

Byron Vannoy: Unleashed Agility

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Something about performances by drummer Byron Vannoy draws an audience's attention. Maybe it is his unusual stance behind the drums — torso twisted slightly... arms high... an ear aimed at the rest of the band members, listening to rather than looking at other group members. Perhaps it is his unconventional style — a style that blends rock-and-roll power drumming, avant-garde exploration and straight-ahead bebop. It could very well be a sense of control and (more precisely) restraint that are hallmarks of his drumming style. The thought crosses one's mind, *'At any moment now, this drummer will be unleashed.'*

Whatever it is, Vannoy tends to draw the loudest applause — and the most interest — from audiences. During a performance at Tula's in January, with the Hadley Caliman Quartet, the midnight hour approached. Shortly before the second break, Vannoy powered through a drum solo that he had been working toward throughout the evening. The audience cheered with each cymbal crash and sonic explosion. The veteran Caliman and his ensemble gathered in an attentive cluster on-stage — instruments lowered, all eyes on Vannoy's raucous, rhythmic solo.

Several weeks later, while discussing that performance with Vannoy, the drummer mentions that it isn't the first time that someone has commented on this burgeoning yet contained energy. After one performance, Vannoy recalls, the drummer Michael Shrieve told him, 'I really enjoy your restraint.' "I found that very interesting," Vannoy adds. "A few people have told me that I play swollen. I don't feel that way. I don't feel like I'm holding back. I feeling like I'm flowing *with*."

Regardless how Vannoy or his audiences see it, this young drummer instills excitement in each performance, and is involved in some of the most progressive and notable jazz combos in this region.

Vannoy's musical roots can be traced back to his mother, an R & B singer who introduced her son to music when he was three years old. It was common for musicians to rehearse at his mother's house, leaving their instruments around for the young Vannoy to explore and try. "Ever since I was little, I was banging on

stuff," he recalls. "The drums were about the only thing that I was allowed to touch, that I wouldn't break at such a young age. One drummer saw that I was interested in drums, and he gave me one of his old drum sets."

As a youngster, Vannoy's musical peers were professional funk and R & B musicians. He sat in on performances with his mom, and attended studio recording sessions. It seemed almost pre-determined that Vannoy would grow up to be a drummer. Yet, as a student at Shorewood High School, he sidestepped the music groups for sports. Throughout most of his teenage years, he quit music entirely.

"When I got out of high school, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, like everyone was," recalls Vannoy. At Shoreline Community College, Vannoy landed in the music department. "I took one class and ended up doing a semester. I got into it. One of the guys who used to go there and conduct clinics was a Berkeley graduate named Clarence Robinson. We talked a lot about Berklee. I wanted a regional change."

Vannoy moved to Boston in 1995 and studied at Berklee College of Music. His first semester was challenging and intimidating. Having skipped music in high school, he was now trying to catch up to his student peers. "It was kind of time lost — missing all those years in high school, not really getting down and studying and getting better. I could have been developing things that I had to learn later. I was trying to learn how to read drum charts and get more rudiments together. There were these kids there that were seventeen or eighteen years old, and played like veterans. They were seasoned already. It was borderline overwhelming to the point of, 'Why am I even doing this?'" Still, Vannoy met some terrific instructors who offered encouragement and kept him motivated. He graduated Berklee with an Associate Certificate in Professional Music.

Vannoy returned to Seattle. He enrolled at Cornish College of the Arts, and began gigging professionally. He formed a funk / improv group called Root Juice and was hired for performances on the *Spirit of*

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Puget Sound. He also focused on small combos and jazz improvisation at Cornish, and earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Jazz Performance.

Vannoy then moved to Los Angeles. He enrolled at California Institute of the Arts. His focus was free improvisation, and he graduated with a Master of Fine Arts degree in Jazz and African American Music Performance. "There were a lot of really creative people down there," he recalls. "I developed as a freer player. That was the essence of that school: *do your thing*. There were people studying North Indian music and West African music and Electronic music. It was cool just to be around it for awhile and really soak it up."

In 2001 Vannoy returned to Seattle. With six years in academia behind him, his professional career blossomed. In spring 2002 he recorded with Julian Priester on the trombonist's album *In Deep End Dance* (Conduit). The album was awarded *Earshot Jazz's* top "Northwest Recording of the Year" honors; and the group — Priester on trombone, Vannoy on drums, Dawn Clement on piano, and Geoff Harper on bass — was awarded *Earshot Jazz's* top "Northwest Acoustic Jazz Group" honors. In fall 2002, he recorded with Jay Roulston on the trumpeter's album *Monkey Mind Control* (Conduit).

Last year was extremely productive for Vannoy. He became involved in four major groups — Big Baron, Frieze of Life, the Hadley Caliman Quartet, and Snur — that cover a wide spectrum of the jazz genre, and still keep the musician's gig calendar active.

Big Baron, a quartet Vannoy formed in fall 2003, performs a combination of funk, soul and jazz similar to Herbie Hancock, James Brown, Freddie Hubbard, The Meters and Stevie Wonder. Vannoy was inspired to start the band after opening for the jazz-funk-fusion band Robert Walter's Twentieth Congress at Chop Suey in Seattle. "I stuck around after [our set] because I wanted to check them out," recalls Vannoy. "I was blown away. I thought, 'You know, I still love this music. There's something about this type of music that just does it for me.' And I hadn't been doing a lot of it." Vannoy hand-picked members of the group, including bassist Tige DeCoster, organist Delvon Dumas,

and guitarist Adam Arcano. Last December the group performed live on KEXP's Sonarchy Radio program. "I'm really excited about the group," he says. "I really like it a lot. I still feel like it's got a lot of me in it, personally. It's nice to kind of nudge things a little bit, and they're really cool about it. Those guys are great, and we've become pretty good friends."

"When you play straight ahead music... you expect certain things out of it because you've listened to it a certain way and you are inside this thing. With the free stuff, you can only use so much of a pre-determined, improvisational language. And then it's up to you to create your own language..."

Vannoy is also the drummer in Frieze of Life, a freely improvised, avant-garde sextet headed up by saxophonist Greg Sinibaldi, and including saxophonist Mark Taylor, trumpeter Jay Roulston, trombonist Chris Stover, and bassist Geoff Harper — some of the leading contemporary composers and improvisers in the Pacific Northwest. The group was awarded *Earshot Jazz's* top Outside Jazz Group honors earlier this year, and received a Creative Residency award from the Port Townsend-based arts organization Centrum. Frieze's style of music nicely completes the drummer's musical repertoire. "When you play straight ahead music or play something that has a very defined style all the time, and very structured, you expect certain things out of it because you've listened to it a certain way and you are inside this thing," Vannoy explains. "With the free stuff, you can only use so much of a pre-determined, improvisational language. And then it's kind of up to you to create your own language in a certain way. You have enough rope to hang yourself. But I really get into that. To me, sometimes that music can be the most pure because you can really just speak from yourself. You make all these decisions. You sometimes have less structure or binding things involved."

Vannoy is also the drummer in the Hadley Caliman Quartet, which includes the pianist Randy Halberstadt the bassist Jeff Johnson, and the veteran saxophonist Caliman. The group produced an album last winter, and spent early-2004 performing

at Tula's, Seattle Art Museum, and The Triple Door.

Finally, Vannoy is a member of Snur — a quintet headed up by keyboardist Kacey Evans that performs a combination of jazz-influenced breaks, old-school funk, and soundtrack drum-n-bass.

These projects allow Vannoy the freedom to explore new music and maintain a level of versatility that may not be afforded other musicians. "I think drummers are required to be a little bit versatile in general," says Vannoy. "There are rudiments you learn. A lot of times you learn rock beats. At one point, I really wanted to be a jazz drummer. I got really into playing straight ahead jazz as much as possible. That's all I wanted to do. And in some ways, I think I actually fit the mold of a jazz drummer — the things I can play and that come a little more naturally to me. I think I'm more in that realm."

Still, Vannoy is hesitant about defining his drumming style and interest. "It puts you in a box if you don't branch out a little bit — financially, as well as anything else," he explains. "There are people who do it and I think it's great if you can, and feel good about it. I like a lot of different styles of music. I get into listening to a lot of different styles."

Vannoy's musical influences cover a wide range of musicians and styles. Rocker John Bonham, local jazz man Tad Britton, and legend Roy Haynes are immediately cited as inspirations. "I love to listen to Roy Haynes," Vannoy says. "I can almost say he's my favorite drummer of all-time. There are so many guys who do things that you like. But I love him. I've always loved him." When Vannoy met Haynes in-person at Tula's, he made certain to snag an autograph. "He said to me, 'What are you going to do with this?'" Vannoy recalls. "I said, 'I'm going to put it in my scrapbook.' Roy said, 'Who else is in there?' I said, 'Elvin Jones and Max Roach.'" The legendary drummer replied casually, 'Yeah, they're alright.'

"I love all those guys," adds Vannoy. "Drummers that everyone talks about, I think there's a reason for it. I like to try and listen to them and try to find that thing that I really like, and pretend I'm them. When I'm practicing or even playing sometimes, I think, 'This has the same vibe. I'm going to try and go there.'"