

Greg Sinibaldi: Improvising About Architecture

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Form.
Composition.
Structure.

These aren't necessarily the signifiers of free improvisation. That's not to say that these things are missing from this style of music. Some of the most important and inspired freely improvised work has come directly from well-composed, expertly-structured ideas and expressions, performed by musicians such as Evan Parker, Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, or Eric Dolphy. Still, many would argue that form, composition and structure are not cornerstones for musicians who actively explore and create freely improvised music.

That is, unless you are saxophonist Greg Sinibaldi.

"I think form gets overlooked by other musicians," he explains. "A lot of free improvisation, to me, lacks consideration of form. Form allows us to latch onto it — to give the audience something it can grab onto. I want it to be open and free, but I also want some type of control or something palpable."

Form and structure side-by-side with openness and freedom? It sounds like a contradiction of terms. "In my mind, improvisation and composition are the same things," says Sinibaldi. "One simply happens faster than the other. The concepts that rule improvisation are equivalent to composition: development of an idea... movement... harmony... rhythm... counterpoints... timbre... dynamics... articulation... These are all aspects of a composition. I see no reason why these aspects should be separated from improvisation."

Moreover, Sinibaldi views the composition process as scaffolds on which to construct something new. All buildings have structural elements that keep them standing, and many of these elements are similar no matter what the façade looks like. Two buildings may look completely different, yet both have similar structural elements that are necessary for them to remain standing. When Sinibaldi composes a piece, he tries to build in the structural elements necessary for the piece to "remain standing," but the façade, in all its richness and immediacy, is up to the individuals.

"I don't buy the idea of just playing whatever whenever, and that's great music," he



earshot jazz photo/daniel sheehan.com

adds. "It *can* be, but 90 percent of the time I don't think it is."

The saxophonist's interests in structure and form make sense. Born and raised in Seattle, Sinibaldi spent much of his early music career in high school bands, studying bebop and performing traditional jazz arrangements. After high school, he attended Central Washington University for two years before moving to Boston to attend the New England Conservatory of Music. It was there that Sinibaldi hooked

up with improviser, composer, theorist, and educator Joe Maneri.

Sinibaldi's interest in classical music and, later, free improvisation was sparked by Maneri's tutelage.

"Greg came to hear me quite often," says Maneri, via e-mail from Boston. "My intuition told me he had to study with me. Greg's God-given gift flourished like the palm trees. His musicianship is on the highest of levels."

"I sold all my jazz records," Sinibaldi

recalls. "I had been doing bebop jazz, but I kind of wanted something more. I started getting into modern classical music. That turned me on to the realm of timbre, which the quintessential jazz group didn't really afford me. It came to a point where whatever I was studying and whatever tradition I had been part of, it wasn't enough. I didn't feel like I could express anything in the forms that I was studying."

But Sinibaldi wasn't rejecting jazz outright. Rather, he was frustrated by some of the limitations inherent in the jazz form. "I'm drawn to the richness of timbre," he says. "The standard jazz group — a piano trio, a horn quartet, etc. — are ill-suited to explore timbre within the jazz vernacular. By vernacular I mean the way jazz is played: a tune with head, everyone plays a solo, head out. That doesn't really lend itself to exploring not only timbre but form, harmony, space, and all the rest of the aspects of a composition [important to me]. I got what I wanted from jazz, mainly improvisation and the phenomenon of exploration, and was ready to move on. I think it was about personal development."

Making the leap from bebop to free improvisation represented a risky move for the saxophonist. For many musicians who eschew the traditional genres of jazz in favor of avant-garde forms, the switch often means a smaller, more marginalized audience. "[But] that's what this music is about: taking a leap and taking a chance," Sinibaldi adds.

After earning a Bachelor's Degree in Jazz Studies, Sinibaldi left Boston and lived briefly in San Francisco before returning to the Pacific Northwest. It was in Seattle that he organized a number of free improvisation groups.

The Greg Sinibaldi Trio (with Sinibaldi on tenor saxophone, Reuben Radding on bass, and Bob Rees on drums) explored the avant-garde tradition with an innovative mix of improvisation, jazz, and contemporary classical music, giving the group a concise, original and fresh sound.

Vena Cava (with Sinibaldi on tenor saxophone, Radding on bass, Rees on vibes, and Jesse Canterbury on clarinet) carried a chamber-music quality, with an emphasis on the exploration of intersections of contemporary improvisation and modern classical sonorities.

Sinibaldi is currently a member of Frieze of Life, a sextet that includes Mark Taylor (alto and soprano saxophone), Sinibaldi (tenor saxophone and bass clarinet), Jay Roulston (trumpet), Chris Stover (trombone), Geoff Harper (bass), and

Byron Vannoy (drums). The music ranges from composed, intricate counterpoint to unbridled, expressionist improvisation. During a recent performance at Polestar Music Gallery, the group created a refreshing sound, sparked with intelligence and verve. Sinibaldi has written a number of compositions and recorded a compact disc with the group. "We all get along," he says. "I can bring new compositions in, and there's a trust level there."

Mark Taylor agrees: "The group has developed into a project that I'm really excited to be a part of. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we have a great chemistry, both musically and personally."

Though he writes a majority of the group's compositions, Sinibaldi is hardly a control freak. "I'll bring music in that gives musicians parameters to deal with. I want someone in the band to be excited about playing the composition, but also to be able to bring out their own thing. I'll give them structures or harmonies or particular melodies, and then let them kind of make what they will of it. I know that the other musicians are going to do something with it that's *really unique*. I don't know if I can call it my music. It's our music."

Composing music as a part of Frieze of Life has meant an evolution of sorts in Sinibaldi's writing process. In the past, much of his work dealt with a harmonic instrument: piano... guitar... vibes. But with Frieze of Life, Sinibaldi is working with four horns. "When it comes to writing harmony," he explains, "I can't write just chords for somebody to play, like for a piano player. I have to break them up into melodies. It has really opened up my writing to different melodic states."

Our discussion of the music-writing process eventually leads back to (you might have guessed) form and structure. "It's a communication thing," Sinibaldi adds. "I'm an audience member a lot. When I go to gigs, I often think, 'What's this experience like for me?' There is a connection there. I want to communicate with people. I want communication within the band. That's why it's important for a band I am leading to be on the same page. When those magical moments happen musically, that gets relayed to the audience. Then it's a special experience for everyone. Does this happen all the time? No. But that's what I'm striving toward."

Greg Sinibaldi will be performing for the New Works Festival at On The Boards April 11th and 12th. Frieze of Life will be performing on Sonarchy Radio (KEXP 0.3FM) May 10th at 11:00 pm.



ROY HARGROVE QUINTET

April 1 – 6

CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE

April 8 – 9

LARRY CARLTON

April 10 – 13

DAVE HOLLAND QUINTET

April 15 – 17

STEVE TYRELL

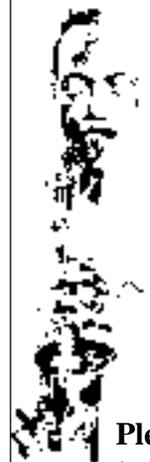
April 18 – 20

JAMES COTTON BAND

April 22 – 27

CHUCK MANGIONE

April 29 –
May 4



Please call 206-441-9729
to make reservations
or visit us online at

WWW.JAZZALLEY.ORG