

## JOHN HEBERT    BIO    SUMMER 2010

If you've taken in a New York jazz gig in the last few years, there's a good chance John Hebert's mighty bass sound was bouncing from the bandstand. Ubiquity is a form of success, and the number of established leaders and impressive newcomers who have placed Hebert in their rhythm section is growing; the guy seems to be everywhere. Which makes sense: the Louisiana native boasts the kind of skills that breed agility. One night he's working a classic club like the Village Vanguard with pianist Fred Hersch, the next he's at an experimental art space like Roulette, supporting guitarist Mary Halvorson. Versatility is a key Hebert credential; the 38-year-old purposefully approaches his artistry from a few different angles.

He's also an impressive bandleader. 2009's *Byzantine Monkey* (Firehouse 12) found him marshalling a cohort of like-minded associates through progressive pieces that featured Tony Malaby and Michael Attias – their horns creating a memorable blend. The disc, which partly alluded to Hebert's Cajun ancestry, contains some of his initial writing for reeds. A bit of the music's personality was even inspired by Airtō's *Seeds On The Ground*, a program where color is just as captivating as melody. *DownBeat* proclaimed the bassist's debut as a disc that displayed "a sonic vision of its own."

More textural daring can be found on 2010's *Spiritual Lover* (Clean Feed). For this date Hebert organized a trio of pianist Benoit Delbecq and drummer Gerald Cleaver, sculpting a set of pliable themes that spoke to the French keyboardist's diverse sonic palette. One moment it's a trad piano group stressing lyricism, the next it's an electronic ensemble threading dissonance into beauty.

This kind of pluralism suits Hebert just fine. The bassist has been open to all sorts of sounds since switching from guitar in the late '80s. He grew up with an abiding respect for a variety of musical perspectives, and

encountered a series of teachers who encouraged him to get the big picture.

While playing with the jazz band in his Baton Rouge high school, director Lee Fortier urged Hebert to drop the six-string when the group's bass chair opened up. "Lee was a real cat," recalls Hebert, "tinted glasses, soul patch, the whole thing. He was a trumpet player, and didn't mince words. The shift from guitar was hard at first, and he got tough on me a couple times. He even had me running home crying at one point. But along the way he gave me some sweet talk and some logic, and said that there weren't that many bassists around, and it would really work for me. He was right. It wasn't long before I thought the bass was cool."

Hebert was playing electric, and momentarily fell under the sway of Jaco Pastorius, the instrument's kingpin during that era. One of the first jazz discs he bought was Jaco's *Word of Mouth*. But when he bumped into an old Kay upright at school, something resonated. "I had no technique, and only knew one position, but the vibration against my body felt great. That was the hook." After a year of lessons, he began gigging with bands that played standards. He also fell in with a bunch of pals who would drive to New Orleans to see local ensembles such as Astral Project, a group filled with players who had a more modern vision of improvisation.

As a college student on a full scholarship ride to Loyola University, Hebert connected with another mentor, bassist Bill Huntington, who encouraged him to work on his sound. "Bill had lots of wood, lots of sustain, lots of clarity. Those qualities became important to me, too. He was a great model." By the time he hit New Jersey's William Paterson College in '93, he was sure jazz was going to be a big part of his future. In New Orleans he was playing standards gigs in hotel lobbies – in the large, that was the only work available. But he was drawn to developing a more original kind of lyricism. "I wasn't good at it yet, but I knew I wanted to work towards it. It was definitely what I was hearing at the time."

William Paterson is just a jump away from New York, and at the end of the day Hebert hit the city's clubs as if they were second classrooms. Visiones, Zinno, and the Vanguard were all on the list. Those first-hand experiences, as well as sharing ideas with other students, generated lots of excitement. He spent lots of time absorbing the art. "God, I remember seeing Dave Holland up close at Bradley's, Charlie Haden and Kenny Barron, too. It's great to see your heroes in action. We were sponges - it was a time to discover new stuff. Back at the apartment, friends brought records over every night. My palette started widening."

A record he'd heard earlier in New Orleans began to resonate again: Keith Jarrett's *Changes*, with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette. Peacock's singing approach to the bass stimulated Hebert. "I could almost visualize his lines. I didn't know it was 'free' per se, but it was definitely beautiful. It spoke to me."

It was around this time that Hebert began working with other musicians who shared his views. Drummer Matt Wilson, pianist Russ Lossing, and saxophonists Joel Frahm and Tony Malaby were all part of his burgeoning community. The New York scene was in flux (as it often is) and a new group of improvisers were starting to reshape the jazz lingo.

"Finding like-minded players is crucial," he says. "It would be a nightmare if you never found the pals you wanted to work with. It helps you on a friendship level, too. It's a team support system around here. Hooking up with Russ was important. Talk about mutual fellowship. I think it was around 1995; he recognized a sound in me and I did the same with him."

The pair has collaborated several times, even cutting a duet disc, *Line Up*. "There's something about the way John interacts with me," says Lossing. "He knows what I'm going to do before I do it. We have a telepathic thing happening. He has a willingness to be a part of the music without taking over. On the other hand, he has the courage and ability to step on it when it needs to be stepped on, to play the right note at the right time. He'll be there for you."

In 2001 Hebert was hired by revered pianist Andrew Hill. Many ideas were clarified by the work the bassist did with the veteran bandleader. From the

start, at a gig in Philly, everything aligned. “Right at the downbeat I knew it was the real deal,” he recalls, “music-making at a high level. I was so lucky to have that time with him.” Hebert cut the gorgeous *Time Lines* with the leader, who passed away in 2007. Hebert has also worked with Lee Konitz, Paul Motian, Kenny Wheeler, and Paul Bley.

“A stamp of approval from someone with historical impact is nice,” muses the bassist. “Playing with Andrew codified what I was hearing in music. Prior to that relationship I was in a bit of limbo about what I was doing. I knew I wasn’t the straight-ahead cat, but I wasn’t playing a whole lot of improvisational music, either. I was a bit lost, and Andrew’s music totally opened my mind.”

Hill isn’t the only well established pianist that’s invited Hebert to the bandstand. Fred Hersch has also used his services. The remarkable *Whirl* is their first recorded work together. “John has a very springy time feel,” says Hersch, “it’s easy to play with him. Having a bassist with that kind of forward motion and great wood sound is attractive to me. He doesn’t strong-arm the music. He shows up to play; he’s down for whatever happens. I give John a lot of space and he always comes up with something interesting.”

Those who have seen Mary Halvorson’s radiant trio know that Hebert is crucial to the group’s concept. The acclaimed guitarist spent a fair amount of time considering what players would comprise her rhythm section, because a band that intimate is defined by all its participants. She knew the bassist’s work with Hill, but was sold after catching a duo gig Hebert did with violist Mat Maneri. Together they’ve made *Dragon’s Head* and *Saturn Sings*.

“John feels like the gravity of my band,” she says. “The upright bass is one of my favorite instruments. And to me he exemplifies the best feel and sound. He’s capable of laying down a solid foundation, but being free at the same time - really fluid. He understands my music, and adds his own ideas to it, takes the songs in other directions than those I might think of, which I really appreciate.”

In the fall of 2010 the bassist premiered a new ensemble, John Hebert's Rambling Confessions. It's a vocal group that features singer Jen Shyu along with Bennie Wallace, Andy Milne, and Billy Drummond. It was an idea that bubbled up after Hebert had spent lots of time enjoying Carmen McRae. "We do standards, but we do them our own way," he says. "Not exactly chinga-chinga-ching. The human voice is heavy, and I want to explore it a bit."

Along with co-conspirator Lucian Ban, he's also reworked the music of Romanian composer and violinist George Enesco. Enesco Reimagined was released in the autumn of 2010. Variety is becoming an Hebert signature trait. Connecting the dots between his interests is becoming more natural to the bassist. He's in the middle of forging an artistic perspective, and the process is similar to the unity that's necessary to have a group of instrumentalists make their collective statement.

"Jazz is a conversation," he says. "You always have to think about how things are blending. Horn players do that naturally, but rhythm sections need to concentrate on that. It's one thing to concentrate on playing changes, but what about just concentrating on a whole note? Let me hear your tone. That simple stuff is key, and I always try to keep it in mind."

I listen to the masters. Billy Hart – the way he tunes his bass drum. Fred's touch - the way he comps is exquisite. Andrew too, how he addressed that instrument was incredible. They're all intent listeners, and have a direct relationship to what's going outside of them. They always want to know: 'what's needed?' That's what I'd like to figure out as I progress."

Sound advice from a musician that Hill deemed "the best bassist you never heard of." "That was a great compliment," says Hebert.

With project after project in the works, one thing's certain: a lot more listeners will be hearing about John Hebert in the years to come.