Johnson (2006)

Review Downbeat June 2004 Issue

Saxophonists are seekers by nature. They search for their inspiration by reaching toward the future, relishing the past, searching the world over or settling down home.

Marc Mommaas: Global Motion: Odd, alternative time signatures and syncopated subdivisions run far and wide on this heady, globally influenced set by the Netherlands-raised tenor saxophonist. Drummer Tony Moreno and guitarist Rez Abbasi-new additions to the group since Mommaas' 1999 trio debut-contribute to the progressive exotica with African percussion and electric sitar, respectively. *Global Motion* is always in stylistic motion, spanning bop, ECM-esque soundscapes and free-form chamber dreams.

~By Ed Enright (2004)

Review Jazz Improv. Fall 2004

Global motion is the brain child of reed-man Marc Mommaas, who wrote all of the compositions. Mommaas comes across as a contemporary composer "in Touch" with a fresh and modern sound. That modern sound seems to center around manipulations of rhythm. I could be biased, as a drummer, but I do seem to remember conversations in my jazz arranging classes dealing with the supreme importance (over both melody and harmony) of rhythm. The idea was put forward that one could really play just about any note in a solo (or composition) as long as the rhythm is strong enough to give the idea substance and identity. It's an idea I tend to agree with, and one that I see in more and more contemporary jazz releases. Mommaas owes much of his distinct sound to his awareness and manipulations of rhythms.

The CD opens with "One Way only", which mixes different odd meters into a high-intensity straight 8th note fusion cocktail. there is some 'collective soloing" between Mommaas and Rez Abbasi, as well as an odd metered bass riff which recurs as an interlude before finally serving as a vamp over which drummer Tony Moreno takes a powerful solo, further developing the rhythmic ideas of Mommaas' composition. "Maktub" includes the addition of electric sitar and percussion, a very unusual idea that works well for this band and his composer.

Mommaas' ballad "intuition" sets up a loose vibe, with the drums providing timbral textures and colors rather than time (another contemporary staple). on this tune the leader reveals a powerful, lyrical and soaring voice on tenor. I can't help think but the title "3458" must reflect the time signature used in the composition. If I had a bit more time to figure it out, I'd tell you definitively. As it stands (deadlines are no less strict for jazz writers) you'll have to do the math yourself.

"Something Else" displays Mommaas' skill at part-writing, with written bass lines and other more classically-minded ideas. Not everything has to be in an odd meter, though, as Mommaas proves with his 4/4 ballad, "revision". The odd meters return for "African FBI", which has a 6/8 Latin flavor, but is in a more complex time signature.

Global Motion ends with the three-part "Copenhagen Suite". Part one begins with an extended sax/piano duet intro and settles into a straight 8th fusion feel. Part two is set in $\hat{A}^{3/4}$ meter, with a feel that seems to bounce in between swung and straight 8th notes. The closing section is in 7/4, with a high intensity straight 8th note feel before returning to the sax/piano duet setting that began the Suite.

Marc Mommaas clearly has a handle on today's jazz scene and is a composer worthy of watching. As he continues to grow as a player and composer his writing (which is already strong) can only get better and his concept more clearly and completely realized. This CD is certainly worth checking out for fans of contemporary jazz

~By Dave Miele (2004).

Review JazzTimes February 2004 Issue

...Ofcourse, improv versus composition isn't a battle to be won or lost. Sometimes the two thrive as equals. Witness tenor saxophonist '**Marc Mommaas**' *Global Motion* (Sunnyside), a finely crafted and sometimes even uplifting example of a progressive-but-not-precisely-avant-garde jazz aesthetic. Mommaas is a gifted tenor saxophonist, ... and a writer of intricate and pleasingly unpredictable tunes. On "3458" and "African FBI," Mommaas seems to delight in subverting convention, especially in regard to time. Such metrically complex tunes are only as good as the band wraps its chops around them. Mommaas' crew ... does the material justice, interpreting its quirks with grace... The music has its own nearly classical beauty.

~By Chris Kelsey (2004)

Review Cadence January 2004 Issue

...The compositions of saxophonist Marc Mommaas have angular folkish themes enhanced by very very active rhythms and lively improvisations. This work comes off closer to the impressionistic side of Herbie Hancock or the piercing cries of Jan Garbarek than normal blues-based American Jazz. There's a nice throbbing pulse wrapped around sitar on "Maktub" while "Intuition" has Mommaas peeling lovely spirals of tenor over a chiming, abstract rhythm. "Something Else" is the heaviest piece, guitarist Rez Abbasi stepping to the front and playing springy, tense rhythms against Mommaas' increasingly frenzied tenor. Bassist Hebert and drummer Moreno also prove invaluable to keeping the crisp tempo afloat. This is a cerebral set, but one with a measure of passion as well.

~By Jerome Wilson (2004)

For the last two decades Sunnyside has showcased some of the best and brightest jazz musicians on the scene. This new recording is no exception. It heralds the sound of the 21st century.

Marc Mommaas Global Motion Tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas's Sunnyside debut, *Global Motion*, marks the extension of the jazz saxophone into the 21st century. This Tegelen-born, Amsterdam-raised musician's sound is full-bodied, articulate and comes close to Michael Brecker's John Coltrane-born sheets of sounds. On *Global Motion*, Mommaas is joined by pianist Nikolaj Hess, bassist John Hebert, drummer/percussionist Tony Moreno and guitarist/electric sitar player Rez Abbasi. Stylistically, Mommaas's music is totally modern, and multicultural, as evidenced by the uptempo opener, "One Way Only," the sub-Saharan syncopations of "African FBI" and the sub-continental swing of "Maktub." Mommaas's artistic openness comes from his exceptional educational background. His father is a painter and his mother is an opera singer. In addition to his musical education, Mommaas also holds a masters in communication science and business. He moved to New York and he studied with saxophonists David Liebman and Dick Oatts and pianist Garry Dial. He also earned a full scholarship from the Manhattan School of Music, received his masters in Jazz Performance and won the William H. Borden Award, which is given to one graduating student for outstanding achievements. In 1999, he released *Global Motion Trio*, his first CD as a leader.....

~By Eugene Holley (2003)

Review All Music Guide 2003

...With his second outing as a leader, Mommaas displays a penchant for working thru linearly devised themes amid a few shrewdly devised digressions along the way. He receives strong support from guitarist Rez Abbasi, and pianist Nikolaj Hess, both serving as sympathetic collaborators here. The saxophonist's compositions include breezy passages atop the often swirling and blustery rhythms provided by bassist John Hebert and drummer Tony Moreno. Hence, Mommaas has aligned himself with good company. Marked by oscillating flows and a few melodically tinted dreamscapes, the band's tactics also consists of

lithely engineered motifs. As the overall concept and execution of this album might spur notions of traversing rolling hills via winding country roads -- at an abnormally high speed, that is! Overall, Mommaas possesses a fluid attack, enhanced by a velvety tone and his bop-induced soloing escapades.
~By Glenn Astarita (2003)

Review All About Jazz

A note to ECM label head Manfred Eicher: I've got a new artist for your stable. His name is Marc Mommaas, a Dutch tenor saxophonist living in NYC, and he's just released a fine album on Sunnyside, Global Motion. The album features the Global Motion Trio, including pianist Nikolaj Hess and bassist John Hebert, expanded to a quintet by the addition of drummer Tony Moreno and guitarist Rez Abbasi. The group creates a sound with affinities to much of ECM's European jazz--an abstract, painterly quality, melodies that wind through twists and turns while retaining a folksy lilt, and an air of wistful melancholy. Mommaas, who studied with Joe Lovano and Dave Liebman, is a musician of much promise; his tone is rich and rounded, with a bit of sandpaper rasp in feistier moments, and his compositions (all tunes on the album are his) are darkly appealing and well-constructed. The quintet can move from song-like melodies to free passages and back without a hitch, and their sympathetic playing provides a cohesion that distinguishes the album. The opener, "One Way Only," is one of the best tunes, featuring a maze-like melody over an irregularly accented meter that periodically gives way to an agitated bridge played in unison by Mommaas and Hess. An ominous single-note rhythmic pattern provides a base for Moreno's drums to solo over, heightening the tension before the tune is brought home with a final set of changes. "Maktub" and "African FBI" add some Dave Holland-like world beat touches: Abbasi plays an electric sitar guitar (if you've heard Steely Dan's "Do It Again" you know the sound) on the former, which again features a torturous melody before settling into an elegant groove; and Moreno's African percussion duet with Mommaas on the latter is a highlight. Another is "3458," a memorable theme over shifting meters with some wonderful playing by Hess (a real find) followed by a remarkable sax solo where Mommaas begins as if awakened from a dream, becoming slowly more alert as his lines become sharper and more declamatory. Like other ECM-style groups, this one sometimes dissolves into merely pleasant abstractions that fail to make a long-term impression: the first part of "Copenhagen Suite," for example. Nevertheless, this record establishes Mommaas as an artist to watch, and makes the case for this group to receive wider exposure. Your move, Herr Eicher?

~By Joshua Weiner (2003)

Groomes O's Place Jazz Newsletter

Marc Mommaas - Global Motion 4-/4 O's Notes: Marc is from Amsterdam but has studied music and performed in New York. He has creative DNA with a painter and an opera singer for parents. Mommaas plays tenor sax with his own take on modern jazz, a combination of fusion, some free jazz and bop. The rest of the band is Tony Moreno (d), Nikolaj Hess (p), John Hebert (b) and Rez Abbasi (g). The music ranges from the peacefulness of "Revision" to the racy open spirited "African FBI". It's a unique sound that grows on you

~By D. Oscar Groomes (2003)

CD Review Multi Instrumentalist Tim Price.

Marc Mommaas Global Motion. Here's an interesting player with a concept, dedication, beautiful chops and ideas, and the ability to tell a story in his own words. The thing I always dug about Mommaas was that he brought a European sensibility into the framework of today's music. His project is a breath of fresh air all the way around and check out his compositions. They are killing! Marc is also one of the people who has benefited by the great Dave Liebman. Let me explain that further. Liebman has rode shotgun over the younger European players searching out and picking and choosing and educating people like Mommaas. Without someone like Liebman approaching and being so dedicated in these areas guys like Marc might not have come into maturity as quickly. Liebman presented a lot of these guys with the jazz sensibilities and the personal direction and instruction. That in itself is an asset to the European youth, playing creative

music. Now the cool thing here is Mommaas is far from being a Liebman clone. That's the beauty of this, he's working on his own voice bringing the elements of jazz and what he knows from his own background. And making a statement that's personal, forthright, and honest musically. That's the thing as I said before that I always dug about Mommaas. He's traveling on his own path, that path of course has roots. And it sure is an interesting thing to listen to him play. The band he has is well rehearsed and tight. In closing, let me add that I'd love to hear this ensemble marc has after a five month European tour, because that is where the development is going to happen next. Unfortunately, with the way the scene is in the Jazz business, things like this are extremely hard, not impossible, but hard. Someone like Mommaas is a diehard and a dedicated creative player, I'm expecting this of him. This music has a beautiful energy and a highly creative spirit. Let's hope the next release is a tone in relationship to this one. Keep on doing it Marc!
FTTP, Keep On

~By Tim Price (2005)

Concert review 'Snake Charmer' (Rez Abbasi) All about Jazz.

The Bayou, Ottawa, Canada

Saturday, March 19, 2005

New York-based guitarist Rez Abbasi rolled into town on Saturday, March 19, 2005 for a performance at Ottawa's The Bayou, in support of his latest release Snake Charmer. Using the same line-up as the album, with the exception of the lesser-known but certainly deserving-of-more-attention saxophonist Marc Mommaas replacing David Liebman, Abbasi and organist Gary Versace, drummer Danny Weiss and singer Kiran Ahluwalia ?????. Mommaas may not have the name recognition of Liebman, but he demonstrated the kind of promise that says we'll be hearing more from him in the future. A fearless improviser on both tenor and soprano, Mommaas had the ability and sense of spontaneous composition to start from almost nothing and build solos that were alive with energy and commitment, fairly bristling with power. Like Versace, Weiss and, of course, Abbasi himself, Mommaas could function in an almost free space, developing his solos with such intention that when the rest of the group rejoined him, it seemed somehow just right

~By John Kelman (2005)

Armen Donelian and Marc Mommaas - All or Nothing at All

Saxophone and piano duos seem to be all the rage this year, witness the Vijay Iyer and Rudresh Mahanthappa recording. Armen Donelian and Marc Mommaas, piano and saxophone respectively, have created just as satisfying an album with what I would call a New York sound, as opposed to the exotic melodies of Iyer and Mahanthappa. All or Nothing at All is a live concert from 2003 in New York City. Armen Donelian has a lyrical quality to his playing touched with a smattering of the avant garde. He was initially trained in classical music, but jazz soon became an overwhelming passion. Armen is also a Fulbright scholar. Marc Mommaas plays his horn with passion, edge, and modernistic tendencies. The overall combination of the two musicians results in an introspective collection of tunes that lets the listener peer into the soul of these musicians.

~By the Covalent Bond (2007)

Armen Donelian and Marc Mommaas - All or Nothing at All

Pianist Armen Donelian and tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas perform duets on three originals and two standards. Their improvisations are relaxed and often lyrical yet quite explorative. Mommaas has a flexible sound and shows versatility while Donelian provides both a rhythmic foundation (even when playing out of tempo) and a strong solo voice. The closer, Donelian's "Stargazer," is the most memorable performance and the challenging piece deserves to become a jazz standard. This is intriguing music that holds one's interest throughout.

~ Scott Yanow, All Music Guide **** four stars (2007)

Armen Donelian and Marc Mommaas - All or Nothing at All

Pianist Armen Donelian and tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas convey many emotions and moods on their

CD (recorded in concert at The New School) and employ a variety of approaches and, in Mommaas' case, wide-ranging tonal colors. Each track is carefully sculpted; i.e., the title song begins with a light-toned sax melody lead, easing into an improvisation over a piano with a walking bass line, then heating up as piano and sax dialogue in phrases breaking up the flowing 4/4 before a complex piano solo. Other highlights include Donelian's "Stargazer", with pedal chords and a sax solo ruminating in long tones before breaking out in arpeggios, and Mommaas' "Children's Song", a waltz lullaby with a lovely light touch.

~George Kanzler, *All About Jazz* (2007)

Armen Donelian and Marc Mommaas - All or Nothing at All

First, an admission: I am disinclined toward duo dates. To me, a piano and saxophone alone together often sound panicky, rushing to fill all that open space. They engage in a technical exercise, like fencing, with intellectual rewards more athletic than aesthetic.

All or Nothing at All is different. To be sure, pianist Armen Donelian and tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas set out a fierce, dense, austere contrapuntal recital. But they function within the duet format with such skill and creativity and taste that it is impossible for an open-minded audience not to have fun.

This particular open-minded audience filled the Jazz Performance Space at the New School University in New York City in 2003. The live sound is oddly monophonic yet captures the intimacy of the evening's shared adventure, which is all about duality. For example, the 11 minutes of the title track contain a slow, luminous intro by Donelian; a horn-plus-accompaniment melody chorus with Donelian's strong anchoring bass line and Mommaas' free forays; frenetic, inspired, loose call-and-response dialogue; an eruptive solo by Donelian creating complex polytonal commentary on the theme; another, more liberated shared melody chorus; and a haunting, piping, high-register coda from Mommaas.

So I ask myself, what's not to like?

~Thomas Conrad, *JazzTimes* (2007)

Passing Ships and Cheesesteaks

This past Friday, your intrepid blogger set forth to face the challenges of I-95 from DC to Philly in order to attend the Ars Nova Workshop presentation of the Ron Horton Sextet performance of Andrew Hill's *Passing Ships*. Since I love the music of Andrew Hill, I was more than willing to face the three hour drive each way (it's the return trip late at night that's tough). On my last trip up the same route, I ran over a large metal object in the road, destroying two tires (newly installed) on the driver side of my car as well as the front left wheel. So it was with some trepidation that I set forth. Fortunately, the storm that had deluged the DC area for several days lifted on the very morning that I left, leaving cold, grey but dry weather for the trip. I was looking for great music and great cheesesteaks. I found great music....

Passing Ships is one of the great Andrew Hill albums. Recorded in November 1969, the album was not released until 2003. The musicians on the original date formed an impressive lineup: Woody Shaw and Dizzy Reece on trumpets; Julian Priester, trombone; Bob Northern, French horn; Howard Johnson, tuba, bass clarinet; Joe Farrell, soprano and tenor sax, bass clarinet, and English horn; Ron Carter, bass (I hope Dan Ouellette, in his in-progress bio of Carter, gives this session as much space as he does Carter's marginal involvement in A Tribe Called Quest recording session, documented in the current DB); and, Lenny White, drums.

The musicians at Friday's concert were something of an all-star group on the current scene: Ron Horton, trumpet/flugelhorn, Scott Robinson, tenor saxophone, Ben Allison, double-bass, Frank Kimbrough, piano, and, Tim Horner, drums. Tony Malaby on sax was originally scheduled to perform, but the audience was told that he had a "medicial emergency" and could not appear. That was disappointing news; I had wanted to check out Malaby in performance for a while. He was replaced by Dutch, New York based musician, Mark Mommaas, who turned in a fine performance, especially when you consider he had only been notified at noon of the day of the concert, and had not seen the music until 5:00P, a mere three hours before the show.

The set began (I believe) with “The Brown Queen” from *Passing Ships*, followed by “Sideways” and “Plantation Bag.” The group then performed, “ML,” a recent Hill composition. According to Horton and Kimbrough, Hill’s recent compositions were often titled with initials, often in reference to a person. “ML” was thought to refer to “My Life;” it was a superb piece. Like much of Hill’s music, it was lyrical, exploratory, reflective and passionate, by turns or simultaneously. The group then played “Passing Ships,” “Noon Tide” and “Cascade,” all from *Passing Ships*.

While faithful to the album, the groups also took room to solo and improvise, in the spirit of Hill’s compositions. Horton’s trumpet playing reminds me of Lee Morgan’s, a comment I don’t make lightly. Horton has tremendous facility. Kimbrough played well, although somewhat overshadowed by Horton and the saxes. Again, I need to single out Mommaas, who was strong on sax, but even stonger on soprano. Unlike many soprano players, who get only a thin, constipated tone on their instrument, Mommaas played the soprano with passion and achieved a strong tone. I ended up not missing Malaby all that much (I hope he’s well though).

Horton offered some interesting insights into Hill as composer. He noted that Kimbrough had maintained a 20+ year relationship with Hill, including the time Hill was virtually off the jazz scene. Horton noted that Hill did not keep the scores of his composition. Horton had been making transcriptions of Hill’s music. When he actually met Hill, through Kimbrough, Hill asked to see the transcriptions. Horton found out that Hill had kept nothing from his previous compositions. Hill went through Horton’s transcriptions, noting and editing. Horton indicated the group was contemplating an album of Hill’s music. I hope compositions like “ML” are on it. The word from Ars Nova is that they will offer another evening devoted to Hill, this time featuring the Nels Cline Group (*New Monastery*). I hope so. I’m ready for I-95 again.

Oh yeah, cheesteaks. On recent trips to and through Philly, I’ve been sampling the noted cheese steak joints that Philly is famous for. I love that type of food. I’ve hit the two most well-known, perhaps even notorious joints, Pat’s and Geno’s, a couple of times recently. On this trip, I checked out Jiim’s Steaks on South Street. Pat’s has been around forever. Geno’s has been around a while too. They face each other on opposite sides of passyunk Street. Garish has nothing on these guys. The stores are monuments to ego and bad taste. Geno slices its steak meat, Pat’s chops and shreds. Onions, cheese (I’m a provolone guy; I suppose I should try whiz sometime); slap it in an Italian sub roll, and there you have it. Jim’s steaks are a lot like Pat’s. Geno’s and Pat’s do share one thing: an overbearing attitude toward their customers. I suppose it’s part of their “charm,” but it doesn’t work for me. I think it’s Pat’s that posts a sign that if you don’t speak English, they won’t serve you. Obnoxious. So, who makes the best cheese steaks? None of these guys. My vote goes to Rick’s, formerly located in the Reading Terminal for 25 years. Unfortunately, Rick closed (I heard the terminal forced the closure) in October. I sure hope he comes back. I had some memorable cheese steaks there—and he was a really nice guy too.

<http://www.prex.com/blog/passing-ships-cheesteaks/#more-557> - Anthony G. Medici, 2009

JazzTimes - Thomas Conrad - February 26, 2009

Amina Figarova Sextet

Location: La Jolla, San Diego, CA

Venue: Athenaeum Music & Arts Library

“.....If it sometimes seems that each passing month brings forth another interesting tenor saxophone voice, then assign February 2009 to Marc Mommaas. Although he has been in New York for 12 years and is a player with a distinctive, deft, edgy concept, he has remained under the radar. Even in a band where individual identities are secondary to overall ensemble purposes, it was impossible not to notice that every Mommaas solo was surprising, with ideas that seemed unrelated to Figarova’s structures until they tied back into them. In the second set the band played three pieces from *September Suite*: “Rage,” “Trying to Focus” and “When the Lights Go Down.” Mommaas’ encounter with “Rage” was profound. His solo was deceptively quiet, a reluctant rage, a contorted rage, rage as suffering and bafflement. Only a boldly creative tenor saxophonist would have come up with it.”

EUROPEAN PUBLICATIONS

Review Concert 'Balance' October 17 - 2008 in Fundación Carlos de Amberes (Madrid) SP

El jazz es lo mas parecido a una caja de sorpresas donde encuentras dos desconocidos y descubres dos gigantes, es el caso de Marc Mommaas y Nikolaj Hess, uno holandés y el otro danés que bajo el sobrenombre de Balance se presentaron en la Fundación Carlos de Amberes para deleite y disfrute de los que quisimos seguirles en su discurso fácil y fluido, de depurada y fina técnica que encajaron a la perfección bebiendo de las fuentes de los grandes del bop.

Dos sonidos, un único lenguaje, entre lo melódico y swingueante su música rebosa optimismo y familiaridad que viaja a un mar de influencias de aquí y de allá, de antes y de ahora, bien compactados y con coherente personalidad donde resulta difícil encontrar un parecido claro y definido, existiendo, no obstante, puntos de conexión con Paul Gonzalves, Lee Konitz, Ben Webster, Joe Lovano, Paul Bley, Bill Evans o Martial Solal entre otros.

Un dúo de piano y saxo tenor es un cara a cara en competencia leal, un ejercicio de sinceridad, de lectura de pensamiento y sentimientos afines. Solo intenso y profundo en el saxo tenor de Marc Mommaas, piano swingueante a la vez que delicado en una composición del primero, que llevó el numérico título de “2, 3, 4, 5 y 8”.

Los labios de Marc Mommaas arañan la lengüeta de su saxo tenor improvisando a capella, mientras el piano calla, el oído escucha y las manos aplauden en “Free Sax Improvisation”. La composición de Egberto Gismonti “7 Anais” es un guiño al optimismo donde se desarrollan juegos que crecen y decrecen con el saxo de Marc Mommaas a los que el piano de Nikolaj Hess responde con arpeggios cicateros y constantes.

Con “Over The Rainbow” la poesía nos envuelve con un velo traslucido y nocturno de tonos suaves y vaporosos mostrando un piano tierno y un saxo melódico que humedece los ojos de Marc Mommaas y llena su frente de lágrimas. Las manos del aficionado rompen el silencio y enrojecen. El standard de Duke Ellington “In A Sentimental Mood” cierra la velada en un corralillo de arrebatos de saxo que rompen el aire hinchando los pulmones de Marc Mommaas y engrandeciendo las manos sobre el piano de Nikolaj Hess.

¡Concierto más que bueno! ¡Mejor!

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Fotos © 2008 Javier Nombela

Review Concert 'Global Motion' 20 november 2004 in Huis Verloren, NL in Jazz Affairs Times.

Amerikanen zijn toch beter!

Op 20 november gaf Marc Mommaas een concert dat volgens mij tot een van de legendarische uit de geschiedenis van Jazz Affairs zal gaan behoren. Voor mij, en voor velen in het publiek, behoort Mommaas hiermee in een klap tot de top van de Nederlandse tenorsaxofonisten. Het gemak en de intensiteit waarmee hij zijn solo's blaast, zonder versterking met een prachtige toon en steeds de indruk vestigend dat hij nog wat over heeft. Daarnaast een Deense pianist, Nicolaj Hess, van hetzelfde kaliber; in alle opzichten van deze tijd, maar toch zeer genietbaar en uiterst muzikaal. Nu hadden we dat natuurlijk kunnen verwachten; twee muzikanten die zich al acht jaar in New York weten staande te houden, dat moet wel uitzonderlijke klasse zijn.

Dat waren zeker ook de beide Amerikaanse begeleiders, John Hebert, bas en Tony Moreno, drums. Zo aangekomen uit de Verenigde Staten, dus met jet-lag, deden zij enkele uren later hun werk. En wat voor werk. Ook ditmaal was de drummer, Moreno, nadrukkelijk aanwezig, maar hier waren alle slagen raak, de accenten lagen waar zij moesten liggen en ondersteunden niet alleen, maar dreven ook de anderen tot een grotere prestatie. Verder kunnen we kort zijn, met de aankondiging van het concert in de 'Times' en de daarin opgenomen perscommentaren, kan ik volledig instemmen, een openbaring en vooral spannende muziek. Kortom, alle aanwezigen waren het er over eens, een prachtig concert met als toegift een mooi duet van Mommaas en Hess.

Helaas nemen wij tegenwoordig geen concerten meer op, maar gelukkig hebben we de CD nog, waarop ook nog de elektrische gitaar van Rez Abbasi is te horen.

~By John Beenen (2004)

Review in Jazzflits August 1, 2004, no 12. - Netherlands.

MARC MOMMAAS?

Het aantal jazzmusici dat om allerlei redenen niet echt bekend is geworden, loopt in de honderden. Triest maar waar. *Underrated* heet dat in Amerika. Het trof bijvoorbeeld uit vorige generaties James Spaulding, Gary Bartz en de onlangs overleden zanger/scatter Jackie Paris. De redenen zijn legio. Er werd geklaagd over een tekort aan promotie door de platenmaatschappijen of geen aandacht van de media, de karakters van sommigen strookten niet met de opvatting van clubeigenaren en weer anderen verdomden het om sowieso in clubs op te treden vanwege het rumoerige publiek en/of slechte piano's. Soms was dat terecht, zoals in het geval van de meestersaxofonist Lucky Thompson. Nog steeds leeft hij, maar hij wil absoluut nooit meer spelen. Andere achterblijvers zagen een verhuizing naar het gevaarlijke New York niet zitten.

Minder ernstig is het gesteld met een Nederlandse saxofonist die in ons land niet op grote schaal bekendheid geniet. Hij, Marc Mommaas (1969), in Tegelen geboren, woont na zijn universitaire en muzikale opleiding in Amsterdam, wel al enige jaren in New York City om zich er verder te bekwamen. Dat is inmiddels aardig gelukt. Marc geeft les en treedt op in en buiten NYC. Onlangs tekende hij een contract bij de bonafide New Yorkse platenfirma Sunnyside Records. Aanvankelijk waren zijn bezoeken aan die stad New York goed voor het lesnemen bij onder anderen David Liebman en Dick Oatts, maar bij terugkeer in Nederland bleef het kriebelen. Marc ging in 1997 andermaal naar New York, maar nu om er te blijven en met financiële hulp verleend door onder meer de Stichting Podium Kunsten en het Prins Bernard Fonds. Hij ging compositie en piano studeren bij Garry Dial, eens de pianist van Red Rodney. Met de wind in de rug kreeg Marc ook nog een beurs van de Manhattan School of Music. Dat resulteerde in zijn Masters in Jazz Performance. Tegelijkertijd ontving hij de William H. Borden Award op grond van zijn buitengewone prestaties tijdens die opleiding.

Na vroegere bijdragen op cd's van bijvoorbeeld Dirk Balthaus en Fay Victor - dat waren Nederlandse producties - kwam in 1999 zijn eerste eigen cd uit op het Calibre-label. Dat Global Motion Trio heeft nu zijn vervolg gekregen met de cd Marc Mommaas Global Motion op dat Sunny Side-label. Ten opzichte van het trio met pianist Nikolaj Hess uit Kopenhagen en bassist John Hebert, geboren in New Orleans, is er nu ook ruimte voor de New Yorkse drummer Tony Moreno en gitarist Rez Abbasi.

De muziek is van een bijna betoverende schoonheid, heel beschrijvend of verhalend, waardoor het dicht in de buurt komt van de stelling dat jazz ook taal moet wezen. Maar dan ook een taal die bijkans wordt *gezongen* op Marc's tenor- of sopraansaxofoon. Marc Mommaas zal zeker niet tot de categorie gaan behoren die in de aanhef al werd gememoreerd. *Underrated*, of onderschat. Zijn website is al even kleurrijk, maar dat is ook te danken aan de medewerking van zijn vader, kunstschilder Henk Mommaas. Marc's moeder speelt klassiek piano en zingt opera. Een veelzijdige familie. In het najaar komt Global Motion voor een Europese tournee ook naar Nederland. Dat zou wel eens een openbaring kunnen worden.

~By Jaap Ludeke (2004)

Review in Draai om je Oren, May 1, 2005 - Netherlands.

Marc Mommaas, geboren in Tegelen, is een jong saxtalent die zich in New York gevestigd heeft. Hij heeft er gestudeerd bij David Liebman en Dick Oats. Met behulp van beurzen van de Stichting Podiumkunsten en Prins Bernard Fonds/Anjer Fondsen heeft hij compositie en piano gestudeerd bij Garry Dial.

Zijn tweede cd 'Global Motion' is uitgekomen op Sunny Side Records. Alle composities zijn van de hand van Mommaas. Zijn groep Global Motion bestaat verder uit pianist Nikolaj Hess, bassist John Hebert en drummer Tony Moreno. Gastspeler op deze cd is gitarist/ sitarspeler Rez Abassi.

De muziek is open en melodieus van karakter en doet denken aan Charles Lloyds ECM-exercities. Toch wordt de vrije emotie niet geschuwd, onder meer hoorbaar in het nummer 'Intuition'. Mommaas' saxgeluid is warm en zangerig en zijn soli getuigen van een grote rijkdom aan smaakvolle ideeën en intensiteit.

Het complexe nummer 'African FBI' krijgt een extra dimensie als na het thema in 12/8 Mommaas vrij soleert over de bass groove van John Hebert en Tony Moreno's odoospel. De Deense pianist Nikolaj Hess, die in het eerste nummer van de cd 'One Way Only' al blijkt geeft een begaafd improvisator te zijn, soleert ook in dit stuk overtuigend, helder, transparant en met de nodige techniek. De 'Copenhagen Suite', die uit drie delen bestaat, wordt geopend als ballad-duo voor sax en piano, waarbij emotievol door Mommaas en Hess gespeeld wordt. In het middendeel is er ruimte voor een geprononceerde bassolo van John Hebert.

Mommaas (die mij qua geluid en speelwijze sterk doet denken aan Clifford Jordan) heeft met dit sterke kwartet een formidabele cd afgeleverd.....

~By Jacques Los (2005)

INTERVIEWS

Interview; JazzImprov. (Vol. 6 Number 2, Winter 2006)

Tell us about the kinds of cultural direction that you experienced from your father, a well-known Dutch painter, and your mother who plays piano and sings opera.

I spent the first half of my childhood living with my mother and I remember going to bed and in the background hearing my mother teaching her private students. It was very soothing and it was great to hear my mother playing the examples, and the students trying to follow her guidance. I started to recognize the students by ear and the pieces they were working on and I could hear their improvement. It was a lot of Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy etc. That was my first ear-training and the sounds came back to me later in my life, especially in my writing. At age 10, I moved in with my father and he exposed me to Jazz/Improvised music and art. He took me to the jazz clubs and exposed me to all the different tones, shapes and colors. I literally grew up in Cafe Alto (Amsterdam), first as a listener and later as a player.

What were the challenges and opportunities that you experienced in Holland in developing your improvisational skills?

Improvisation is part of life, and I had to learn very early on to adapt to my environment, and fight for my ideas. That is one of the reasons why the art-form of improvisation within a musical context attracted me so much. I understood that language, and in a sense I related to it much faster and deeper than the spoken word. From a more literal point of perspective, I had great teachers who had big hearts and true passion for the music. Both Ronnie Rem and Peter Guidi taught me the philosophy of the music, and in a sense it protected me from mediocrity. The challenge in the Dutch scene was to stay yourself and follow your own path. At the time I was growing up in Amsterdam there were the straight ahead players and the free players. There was a big division and little cooperation, a lot of pretension without the ability to back it up in the

free section, and a lot of close-mindedness from the be-bop dogmatists. I never liked that division and never wanted any part of it. There is only good and bad music, and that is the end of it.

What was involved and or what process occurred in your winning the two grants, Stichting Podium Kunsten, Prins Bernard Fonds & Anjer Fondsen, in support of your music?

After my graduation from the University of Amsterdam I spent 3 months in NYC to experience the music. From the first second I set foot in the City, I felt like home. I went back to Amsterdam with the determination to return to NYC, and applied for the grants. These grants are normally reserved for graduates from the conservatory programs. But fortunately some people on the board heard about me and agreed to let me audition. Based on this I received a combined scholarship to study for four months in NYC. Four months became 8 years and NYC is now my home.

How did your time in the academic environment at Manhattan School of Music impact your creative approach and perspectives?

At the masters program there is a lot of emphasis on the combination of performance and composition. I feel very strongly about that connection and I believe that the ability to compose music makes you a better improviser. You get to a deeper understanding of form, contrast and development and it trains your awareness of what sound and color is needed at what time. It was a great experience to be part of the program, I got exposed to a vast amount of information given by excellent teachers and it gave me a lot of inspiration.

Who were some of the key musicians that you met upon your arrival in New York and how did they help shape your direction?

Garry Dial has been a strong influence. I became a more complete player because of his wisdom, his knowledge and his trust in my ability. And then there is Tony Moreno. His conviction is merciless and his rhythmical pallet endless. We have been 'partners in crime' from the moment we started playing together. David Liebman also has been a great influence. I met him for the first time in 1995, in Den Haag (NL), and I was his student at MSM. Like Moreno, Liebman is another example of a master musician who does not negotiate.

Could you compare the kinds of opportunities, perspectives and attitudes about jazz music and the business that you experience working in Europe versus the United States?

That is a question that you can write a whole book about. First, every country within Europe has its won identity with a different history, social-cultural background, different support systems for the arts and a different economic relationship to the world. All these aspects influences the Arts. Then you have the attitudes and opportunities from a purely musical point of perspective versus the business side of the picture. I would love to talk about this in great depth, but preferably with a bottle of Whiskey on the table.....or Calvados. For now I will keep it more general. Musically I feel that in NYC there is more willingness to explore, there is a hunger for excellence, and the musicians are willing to push the boundaries and work together. In the Netherlands there is a general tendency to fall asleep as soon as you have been acknowledged. From a business point of perspective there are definitely more opportunity's to play in Europe, and there is more cultural support and appreciation. But the story is not that simple.

Tell us about some of the saxophonists who have impacted your style?

My first influence was Ben Webster. As soon as I learned a few notes on the horn I dimmed the lights, put on one of his records and tried to imitate his sound and lines. I met him when I was three years old, he used to live in Amsterdam and was playing a brunch concert in Breda (NL). I had just learned that you should shake hands when saying goodbye to somebody and when my father told me that we were leaving I climbed on stage and walked straight to Webster to shake his hand. The only thing I remember of that was

his big hand. After Webster the list of players that influenced me one way or another is endless. But I do have to put John Coltrane on the top of the list. Being a tenor player and loving Trane is to me one and the same thing, it is impossible not to be influenced by him in some form or color.

Could you talk about the creation of your new album “Balance” which features saxophone and piano—your selection of repertoire, and how you might have grown from this creative endeavor?

Ten years ago I started thinking about recording as a leader, and the first format that came to my mind and heart was a duo recording. Now, 10 years and two releases later I felt the time was right. There are always projects in my head that I would like to do, but you can't force it, you know when the moment is there. The compositions I wrote for this project are mostly based on mixed meter and poly-harmonic principles. The duo format lends itself very well to dense harmony since there is a lot of space to let the colors develop and resonate. To also combine this with mixed meter is less common within this format since you have no bass or drums. My long time collaborator Nikolaj Hess made the project complete. We share a very strong connection both from an intellectual and intuitive point of perspective. And he is a great friend, which also comes through in the music. Regarding the second part of your question, starting and finishing a project is a full circle in life. At the conclusion you will encounter the beginning of a new phase, new doors open up which frees up space to explore other colors. It finalizes a specific personal period and mind-frame which is necessary for the creative flow; the music has to come out.

What kinds of understandings about business and human nature have you garnered from your experiences in the music business here in the States?

Name recognition is always a hard reality that you are facing when trying to organize anything as a musician. The music itself should be the key, but rarely is. Big companies have monopoly positions and protect their markets and assets, meaning their personal stable of artists. This can hinder other talented musicians from emerging on the bigger stages. It's all part of the basic principles of the economic market mechanism we are living in, and it is not any different in the music world. For more in-depth discussions we need to get to the whisky again...single malt please. The biggest challenge of an artist in our time is the involvement with the business aspects of one's career, without it influencing your creative path in a negative way. It is a balance that is delicate and for everybody different.

Could you talk about some of your approaches to composition, and the sources of ideas and inspiration?

Inspiration comes in different shapes and is truly everywhere. Therefore I believe that you need to explore all the different composition methods that you feel are helpful to get to the colors you are looking for. I always work in contrast and I feel that it is the contrast that creates the balance. When I am working on a very elaborate piece of music, I immediately feel the urge to write something very simple. When I am playing a very angular open voicing style solo, then I will likely balance it up with a more spacious counterpart with a more horizontal melody. My goal has always been to shape and develop my tools to the extent that I can get to the point of what I have to say. For me these tools are my horn and the pencil. To get to that point you need to explore many different kinds of red, yellow and blue, and all the shades in between. The more developed your tools are, the more the inspiration will translate into great stories, and enable you to play what is needed in the moment.

Discuss the temptation to focus on or be drawn to technique over the music itself that some artists experience. How have you worked to balance the two?

That is a great question that I have been fighting over with (or against) my father for the last 20 years, but always with humor and a good bottle of.....no, I am not an alcoholic. As mentioned before, my father is a painter with a very expressive style which fits his personality. For him it is all about fast, strong and powerful expression. “It is the heart and your balls that makes the earth move,” he says, “and technique is irrelevant and at the most irritating.” He thought for a very long time that I studied too much, but we met

later on common ground when we both realized that ultimate freedom using a musical instrument as a tool is not exactly the same as making a painting, although it is very close. The goal is the same, the paths are different. It is a balance, technique is essential and irrelevant at the same time. You need it to feel free to express yourself, but if you sound technical you missed the point.

What words of wisdom have you received from a teacher or mentor, or is there a quotation or fragment of wisdom that has inspired you or that you abide by?

Freedom is what my father shared with me and what has proven to be a guidance in my development as an artist and a human being. Life is an art form and it is a challenge in this society to not be swallowed up by mediocrity, or artificial realities. It takes strength, conviction, trust and good friends to stick to your grounds and form your own life the way you envision it. With that you need a healthy dose of stubbornness and it does come with some economic challenges. But so be it. I find it a beautiful road to walk on, and I have ultimate respect for my colleagues who take on this beautiful fight in their own personal way.

What are the things that most inspire you and provide balance in your life?

NYC always inspires me. The energy relaxes me and keeps me focused. That might sound a little funny, but you do not lose any energy trying to motivate yourself and getting started, which takes away a lot of pressure. And it is a great feeling to be surrounded by so many great musicians that are on a mission, it keeps you on your toes, and it gives you the feeling that the possibilities have no limits.

~By - Jazz Improv Staff November 2004 - www.jazzimprov.com

Interview; Trouw (national newspaper), zaterdag 20 November 2004

Saxofonist Marc Mommaas vond zijn thuishaven in New York, "de plek waar jazzmusici zo goed zijn dat je al je ideeën kunt verwezenlijken."

Goede jazz komt allang niet meer alleen uit America. Europa is trots op zijn eigen jazzidentiteit en met name in ons land zijn de opleidingen van hoog niveau. Niettemin is New York voor velen nog steeds de beste plaats om te groeien in de improvisatiepraktijk. Zo ook voor tenorsaxofonist Marc Mommaas (tegelen, 1969). Als autodidact vertrok hij naar de Big Apple, kreeg er les van David Liebman, Garry Dial en Dick Oats en studeerde als meest belovend jazzmuzikant van zijn klas af aan de prestigieuze Manhattan School of Music.

Mommaas: "Mijn eerste passie was wedstrijdzwemmen. Toen ik geblesseerd raakte aan mijn schouder besloot ik mijn zwembroek in te ruilen voor een tenorsaxofoon. Die keus heb ik mede te danken aan mijn vader, een groot jazzliefhebber. Hij nam mij al op jonge leeftijd mee naar jazzclubs en ieder jaar gingen we samen naar het North Sea."

Tegen beter weten in ging Mommaas niet naar het conservatorium, maar koos hij voor een studie communicatiewetenschappen. "Het werd steeds moeilijker mijn droom om professioneel tenorist te worden van mij af te zetten. Telkens als ik een tentamen had ging de sax onder het bed. Was ik uitgestudeerd, hing hij alweer aan mijn lippen. Op mijn tandvlees heb ik mijn bul gehaald en nog geen week later vloog ik naar New York. Daar nam ik les bij David Liebman. Hij hoorde onmiddellijk mijn tekortkomingen en heeft me alle ins en outs van de beboptraditie geleerd."

Toen zijn geld op was, keerde Mommaas terug naar Nederland en ging aan de slag als freelance muzikant, onder meer in de band van Astrid Serie. Maar New York bleef trekken. "In Nederland bestaat er een uitgesproken tweedeling tussen 'mainstream' en vrije improvisatoren waardoor je lang moet zoeken naar muzikanten die alle stijlen meteen aankunnen, je ideeën begrijpen en ze ook kunnen spelen. Dat is in New York wel anders: er zijn daar zoveel muzikanten, de competitie is hoog en je wordt constant op de proef gesteld. Je vindt er gemakkelijk de juiste mensen om mee samen te werken omdat elke muzikant die er wil overleven een breed idioom moet beschikken."

Voor een deel financieel zeker gesteld met studiebeurzen van de Stichting Podiumkunsten en het Prins Bernard Cultuur Fonds, besloot Mommaas weer terug te keren naar New York om zich dit keer toe te leggen op piano- en compositielessen bij Garry Dial. Deze raadde hem aan auditie te doen bij de Manhattan School of Music, wat hem een volledige 'scholarship' opleverde. Samen met zijn 'room mate', de Deense

pianist Nikolaj Hess en de uit New Orleans afkomstige bassist John Hebert richtte Mommaas in 1999 Global Motion op. Twee jaar later voegde drummer Tony Moreno zich bij het gezelschap en dit voorjaar kwam hun tweede cd uit.

"Hij is totaal anders dan onze eerste. Die was open en ruimtelijk en een statement tegen technische hoogstandjes. Deze keer kozen we voor meer power en een compactere structuur, maar ook nu geen notenacrobatiek." Mommaas tekent voor alle stukken op de cd die je kunt labelen als echte luistermuziek; voer voor ingewijden in doorwrochte jazz vol vreemde maatsorten, polyritmische lijnen en harmonische inventiviteit. Maar al die cerebrale 'highbrow' heeft ook iets meeslepends.

"Net als bij het zwemmen wil ik ook in mijn muziek een vloeiende beweging neerzetten en altijd vooruitdenken. Ik schrijf steeds naar de volgende maat, de volgende sectie, het volgende contrast. Het moet een soepel lopend verhaal worden dat zelfs mensen die niets van muziek weten kunnen oppikken. Alle credits gaan daarbij naar mijn bandleden, met wie ik al zeven jaar 'in training' ben. Zo zijn Tony en ik bezig met een boek over onregelmatige metrumen, we komen vaak samen en spelen allerlei oefeningen door: negen-, tien, elftals ritmes, ze moeten vanzelfsprekend klinken, nooit hoekig of droog."

Global Motion maakt moderne jazz met invloeden uit bop en fusion. Of het vernieuwend is maakt Mommaas niet uit. "We zijn 'intune' met onze omgeving, met het hier en nu en blijven tegelijkertijd dichtbij onszelf. Ik ben een karakter vol contrasten en dat wil ik ook cultiveren in mijn toon. Mijn vader is kunstschilder, van hem heb ik het intuïtieve, directe en extraverte. Van mij moeder, een operazangeres en pianiste, het theoretische en bedachtzame. De ingeving van het moment staat bij mij voorop. Maar om te komen tot een ultieme vrijheid van expressie is gereedschap nodig: onmiddellijk beschikbare theorie en techniek. Ik wil zonder problemen al mijn ideeën en gevoelens uiten op de sax en zoveel armslag hebben, dat ik niet meer beseft dat ik een instrument aan het bespelen ben." ..

~door Armand Serpenti (2004)

Interview De Gelderlander (national newspaper), Donderdag 18 Nov. 2004

Reisverhalen uit een Hollandse saxofoon

Geboren in Tegelen, getogen in Amsterdam, maar in New York voelt tenorsaxofonist Marc Mommaas zich muzikaal het meeste thuis. Hij is even in Nederland om zijn nieuwe cd te promoten. Zondagmiddag speelt de jazzmusicus in Velp.

Helemaal uit New York! Doet het goed op de affiches. Zeker als het om een jazzmusicus gaat. Kunsthuis 13 in Velp ontvangt zondagmiddag de nederlandse tenorsaxofonist Marc Mommaas. Inderdaad, Nederlandse. Maar hij woont tegenwoordig in New York. Helemaal uit New York dus.

Mommaas is in Nederland om zijn tweede cd (Global Motion) te promoten. Hij is in New York blijven hangen nadat hij (mede dankzij enkele beurzen) daar enkele semesters had gestudeerd. De vraag dringt zich op: waarom woont hij in New York? Is het de 'place to be' voor een jazzmusicus die aan de weg wil timmeren?

Mommaas: "Vanaf het eerste moment dat ik in New York was, wist ik dat ik daar thuis hoorde. Er is daar een enorme diversiteit aan muziekstijlen en scenes. Muzikanten van over de hele wereld komen naar New York om hun muzikale kwaliteiten verder te ontwikkelen."

Met zijn eigen band Global Motion toert Mommaas regelmatig in de Verenigde Staten. Hij speelt in de VS ook in andere bands. De waardering in de Amerikaanse jazzkringen voor Mommaas' muzikale kwaliteiten is groot wat onder meer blijkt uit lovende recensies in toonaangevende jazzbladen. Trots is hij op de recensie van Eugene Holey, die schreef dat Mommaas' spel dicht in de buurt van John Coltrane en Michael Brecker komt.

Dankzij zijn reputatie speelt hij in de VS met de betere jazzmusicus. Mommaas trad inmiddels op in Carnegie Hall en het Lincoln Center. Bovendien is hij gecontracteerd door een gerenomeerd label in New York: Sunny Side Records. Mommaas' band Global Motion bestaat verder uit pianist Nikolaj Hess, bassist John Hebert, drummer Tony Moreno en gitarist Rez Abbasi. De muziek van Mommaas en band kenmerkt zich door een enorme strakheid en helderheid. Hoewel in het algemeen complex, klinkt het door de strakheid nooit rommelig of vaag. Verder heeft Mommaas een voorkeur voor werveldende, lastige thema's, die meestal door meerdere instrumenten meerstemmig worden gespeeld. Als luisteraar geniet je van de fabelachtige techniek en snelheid van de saxofonist.

Mommaas zelf over zijn techniek: "Ik geloof boven alles in de schoonheid van de melodie. Techniek kan

een hulpmiddel zijn voor het vinden van muzikale klanken maar het mag nooit een doel op zich zijn. De composities zijn verhalen, en het publiek dat naar ons komt luisteren kan zich klaar maken voor een reis vol contrasterende klanken."

Op de vraag of zijn muziek toegankelijk is antwoordt hij zonder aarzeling: "Absoluut!" Om eraan toe te voegen: "Het idee dat je iets moet weten van jazz om het bij een concert van ons naar je zin te hebben is onzin. De oren doen het werk; goede muziek is goede muziek."

En hoe zit het met de waardering in Nederland? "Veel musicus hier weten van mij bestaan. Dat ik geen vreemde ben, blijkt ook uit het feit dat ik op dinsdag 23 November een masterclass geef op het conservatorium in Amsterdam. "Dat de Nederlandse media mijn muziek nog niet kennen, is niet verwonderlijk, aangezien ik naar New York vertrokken was voordat ze de kans kregen om mijn muziek te leren kennen. Inmiddels wordt dit de zesde tour in Europa, en ik hoop dat de media nu wakker wordt."

~Door Henk Aalbers (2004)

Interview All About Jazz October 25, 2004

Marc Mommaas: On the Fringes of Jazz and Beyond

When Marc Mommaas graduated as a Communications Major from his hometown university in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, he rewarded himself with a trip to New York and took his tenor saxophone with him. He hung around for a few months, and knew that his life had changed forever: "While I was doing nice enough in Holland, I knew that at the time I was not ready and free enough to express myself. I had to change and make a move." He settled in New York and paid his dues, from the bottom up. After a few difficult years, he slowly but surely started branching out and building a reputation for himself. He graduated as first in his class on a full scholarship from the Manhattan School of Music, although he entered the program somewhat reluctantly: "At first I didn't want to do it, but then I thought, what do I have to lose, and it helped out with my visa too". He received a prize for his composing work, has two well-received CD's with his Global Motion under his belt (see review), and works with several groups on the fringes of jazz. An articulate and thoughtful musician who definitely is in it for the long run, he discusses the virtues of hard work and determination, the concept of style and doing your own thing, and how the New York experience can bring you back to your own roots.

Listening to Mommaas' music, one cannot escape the notion that there is a lot going on there. Straight-ahead unison themes to improvise over mix freely with intricate multiple-rhythm through-composed sections. It is as if he is carefully steering a jigsaw through a piece of plywood, creating a puzzle with multiple pieces both big and small. But for Mommaas it is not about cramming as much stuff into his pieces as possible. "No matter how complex the music is, I guess in the end I am always looking for a beautiful melody; the melodies should just flow no matter what. It shouldn't sound complex."

Absent though, is any reference to popular music, be it in a nostalgic manner, or alluding to more recent pop and rock-type concepts or material. While others are on a mission to keep jazz free from 'impure' elements, for Mommaas it is a natural result of the music surrounding his childhood. Unlike most of us, he simply didn't grow up on pop music. "My mother is an opera singer and a pianist, and my father is an expressionist painter, so around me were the colors of classical music and the freestyle of the paintings of my father. I grew up with the notion of practicing, applying yourself and focusing on one hand; but on the other hand, let knowledge be a tool for your intuition, rather than go for knowledge itself. As a kid I heard a lot of the well-known classics, like Schumann and Mozart and all that stuff. My mother was teaching a lot and when I was lying in bed I could hear the students hack through those pieces - which I enjoyed actually."

"You have to know where you come from to know where you are going." - Marc Mommaas

But when Mommaas picked up the saxophone as a teenager in Holland, he just wanted to be a jazz tenor player, and was digging deep into Ben Webster, Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson, and lots of Coltrane. It was in New York that some of the pieces of his own puzzle started to come together with the realization that being the practitioner of a certain acclaimed style is at best a very relative thing. "In Holland, musicians often feel they have to make a choice and not touch the other side. People play either bebop or free. But in

New York you have people who are part of the free scene, and who also play bebop extremely well." This was a real eye-opener, and he took this as a cue to discover his mission. "I found there should be no reason for playing just free or just bebop; that it's all about expression and developing your tools. I really believe in the power of the individual and getting a couple of good guys together to share thoughts with, and come up with a beautiful story. Who cares what style it is."

The pieces of Mommaas' own puzzle are rooted in classical music and jazz on a more or less equal footing. For him the two exist within the same universe, where they gel into one singular expression. When he started composing, from the first note he put on paper, something surprising happened. "All the classical music from my childhood started to come back. And then my composing started to redirect my playing. That was a big turnaround for me." It all came together when, on the Manhattan School of Music, he took a composing class with Ludmila Ulehla. "When Bartok's Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta was brought up in class, it really, really knocked me out. It reminded me of the impact a Kandinsky painting had on me as a 14-year old, it went straight to my heart. But first and foremost, I am still an improviser."

One of the more classical concepts that he brings to his own music is what he expects from the listener. "I play for anyone, as long as he or she has the willingness to sit down and listen. My music does not really cater to being background music for dinner and a nice chat." So if he would have a choice to present his music in either the Avery Fisher Hall, or the Village Vanguard, which setting would he prefer? "I think it really would work in both settings, I just would make some adjustments to deal with the acoustics."

Mommaas is very confident about his own group and music. He never entertained the typical dream professed by many young jazz musicians to be a sideman for their favorite idol. "I really never thought about that. My ideal group is my own band. What inspires me in the musicians I play with, is an ability to stretch the boundaries of harmony. With that I don't mean complex chords; I mean the willingness of musicians to stretch the boundaries of their own playing. To allow themselves to be deeply influenced from all directions, with the ultimate goal of finding the harmony between all those styles, the ultimate synergy."

So, having come to New York seven years ago with the vague idea of becoming a jazz player, he actually found something much more important: his own artistic self that was rooted in his childhood in rural Holland. "You have to know where you come from to know where you are going. It is much more important to find yourself, and be honest with yourself. To be in balance with your own expressive voice, that is the largest achievement. What kind of style it is doesn't matter, what matters is how it sounds; it's all about honesty and expression."

~Door Jochem van Dijk (2004)

Interview Prins Bernard Cultuurfonds (Amsterdam, Netherlands 2002)

Marc Mommaas is een van de musici die van het Prins Bernard Cultuurfonds een beurs hebben gekregen voor vervolgstudie in het buitenland. Een gesprek met een talentvolle en goedlachse saxofonist. 'Ik heb het spelen op straat geleerd' Marc Mommaas kreeg twee keer een Cultuurfondsbeurs. Een keer voor het volgen van een masterclass bij David Liebman in New York, de tweede keer voor de mastersopleiding tenorsaxofoon aan de Manhattan School of Music. Mommaas is autodidact. In Julie kwam hij op specifiek verzoek van het fonds overvliegen om tijdens de uitreiking van de Cultuurfondsbeurzen over zijn ervaringen in The Big Apple te vertellen en - uiteraard- de uitreiking muzikaal op te luisteren. Op mijn vraag waarom hij uitgerekend naar New York wilde, kijkt hij me meewarig aan:

"New York wordt nog steeds gezien als de 'capital of jazz' en trekt daardoor veel getalenteerde musici. Nederland is klein en heeft binnen de jazz maar een beperkt aantal 'scenes' waarin musici op hoog niveau samenwerken. Dit in tegenstelling tot New York, waar de diversiteit aan kleuren en klanken bijna oneindig is, met als gevolg een enorme vanzelfsprekendheid als het gaat om experimenteren en samenwerken."

Zet zo'n beurs van het Cultuurfonds nou zoden aan de dijk?

"Ik heb het spelen op straat geleerd en kon in New York dus geen diploma's laten zien. Ik moest voorspelen en werd op basis van de auditie toegelaten. The Manhattan School of Music heeft mij een 90 procent-beurs gegeven. Met de bijdrage van het Prins Bernard Cultuurfonds kon ik het collegegeld betalen. Voor de huur en het dagelijks brood werkte ik in een saxofoonwinkel en gaf ik prive-saxofoonlessen. Als ik van jullie die aanvulling van 10 procent niet had gehad, had ik nog een baantje moeten nemen. Ik weet niet of ik het dan wel had gered."

Waarom ben je na je opleiding in New York blijven wonen?

"Ik doe inmiddels verschillende projecten in America en Europa. New York is daarvoor een goed centraal punt. Het is ongelooflijk hoeveel musici uit verschillende werelddelen je daar ontmoet. Dat biedt zowel muzikaal als zakelijk vele mogelijkheden." Wie zijn je grote voorbeelden? "John Coltrane, voor mij de 'godfather of the tenor saxophone', Bartok om zijn composities, David Liebman om zijn uitgesproken saxofoontechnische expressiviteit, en Keith Jarrett om zijn melodische kwaliteiten en vanzelfsprekende, ongedwongen stijl van improviseren."

Kom je binnenkort met je Global Motion Trio naar Nederland?

"We spelen van 12 tot 17(2002) November in de Pompoen in Amsterdam. Daarna reizen we via Duitsland door naar Denemarken. Ik laat voor het eerst ook drummer Tony Moreno overvliegen. Ik speel inmiddels zo'n vier jaar met hem op sessies en optredens in New York, en verheug mij op zijn bijdragen in de komende tour."

~Door Astrid Waltmans (2002)