

Susan Pascal's Mallet Jazz

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Susan Pascal's name is as recognizable on the Pacific Northwest jazz scene as the unique tone of the instrument she plays: the vibraphone. If you mention area vibraphonists, or listen to a CD produced by a local jazz musician and the recording includes a vibraphonist, chances are pretty good that Pascal's name appears in the conversation or on the liner notes.

When I mentioned this to her last month, Pascal deflected the praise. "Well, that's interesting, because there are some very fine vibraphonists in Seattle," she said, during a conversation in the living room of her West Seattle home. "There's Tom Collier, who was my teacher at the University of Washington, and who has released two CDs. He's incredible. There's Ben Thomas, who has his own group, produces his own CDs, and is a fabulous player. I think one of the reasons my name might be mentioned is because I've played on various projects that fortunately get radio airplay. And gig a lot."

Another reason? Music has always been an important part of Pascal's life. She was introduced to music in grade school, when a teacher in the local public school district provided percussion lessons. Pascal played the violin for awhile, but returned to percussion — specifically the marimba — after listening to her parents play Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass albums. "One day, a little student marimba, which I still have, appeared in the living room and I started playing on that," Pascal recalled.



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"I took lessons on it, and that's how I really got into percussion." She performed with her middle- and high-school bands in the Shoreline School District and explored classical percussion with the Seattle Youth Symphony. It was in high school that Pascal started to grow fond of jazz percussion. "For awhile there, I was thinking I would be a symphonic player," she said. "But then when I started listening to jazz vibe stuff, like Gary Burton, Milt Jackson, Bobby Hutcherson and that kind of stuff in high school, I got more interested in the jazz vibraphone." It was at the University of Washington, where she initially set out to study classical percussion, that her fondness for jazz took hold. "I realized I was much more interested in jazz at that point," she said "Hearing that *Crystal Silence* album, which came out I think in 1973, I think a lot of people had that experience. That recording made a mark on a lot of people."

Pascal was torn between careers in classical or jazz percussion, and she dropped out of the university for period. "I always wanted to play melodic material," she explained. "When I was in the orchestra, I envied the first violinists who were constantly playing all the time. In the percussion section, you had to sit back and literally count hundreds of measures while waiting. Meanwhile, I was just listening to great jazz music: Gary Burton, Bobby Hutcherson, Milt Jackson — those fabulous players were really inspiring."

Pascal found a day job and combed the listings in *The Rocket* for jazz bands. The first group she joined was the 'No Nukes! Stop Rape! Jazz Band,' led by saxophonist Dan Greenblatt. She also responded to listings for piano players. One group invited her to audition. Shortly thereafter, she was hired. "It was wonderful," she recalled. "We had a guitarist, bassist, drummer, and the vibes. We started playing all kinds of stuff, and we performed quite a few gigs around town."

Pascal's interest in jazz was sealed. She returned to the University of Washington to complete her degree. She also started to aggressively seek performance

opportunities — whether at clubs, on recordings, or even theater and motion picture soundtracks. "People who want to specialize in vibes have to create their own band and performance opportunities," she said, referring to the instrument's reputation as somewhat unconventional. "The people who succeed at the vibes are really aggressive bandleaders and promoters. When I first started really wanting to get out and play more vibes, I decided I was just going to learn as many standards as I could and go out to jam sessions. Sometimes I would get tired, or I would have my day job and I didn't feel like going out. But once I was out, I was really glad to be there."

She also set out to inform musicians and audiences about the instrument's unique sound and quality. She auditioned for bandleaders initially seeking a pianist or guitarist, and was hired based upon her performances and the vibraphone's complementary sound. "That's something I did with The Jazz Police," she said. "I've played with them for a number of years, and all along they have used either guitar, piano or vibraphone."

Pascal hasn't entirely ditched her classical training. In fact, that versatile background has helped broaden her career. She has recorded for a wide range of musicians, including the slide guitarist Orville Johnson, the steel drum band The Toucans, the Plymouth Trio (which performs sacred music for the Plymouth Congregational Church), jazz vocalists Edmonia Jarrett and Greta Matassa, composer Daniel Barry, and The Jazz Police. She has also found her niche recording for motion picture soundtracks, including *The Wedding Planner* and *Office Space*, among others. "Seattle has really become one of the major areas in the country for recording film scores," she said.

Still, one area remains unexplored: her own recording as bandleader. "I think I've been waiting to have something that really feels unique and mine," Pascal explained. "I really want to wait until I have something that's new. I would prefer not to do a CD of standards, although I've enjoyed playing standards. What I find myself really excited by is something like the Mike Stern show I saw in New York

City last week. They played standards, but they were standards de-constructed. They would do improvisations and then they would go into a rough sketch of a tune that I recognized. That's kind of fun and very cool. I think I'm waiting until I have something that will be new."

One project that might contribute to her own recording is a long-standing job at the Plymouth Congregational Church, where she is tasked with creating sacred music for performance each week. "I've been studying the music of a lot of other people for that," she said. "Sometimes it's material I compose. Sometimes it's the music of other people that I like. It's kind of nice as a workshop for me to study new music because I have to keep generating new music for that every week."

Pascal also leads her own quartet, which includes a rotating roster of the finest jazz musicians in town: pianists Larry Fuller and Randy Halberstadt; bassists Doug Miller, Jeff Johnson, and

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KPLU's Jim Wilke is Master of Ceremonies. Doors open 5:30pm; advance tickets on sale until April 15.

30 RAY VEGA

The multitaleented trumpeter, percussionist, composer, and arranger who has emerged as the most innovative of salsa and Latin jazz band leaders, joins three of the most respected and dynamic players on the Seattle jazz scene, saxophonist Rick Mandyck, bassist Geoff Harper, and drummer Byron Vannoy. Tula's at 8:30pm.

SUNDAY MAY 1

JA Earl Klugh, 6:30 and 8:30
MT Marc Smason & The Chicago 7 - Vintage Jazz!, 8pm

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Chuck Deardorf; and drummers Mark Ivester and Portland-based Gary Hobbs. She also works regularly with guitarist Dave Peterson. "The sound with guitar and sound with piano is really different," she said. "I love aspects of each one, and I wish I could take certain aspects and role them together. The guitar has that beautiful long sustain and beautiful tone, and there's a lot more space. With the piano, it has that percussive crunch, and I love the percussive aspect."

Despite the vibraphone's unique sound and unconventional reputation, Pascal has built an impressive music career — a career as amazing as the instrument she performs. "People will say, 'I never saw that before. I never heard it in person before,'" she said. "Maybe they heard it on the radio. But when people see it, they're really excited about it. On the vibes, I think that kinetic, visual thing is fun for people. It's fun to watch."



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