

Paul Rucker: New Works from a New Leader

BY PETER MONAGHAN

Bassist, cellist, and composer Paul Rucker, who appears with his 22-piece Paul Rucker Group on Thursday, November 4, at Consolidated Works, created high expectations with his two releases last year, *History of an Apology* and *Oil*, both on his own Jackson Street Records.

Both discs received high praise. In *Cadence*, Frank Rubino celebrated History's "magical music." Its compositions, he said, "unfold in numinous fashion," with "mystic qualities," to create "a fine listening experience."

In the venerable British new-music monthly, *The Wire*, Julian Cowley called it "finely conceived and executed," and "distinctly of the moment and distinctively personal in Rucker's deft, tasteful writing."

Cowley was equally high on *Oil*, a set of improvisations for Rucker on cello and old friend Hans Teuber on alto saxophone. It was nominated for the Earshot Golden Ear 2003 Northwest Recording of the Year Award.

Both albums were carefully considered and beautifully conveyed, and were far from a recitation of standard jazz forms. Both drew enthusiastic comment in these pages — *History* for its "pieces that are often somber and pained, yet also austere dignified and resolute. The music's exact references to the shameful Tuskegee experiments [in which black men with syphilis were purposefully left untreated, so that researchers could follow the course of their disease] are not directly apparent, yet the album runs deep with a complex sense of delving into a terrible, mournful history."

To create the sonically rich, attention-catching, and highly expressive project, Rucker enlisted such international, Seattle-based stars as Bill Frisell, Michael White, Jovino Santos Neto, and Julian Priestler.

That all those responded to his call, and have since also praised his work, suggests that the mid-30s Rucker, amiable and unassuming in everyday life,

is capable of making plenty of noise with his music. In conversation, he exhibits a winning forthrightness about his aspirations, which largely relate to conveying fundamental values like equity and tolerance through his music — the kind of values that *History of an Apology* states plainly, and that are hinted at by the title of *Oil*.

His ambition was evident, too, as he talked, last month, about the evening of music he will present, with a 22-piece band, at the Earshot festival. He will present several new compositions for the ensemble, which is composed of Seattle friends and also musicians he has met in recent months while attending various workshops around North America.

A preview recording of one of the major works he will present, "From the Womb," suggests that the impressive capability and intelligence that he displayed on his first two discs have only grown.

And, he says, he loves a big jazz ensemble. "There's just nothing like it," he says over coffee. "And opportunities like this don't happen very often."

He promises "two grueling 40-minute sets with a lot of surprises."

Not "grueling" in any forbidding sense. "From the Womb," for instance, is a captivating four-movement piece about the various possible fates of an unborn child — about the sheer happenstance of where a child is born, to what kind of socioeconomic and cultural fate.



photo by Erik D. Anderson

"Clocks" is a loose, open, atmospheric piece Rucker wrote at a jazz workshop in Banff. It is, Rucker says, both easy to follow and challenging to play. It features multiple metronomic markings, with a melody played at different tempos by different sections. Rucker likens the effect to simultaneously hearing several marching bands bleeding together from different stages of a parade.

In the piece, where several leaders become separate conductors of their own section, one section plays a ballad while another plays a fast march, and so forth.

"Occasionally," says Rucker, "they meet like the hour and minute hands of a clock. Hence the name 'Clocks.'"

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Another piece, "Up Bringing," is about setting a pace for one's children that provides them both security and room for imagination and individuation. He means the piece, he says, to address the current atmosphere in America of "fear at a high level, with no reason, that controls people."

The composition has some unusual stylistic features. For example, it uses a wash of human voices as an accompaniment to the soloists. And, Rucker has written the score in text, rather than musical notation. His goal, he says, is to address the varying levels of proficiency that his players have for reading music. He provides each player with directions for what to do in each movement. "It's based on their personalities and things they like to do and can do, as well as things they're not quite comfortable doing," he says. "That takes people out of their comfort zone."

Rucker uses various hand signals that would be recognized by anyone who has played in a school or college band or orchestra – signals for starts, stops, crescendos...

But Rucker says he will, as much as possible, not conduct, and certainly not "overcontrol." That is in part because "I want to play as much as possible, myself," and in part because the performance will feature a lot of composition-guided improvisation, heavily influenced by trumpeter/leader Butch Morris's "conduction" method.

That approach seems to reflect Rucker's intensely democratic frame of mind. "Everyone will be featured in one way or another, to highlight their abilities," he says.

As for the players he has chosen, they are, like his partners on *History of an Apology*, people with whom he feels he can readily relate. "You have to be able to communicate with a person verbally before you can make music with them," he suggests. "And you have to admire their strengths."

That, he allows, makes for a greater challenge than just, say, getting together a bunch of jazz players who can swing. He has chosen, instead, to seek a cross-

pollination of varied abilities and styles.

But he has, he says, found "a lot of tasteful players who don't overplay. They give a lot of air to the music. Their biggest strength is silence. You don't expect that many people to be quiet."

Among out-of-towners will be Canadian pianist Marianne Trudel and San Francisco violist Tara Flandreau. The latter was part of the string quartet that Rucker appeared with at this year's Seattle Improvised Music Festival, as was Seattle violinists Tom Swafford and Tari Nelson-Zagar, who are also in this ensemble.

So, too, are several players who appeared on *History*, including Isaac Marshall (flutes), Hans Teuber (alto, tenor, bass clarinet), trombonist Neil Gitkind, guitarist Bill Horist, and drummer Erik Anderson.

Also on drums, creating a Miles' *Bitches Brew*-era effect, is Byron Vannoy. On bass is Geoff Harper. The other horn players are Mark Taylor (alto, tenor, soprano), Wally Shoup and Greg Reynolds (alto),

Greg Sinibaldi (bass clarinet, sax), and Marty MacPont (bass sax, sousaphone). On trumpets: Gordon Allen, Dave Carter, and Jim Knodel. On trombone, along with Gitkind, is Chris Stover, whom Rucker rates very highly, and who is Sinibaldi's colleague in the outstanding four-horn band Frieze of Life.

Towards the end of the evening, Josephine Howell, who appeared to great effect on *History*, will sing.

Rucker's task will be to herd all these very diverse cats. He says he has gained in confidence in large-ensemble work from experiences he has had in recent months at workshops, where he has received instruction from, and played with, the likes of trumpeters Dave Douglas and Kenny Wheeler, guitarist Bill Frisell, trombonist Hugh Fraser, pianist Jason Moran, and drummers Han Bennink and Clarence Penn, among others.

The workshops resulted, in fact, in two CDs that he is not going to release yet – not until he feels the time is right.

Meanwhile, Rucker is busy at another pursuit – he is preparing visual-art exhibitions for November and the spring. The November event will be the 10th anniversary show for the studio where

he has worked for seven years, at 1426 S Jackson, on November 14.

Then, in the spring, he will have his first gallery show, at Priceless Works in Fremont. He is creating 100 images for the show, and is recording a CD of 100 short compositions, for various-sized groups, from one up, to go along with them.

Rucker has also begun to work on a CD for quintet. Drummer Byron Vannoy has laid down tracks, already, and Rucker will record some of the remaining tracks live, and some for dubbing in.

Due to a recent move out into an apartment, Rucker is for the first time able to make full use of his studio space, which formerly permitted him to record only one other player at a time.

That is simply not enough room for someone so expansive as Paul Rucker.

The Paul Rucker Group performs Thursday 11/4 at Consolidated Works, at 8pm, as part of the Earshot Jazz Festival and the Consolidated Works Instinct series. Admission: \$12 general / \$10 discount

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