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EARSHOT JAZZ

May 2005 Vol. 21, No. 5
Seattle, Washington



NICHOLAS HOFFMAN

VICTOR NORIEGA IN SHANGHAI

ELLERY ESKELIN & SYLVIE COURVOISIER

Six String Belief: Nicholas Hoffman's Road to Music

By TODD MATTHEWS

If you were to chart the career of Bellingham jazz guitarist Nicholas Hoffman, you might be amazed that he even plays the guitar at all.

Hoffman dropped out of the Berklee College of Music in 1978 and moved to the Pacific Northwest, where he worked for a decade as a commercial fisherman. He rarely played music during that period, and he didn't even own a guitar.

His current fascination with the Hammond B-3 organ appears to be more feverish than his interest in the guitar. Along with the non-profit Jazz Project, he books and promotes the "Organ Donor Tour" — a monthly series that brings a different organist to the small town of Bellingham. Moreover, Hoffman has designed an electric winch with remote control ramp in his van specifically for hauling an organ from his home to a different venue every month.

And he's managed to carve out busy performance and recording schedules in Bellingham, Washington — a city nearer to Vancouver, B.C. than Seattle, and with a population of just 70,000 people — without having to travel to bigger cities to earn a living. If there's a jazz performance in Bellingham, chances are pretty good that Hoffman is involved.

Yet, to imagine Hoffman without a guitar is simply impossible. His roots are in music, and date back to his youth, growing up in Hyde Park, Chicago, between the late-1950s and late-1970s.

At the time, Hyde Park was an integrated neighborhood of young white students attending the nearby University of Chicago, and blue-collared African Americans who frequented (and performed in) the neighborhood's blues and jazz clubs. Joseph Jarman, Anthony Braxton, Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield, and many of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (or AACM) were from the Hyde Park area. Hoffman frequented the blues clubs to see Junior Wells and Muddy Waters. "In a certain sense, it wasn't that odd," Hoffman says, referring to his early interest in jazz and blues — two genres of music that inform his music style. "It was a unique breeding ground for that kind of music and culture. I was just exposed to a lot of that. Being around it led me in that direction."

Like most young guitarists at the time, he started out interested in rock-and-roll — namely, the Beatles. He took guitar lessons when he was nine years old, and was heavily into the psychedelic rock scene by the age of eleven. His parents had played jazz records in the house since he was a toddler, but Hoffman was more interested in Cream. It wasn't until he heard *Bitches Brew* by Miles Davis that he started to explore jazz. "When I heard that



Hoffman performs live in Bellingham with drummer Jud Sherwood and organist Delvon Dumas

album and listened to the John McLaughlin parts," Hoffman recalls, "I really related to that music. That *Bitches Brew* recording that I was listening to was by the same guy who did *Boplicity*, which my parents used to play when I was five years old. How could that be? After awhile, I filled in the gaps. By the time I was 15 or 16 years old, I was interested in jazz."

After high school, Hoffman attended DePaul University for one year. His father taught there, and the music classes were free. It was a good experience for Hoffman while he decided on a formal music school — either Indiana University, North Texas, or Berklee. Indiana University and North Texas had great jazz programs, according to Hoffman, but they weren't geared toward the guitar.

"I could play classical guitar at those schools, but I didn't want to," he explains. "At that time, if I wanted to major in my instrument, jazz guitar, Berklee was the only place I could go." As such, he enrolled at Berklee and moved to Boston in 1976.

The experience nearly ruined his music career.

"At the time, there were 2,000 students," he explains. "Of those, 1,600 were electric guitar players. If you were a saxophone player, you could play with a band. If you were a guitar player, you went to your combo class and there were five other guitarists. I just felt like a grain of sand on a beach. I felt really unimportant. I just never really got comfortable there."

Hoffman returned to Hyde Park. He formed a group with the saxophonist Steve Coleman and found a steady six-month gig at a club on 53rd Street. Hoffman and Coleman were fascinated by two senior jazzmen on the

scene — the tenor saxophonist Von Freeman and the alto saxophonist Bunky Green — and would follow them around town from gig to gig.

Watching their heroes perform, as well as their own performances at jazz clubs, developed Hoffman's music skills. "It was almost better than being in school," he says. "Coleman was - *still is* - incredibly talented. Sometimes, after he would solo, I would think, 'How am I supposed to solo after that?' I learned a lot playing in the same band."

Coleman and Hoffman amicably parted ways. Coleman moved to New York City. Hoffman considered his next move. "It was time to leave the nest," he says. "In a sense, I felt like I had failed at college. I did well in school, but didn't stay. I was living with my parents in Hyde Park — it was just time to leave."

Hoffman headed west. He visited everybody he knew who had moved west from Chicago. He stayed in Colorado, California and Oregon (where he lived on a commune for a brief period). He had a friend in Bellingham and made the journey north.

When he arrived, Hoffman found friends in a community of artistic, politically active young people protesting nuclear power. "It was kind of a tough transition moving from the middle of a big city like Chicago to a small town," he recalls. "But it was easy to find a place to stay, and people were very open and friendly."

Still, the one thing most important to Hoffman — music — was missing in Bellingham. "There wasn't any music here," he

adds. "I ended up getting away from music altogether."

INDEED, HOFFMAN GOT rid of his guitar and found work as a commercial fisherman working on purse seiners and factory trawlers that took him to the coasts of California, Washington and Alaska. He would work in Alaska for three months straight, then return to Bellingham flush with cash. It was a lifestyle that slowly took its toll. "I was really overworked," Hoffman says. "You work twenty-four hour days at times, and you can't get off the boat for months. Physically, it's really hard work. And when you return, all of a sudden you have a lump of money and nothing to do. That's not so good. Most fishermen ended up really bad alcoholics. It was typical to come back to town and be totally toasted until you jumped back on the boat."

Life as a fisherman, according to Hoffman, was "barbaric" and "anti-social."

"I remember one time, we were at a bar in Sand Point, Alaska and it was just full of wacko fishermen," he recalls. "One guy there described it as Darwin's Theory of Evolution at its worst. In order to survive, you had to act like a macho jerk."

When Hoffman wasn't working on a fishing boat, he had a second career as a poker player. He was so good at cards that he actually made a decent living from his winnings. "I justified it by saying, 'I'm coming out ahead,'" he explains. "I was coming out ahead *financially*, but every other aspect was killing me. It was a really unhealthy environment. I spent a lot of time playing cards in the backrooms of bars. Basically, in order to be a winner, you have to hang out with losers. That's the only way to win."

Hoffman also spent some time skydiving and repairing motorcycles.

While fishing in 1989, Hoffman tore the Anterior Cruciate Ligament ("ACL") in his knee. The injury ended his fishing career. He returned to Bellingham jobless, collected unemployment checks, and wondered what to do for a living. His roommate had a guitar, and Hoffman picked it up on a whim. When he started to casually play a few tunes, his roommate said, "I didn't know you played. Why don't you just take the guitar for awhile?" Hoffman spent the next six months holed up in his room recouping his technique and recovering his chops.

In hindsight, the injury and unemployment were catalysts for Hoffman to return to music. "I was really fortunate to have that time," he says. "It's funny how sometimes something bad happens and it's actually a blessing. I thought blowing out my knee was the worst thing that could have happened in the world. In reality, I wasn't on a fishing boat and I rediscovered music."

After six months holed up in his room learning to play the guitar again, he was ready to set out and perform. He plugged into Bellingham's small music community,

where he met a pianist named Debra Chang, whom he later married. Still, nearly a decade had passed since Hoffman had played the guitar. By his own admission, he was rusty. In one instance, Hoffman arrived to a jam session hosted by tenor saxophonist Hadley Caliman at the Tractor Tavern in Seattle. "I remember Hadley said, 'Well, what do you want to play?'" recalls Hoffman. "I was nervous and just trying to think of something I kind of knew. I said, 'How about Oleo?'" Hadley counted it off and it was so fast. I remember trying to take a solo and my fingers just wouldn't move that fast. I was just sitting there laughing."

Hoffman still laughs about it today. But at the time, he was unsure if returning to music was such a good idea.

"You can't be shy as a musician," he says. "You have to just jump in there. The hard part is when it doesn't go well. It can be real discouraging. But if you don't do that, nothing will happen. A lot of the reason I got away from the guitar was that, when I was 20 years old, I had higher expectations for myself. I wasn't able to meet them, and it was too painful. Finally, I got older and kind of let some of that stuff go. I said, 'I'm just going to play the guitar.'"

HOFFMAN'S INTEREST IN the Hammond B-3 organ developed in 1996, when he set out to record his first album. Though that Seattle jam session might have been a disaster for Hoffman, he wasn't deterred.

He called organist Barney McClure — a musician he had met at an earlier Seattle jam session — and asked if he would be interested in recording an album. Jazz has a long history of guitarists and organists performing together: the organist Jimmy Smith often recorded with guitarists Kenny Burrell and Eddie McFadden; and the guitarist Wes Montgomery often recorded with the organists Smith and Mel Rhyne.

The guitar-organ combo complement each other: the tonal spaces are distinct, and the organ can play a sustained chord while the guitar can complement that sound with a staccato rhythm. "There's a stereotypical wisdom that says, if you have a piano and guitar in the same group, the sound is very similar," explains Hoffman. "They have a very sharp attack and a quick decay. When you are playing with a piano player, you can make beautiful music, but you really have to be aware of each other, and not get in each other's way. It's like having two harmonicas in the same band."

"When the B-3 is playing the bass, it can get a certain kind of feel with the drum — a certain kind of swing that is different, even if it's just a walking bass. I'm not sure exactly what it is. I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's because the B-3 bass isn't quite as distinct. The upright bass can have a pluck, or a very distinct beginning of the note. With the organ, it's less distinct. The bass kind of comes up,

'nuh-nuh.' It's not quite as sharp a beginning. It's just a real nice set-up. I think that's why a lot of guitarists like it."

Hoffman's interest in the organ also traces back to his Hyde Park roots, where that blues-and-gospel sound was heard frequently in clubs. His love of the organ is evidenced in a unique concert series (promoted by Hoffman and drummer Jud Sherwood) that brings a different organist to Bellingham to perform in a different venue each month. The concert series has featured organists Joe Doria, Bob Murphy (from Vancouver, B.C.), Delvon Dumas, Chris Gestrin (also from Vancouver, B.C.), Barney McClure (from Anchorage), Mikal Majeed (from Los Angeles), Steve Czarnecki (from Santa Cruz), and Dennis Blackmon (from Seattle).

Hoffman provides the organ and shuttles it around town to different venues in a van outfitted with a custom-made electric winch with remote control and ramp designed especially for transporting the Hammond B-3 organ.

In 1996, Hoffman entered a recording studio to lay down tracks for the album *Nick's Tricks*. The personnel included organist McClure, drummer Larry "The Sparkplug" Jones, and saxophonists Rick Mandyck and Brian Kent. His wife, Debra Chang, sang on the recording. The album was released later that year, and consisted largely of standards such as "What is This Thing Called Love?" "You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To," "Take Five," and "Walkin'."

Less than four years later, Hoffman began work on his second album, *Jazzy's Dance*, named after his daughter Jasmine. Hoffman had his sights on Joey DeFrancesco — arguably one of the most popular contemporary jazz organists. DeFrancesco had recorded for Columbia and Concord Records, and with Miles Davis, Grover Washington, Jr., and Houston Person. Hoffman and DeFrancesco had a mutual friend who connected them. DeFrancesco agreed to record the album during his next trip to Seattle. Meanwhile, Hoffman's father became ill. He flew back to Chicago to tend to his father, who eventually passed away. The event derailed plans for the album until Hoffman received a phone call: DeFrancesco would be performing at Jazz Alley in Seattle with Etta Jones and Houston Person. He was available to perform on Hoffman's next album in a few days.

"Music was the farthest thing from my mind," says Hoffman. "I didn't think I was really interested. My brain wasn't there. I hadn't played my guitar for a few weeks. I hadn't been thinking about a recording session. I really wasn't on that path. But I started thinking about it more. Why not do it? I called him back the next day and said I would do it. It all worked out."

Hoffman released the album in February 2000. The personnel included Hoffman and

See Hoffman, page 6

Hoffman, from page 5

DeFrancesco, in addition to saxophonist Hadley Caliman, an additional organist named Dave Mathews, and drummer Mark Ivester. “A lot of people were surprised when I made that record with Joey,” says Hoffman.

Later that year, Hoffman released the album *Blues for Eddie* – named for the bluesman Eddie Boyd. The project highlighted his friendship with the Swedish bassist Peter Axelsson – a friendship that started on the Internet. Axelsson was headed to Bellingham to study with Chuck Israels. He was looking for other musicians in Bellingham with whom he could perform and found Hoffman’s Web site. Axelsson e-mailed some of his recordings to Hoffman, and explained that he led a quartet in Sweden, performed with Chet Baker, Maxine Sullivan, Scott Hamilton, and Gerry Mulligan, and released an album in 1998 entitled *The Natural Way*.

When Axelsson arrived in Bellingham, Hoffman plugged him into his recording and performance schedule. “He’s one of the best bass players I’ve ever played with,” says Hoffman. “We connected personally, too. He was really comfortable and it inspired me to record *Blues for Eddie*.” Hoffman brought in saxophonist Caliman, drummer Ivester, and the pianist Hans Brehmer. The album was released in January of 2002.

In one decade, Hoffman had gone from not owning a guitar to producing and recording three albums that spanned genres of blues and jazz. The experience informed Hoffman that he was first and foremost a guitarist. It also gave him an education producing and recording albums.

“There’s a lot of learning that goes on in recording an album,” he says. “You live by your mistakes, unfortunately. The first album took close to two years to finish. I had an awful lot of perseverance and forced it through. It was a big deal to get it done. I had to really just keep on pushing through all the obstacles. I don’t have that kind of perseverance anymore.

“But luckily, the process is much easier now. I know what you’re supposed to do, and what you shouldn’t do. And I can save a lot of energy by not having to learn as I go.”

LATELY, HOFFMAN’S INTEREST has focused on jazz’s rich history of dueling saxophones: Gene Ammons and Sonny Stitt . . . John Coltrane and Sonny Rollins . . . Eddie “Lockjaw” Davis and Johnny Griffin . . . Dave Liebman and Steve Grossman. Similar to his fascination with the Hammond B-3 organ, Hoffman is interested in the dynamics created by putting two saxophonists together in a group.

Last spring, he produced a concert in Bellingham and invited the tenor saxophone veterans Hadley Caliman and Gary Hammon

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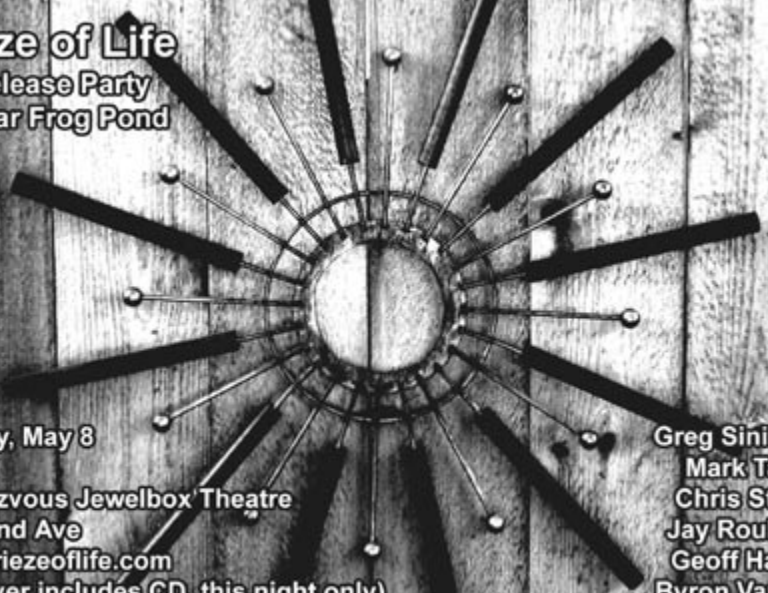
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to perform. Hammon, originally from the Pacific Northwest, had spent several decades on the East Coast and had recently moved to Seattle. That concert inspired Hoffman to name the group and release an album. The result? A quintet called Fangs and a self-titled album released earlier this year. The personnel include Hoffman, saxophonists Caliman and Hammon, drummer Jud Sherwood, and organist Delvon Dumas (who moved from Seattle to Bellingham in March). It was the first recording project where Hoffman delegated duties to bandmembers and the album wasn't entirely his own: Sherwood and Chicago-based Robert Guttman produced the album along with Hoffman; and Hoffman wrote only one of the nine tunes on the album (Hammon wrote two, Caliman wrote one, and the album features classic tunes by Herbie Hancock, Tadd Dameron, Cedar Walton, and Harold Mabern).

"By the time you're done making a CD," says Hoffman, "you're so burned out on the whole thing. You're kind of tired of the music, listening to it, mixing it, going through the process of making it. It's always really hard to push it. I thought maybe if we made more of a group album rather than an individual album, the other musicians might be more involved. They could use it as their own. That way there's more energy for the album to go further. We all have energy for promoting it now, which is actually really nice."

The group hosted a CD release party last month at the Nightlite in Bellingham. The group is also promoted heavily by the Jazz Project – a seven-year-old non-profit jazz program that formed out of the Pacific Northwest Jazz Alliance. The Jazz Project presented nearly 100 jazz concerts in Bellingham last year, including an Art of Jazz series, features series concerts, Nick and Jud's Traveling Organ Donor Tour, a Bellingham Youth Jazz Band performance schedule, and the Progressive Jazz and Garden Tour.

It's an interesting and unusual career path for Hoffman: a big-city kid who drops out of music college to move to a small town and build an impressive music career. Hoffman admits it's strange, but also sees the benefit of such a journey.

"I used to kick myself thinking, 'I could have played music. I wish I hadn't quit. It's too late,'" he says. "That was after quitting for two years. After five years, I thought, 'Man, I shouldn't have done that.'"

"Finally, after about ten years, I got back into it. Of course, I still kick myself for not playing for those years. On the other hand, what you play reflects your life experience. If I had been sitting in a practice room those 10 years, I might not have anything to say. Maybe I would. I don't know. It would be different. Your experiences make you who you are."

For more information about Nicholas Hoffman, visit <http://www.nicholashoffman.com>.

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