



38

No Time Like the Present

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By Bob Weinberg





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Installed within a repurposed factory in Brooklyn, National Sawdust is an ultra-modern performance space wrapped in a weathered brick façade. While the venue doesn't present jazz exclusively, it's just a few minutes' stroll from the Williamsburg Bridge, where Sonny Rollins once blew sharp incisive notes into the night sky while gazing at the lights of Manhattan. Onstage during a February performance, Matt Parker, a burly, ginger-bearded tenor saxophonist, nods to Rollins in his choice of instrumentation — a saxophone trio — as well as in his effortless blending of traditional and more-outré expressions. Loose and relaxed, drummer Reggie Quinerly and bassist Alan Hampton provide lithe and lively accompaniment, as they do throughout Parker's sophomore recording, *Present Time* (BYNK Records).

Projected on a screen behind the musicians, Michael Arthur's line drawings take form — a nocturnal city skyline, a courting couple, an astronaut floating in space — created in real time by the artist as he skillfully improvises along with the trio. During the course of the evening, Parker

will also bring out vocalist Emily Braden, whose Jeanne Lee-like alto is showcased on a few tracks on *Present Time*, and tap dancer Jimmy Sutherland. At the center of it all, the unassuming saxophonist, attired in a charcoal-colored suit and a stingy-brimmed hat, bends and dips with the music while keeping all the balls in the air.

"I realized many years ago that my profession is to be an entertainer," says Parker, 37, speaking by phone from his home in Brooklyn. "I'm constantly making revisions, trying to build a show, trying to present something more. ... The fact of the matter is, I'm one of thousands and thousands and thousands of fantastic saxophone players. I mean, there are so many saxophone players that are just 'lights-out.' And I'm one of them. But it's just a huge pool."

Parker fully realizes the importance of winning over audiences. His tone and phrasing can be as genial and welcoming as Lester Young's or Ben Webster's. But anyone who listens to him for more than a few minutes will hear him straining to bust



loose and rocket into more sonically adventurous territory. This tension threads throughout *Present Time*, which starts off with Parker lyrically skipping along to Hampton and Quinerly's rhythmic motif. But before long he begins blowing knife-edged R&B textures inspired by vintage tenor-sax wailers.

By the second track, Parker and Quinerly are in full John Coltrane-Elvin Jones mode. And when Hampton joins in on bowed bass, listeners are transported to Sam Rivers' *Studio RivBea* in the early '70s, where unchecked emotional expression was common currency. That Rivers connection resounds on Parker's solo piece "The Gong," as well, in his piercing soprano cries and also in his full-throated primal-scream vocalization. With the reverberant sound of a gong strategically punctuating his ecstatic statements on the horn, the track could have been lifted from a vintage Dewey Redman LP.

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As with the rhythm team, vocalist Braden seems to share the leader's inner-outré sensibilities. On the stark and lovely "Winter's Gone" — she co-wrote the lyric with Parker — and on the anxious, wordless title track, she adds the shading and color of another instrumentalist. Just as deftly, Braden delivers the standard "I'm Confessin' (That I Love You)" with bluesy brio. The Depression-era pop tune hardly feels like a compromise, nor do Parker's bluesy nods to straight-ahead jazz. In fact, the album's closer, "Sixteen," a sassy New Orleans strut, offers a smile and a wave to listeners as they file out the door that might as well be accompanied by the words, "Ya'll come back now, heah?" Even at his thorniest, the saxophonist says, he's constantly trying to widen jazz's embrace, to dispel the notion that a secret handshake is required for admittance.

"I am attracted to the avant-garde, but really what it is, is being spontaneous," he explains, noting that he keeps photos of avant heavies Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler at his desk. "So that spirit is still there, for sure. But I want to pull back the curtain a little bit, to show you what's happening, break it down to its simplest form so that on something that might be considered more avant-garde, even a non-jazz-enthusiast can sit down and feel like, 'OK, I'm being taken care of. I'm not being left out in the cold. I've been invited inside, given a seat.' You have to remove the listener's caution."

Parker developed his sense of inclusion on one of the most-welcoming stretches of real estate in America: Bourbon Street. During his junior year of high school, the budding saxophonist visited New Orleans with his high school class. Sponsored by Cardinal Gibbons High School, a Catholic institution in Parker's hometown of Fort Lauderdale, the wholesome itinerary was not exactly

Upon Further Development

In the documentary film *Mingus: Charlie Mingus 1968*, Thomas Reichman chronicles a particularly bad day in the life of the jazz bassist and composer. Mingus, understandably agitated, was being evicted from a studio in Manhattan. Nonetheless, he displays great tenderness toward his young daughter, Carolyn, also known as Keki. In one scene, she sits beside him at the piano as he picks out a seemingly spontaneous melody.



"To me, it really comes across as a lullaby to his daughter," says saxophonist Matt Parker, who developed the theme into a song on his trio album *Present Time*. "And there's less than a minute — there's a 20-second snippet of it, and later there's a 40-second snippet. It's a little more defined the second time he plays it. And it very well could've just been a great idea that he was having at the moment. He was present in that time, with his little daughter."

Parker had the opportunity to sit in with the Mingus Big Band at the Jazz Standard in New York City. As part of his preparation, he researched the tunes he was going to play and recalled Reichman's documentary, a particular favorite. Inspiration struck. He later asked Sue Mingus, the bassist's widow and the band's artistic director, if she knew anything about the province of this brief piece of music. "She didn't have any documents of it being written down or ever having been performed outside of this [film]," Parker says. "So I asked her if she would mind if I reinterpreted that into a composition for a trio with no piano, just using him on piano and him singing as the inspiration."

The goal, Parker says, was not to try to anticipate how Mingus would have completed the tune. Rather, he wanted to develop the song in his own way, while honoring the composer's legacy.

"Song to Keki" joins a piece Mingus did compose for his daughter, "Carolyn 'Keki' Mingus," which appears on his 1979 recording *Me, Myself an Eye*. "There's a new Mingus song 40 years later, added to the book," Parker says, justifiably proud. —BW



the experience the jazz-loving musician was craving.

"I basically played hooky," he admits. "I just started walking up and down the French Quarter, and I couldn't believe it! Every other door there was a band. At the time I didn't even think about etiquette. I'd just walk in with my horn and be like, 'I have to sit in. You guys gotta let me play.' And I did that for a whole week."

His perseverance paid off. Parker actually landed a summer job playing six nights a week in New Orleans. "And during that summer, I was thinking of ways to tell my folks, 'Guys, I know you're not gonna agree with this, but I'm not coming home,'" he says. "And, as fate would have it, my parents got a phone call, while I was away, asking me to attend my senior year at the New World."

The prestigious New World School of the Arts in Miami has become something of a jazz powerhouse. Its ensembles routinely place among the top bands in the national Essentially Ellington competition, as they did again in 2015, winning the No. 3 spot. For the most part, New World selects

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Parker, with drummer Reggie Quinerly, and bassist Alan Hampton.
Photo by: Javier Oddo.

years of high school. However, band director J.B. Dyas needed a tenor player to take the place of Marcus Strickland, who had just graduated. So he made an exception for Parker, who was going into his senior year. Parker returned to South Florida and began the rigorous training that would take him on the next step of his journey.

In his teens, Parker had either accompanied his dad — a jazz and blues enthusiast himself — to local jazz clubs, or sneaked past the door. He recalls seeing shows in Fort Lauderdale by area stalwarts such as Dr. Lonnie Smith, Ira Sullivan, Turk Mauro, Duffy Jackson and the Melton Mustafa Big Band with Jesse Jones Jr. on alto sax. He was also among the many young saxophonists who would queue up to jam on Thursday nights at One Night Stan's in Hollywood, tacitly granted admission by owner Stan Waldman, who "would give me the nod and look the other way."

But the musician who had the greatest impact on the impressionable teen was Jimmy Cavallo,

an old-school tenor player and singer who had played sax-driven rock 'n' roll in upstate New York clubs — as well as in movies and on TV — in the 1950s. A popular draw on South Florida stages for decades, Cavallo, still gigging at 89, draws heavily from the jump-blues songbook, expertly evincing the throaty sounds of Louis Prima's sax cohort, Sam Butera.

Parker was just 14 when his dad brought him to see Cavallo at the now-defunct P.G. Doogies in Deerfield Beach, a throwback jazz room with a blue-and-silver tinsel curtain behind the bandstand. He was hooked, even before Cavallo invited him up to play. "That was really the first stage I ever went up on, and Jimmy was the one who brought me up," he says. "The older I get, the more I realize how much of a mentor he's been. Just hearing him talk about playing opposite Clifford Brown with Max Roach, Sonny Rollins. ... He'd be down in the basement, playing his blues, and then up in the jazz club would be [pianist] Richie Powell and all these cats. And they would come down on



Richie Powell and all these cats. And they would come down on their breaks and check him out, and he would go up and see them. Just hearing all those stories — I mean, where else do you get that?”

No wonder Parker felt right at home in New Orleans, where he gained access to veteran entertainers and topflight musicians such as Al Hirt, Pete Fountain and Ellis Marsalis. Trumpeter Hirt, who shared the stage with the young saxophonist at his own Bourbon Street jazz club, left a strong impression. “He was just such a presence,” Parker relates. “Just the way he commanded a club, the people were just ... he had them! He literally opened the door and they all came in.”

That lesson wasn't lost on Parker. Nor were the ones he learned from mentors such as Phil Woods, Jane Ira Bloom and Reggie Workman, among others, while attending the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York City, where he began studying in 1999. Or those imparted by trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, with whose Big Bop Nouveau Band he toured for a couple of years, and with whom he recorded live at Ronnie Scott's in London in 2005. “He was another tie to that tradition, that old-school mentality,” Parker explains. “It's past being as great as you can be with your facilities as an artist, but then, after all the hours and years you dedicate, it's all about the audience. And [older artists] never forgot that. It's something I've taken away from my ties to that generation.”

In 2013, Parker released his debut album as a leader on his own BYNK (Because You Never Know) imprint. *Worlds Put Together*, an ambitious collection of mostly original tunes, was named one of the year's best albums by *DownBeat*. With a strong sextet behind him, including his current rhythm section of Hampton and Quinerly, Parker seemed undaunted by commercial concerns. Though it's shot through with his signature wit, and radiates at least as much light as heat, the music on *Worlds Put Together* is not exactly mainstream. With longtime friend and colleague Julio Monterrey on alto sax, Parker evinces an often-lacerating tone. Even the lone cover, Jimmy Van Heusen's ballad “Darn That Dream,” is rendered as a scathing sax duet.

But then there's the charming “Zeynep's Pano,” its singsong motif intoned throughout by a kids' chorus laughingly led by Parker. His tone and the

childlike simplicity of the melody instantly call to mind Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Surprisingly, Parker knew very little about Kirk's music when he recorded the album. “And as soon as other people started hearing it, that was the commonality,” he says. “Everybody was like, ‘Oh, this kind of reminds me of Roland Kirk!’ And since then, I've delved into so much of his music. That's the common thread. I mean, I feel so joyous listening to his music.”

Kirk never seemed to lose his sense of play or childlike wonder, qualities Parker would like to hang onto, as well. He's managed to recharge those sensibilities through interacting with the kids in the Capetown Youth Choir he recently performed with in South Africa, as well as with his own son, 2-year-old Theodore, from whom he learns every day. Just observing how his son approaches new challenges, some for the first time, has inspired him. “It's given me a bigger playground, from a creative standpoint,” he says.

In that same spirit, he and saxophonist Monterrey, his best friend from childhood, made a pact to challenge each other to play their instruments as if they'd never played them before. This is among the central conceits behind their duo project, Twos and Fours. They actually came up with a manifesto, which is posted on their website and which includes commandments such as “Thou shalt swing” (No. 1 on the list); “Thou shalt not play more than intuition dictates, ever”; and “Thou shalt not stoop to nostalgia.” This last doesn't prevent Parker from dipping into the songbooks of the jazz composers he loves, but he's careful to mind two other dictates of the manifesto: “Thou shalt reinvent” and “Thou shalt pay homage.”

Once again, for Parker, it comes down to who shows up to hear him play. “It's not like, ‘Oh, it doesn't matter who's in the audience, this is what I'm playing,’” he affirms. “There's nothing wrong with that, but it's not part of my m.o. I'll do a show and we'll play Duke Ellington's greatest hits, and I'll have a blast playing ‘A Train’ or ‘Black and Tan Fantasy.’ Because I'm in love with that music, I'm in love with that tradition. And it's created me. It helped shape who I am.”

In recent years, Parker's had the opportunity to sit in with the Mingus Big Band during their regular Monday night residency at the Jazz Standard. Playing alongside veteran jazzers — “some of my heroes on saxophone,” he says — inspired him





snippet of a Mingus theme (see sidebar), “Song to Keki,” which appears on *Present Time*. He also has produced an album by trombonist Reggie Watkins, which will feature songs composed by Mingus trombonist Jimmy Knepper and is slated for release on Parker’s BYNK label later this summer.

Parker already has a title picked out for his next album: *The Parker Nose*. The name doesn’t allude to a shared facial feature, but rather to a genetic kind of global positioning system that runs in his family. “My dad would always say, ‘You got the Parker nose.’ If you go somewhere once, you should always be able to find your way back,” he says. “And that’s a philosophy that I’ve kept and that’s gotten me through. It’s allowed me not to make the same mistakes twice.”

That philosophy also has helped Parker balance the various dualities in his life — husband/father and working jazz musician; envelope-pushing artist

and crowd-pleasing entertainer; iconoclast and lover of tradition. The saxophonist addresses these seemingly contradictory elements on *Present Time*, the title of which reflects his ongoing struggle to stay in the moment. The most important lesson he learned, from instructors and jazz elders, he says, “is realizing that you need to be emotionally aware of who you are and present that to an audience. Warts and all.” And that hardly precludes in-the-pocket, straightahead jazz. “It’s really for my mom,” he says of including a few more accessible numbers on his second album. “She’s always asking me, ‘Can you write something that I can hum to please?’ And there’s validity in that.”