

More to the ear than meets the eye

BY LLOYD PETERSON

He is responsible for one of United Press International's previous top ten jazz recordings of the year; he has played with Ron Carter, Benny Golson, Lionel Hampton, and Russell Malone; and he was the pianist and musical director for vocalist Nnenna Freelon. His compositions have been used for a PBS movie along with an HBO series and he was the creator and producer of a radio program, *Jazz South* that was broadcast to over 200 stations internationally.

Yet, surprisingly, many Seattle jazz enthusiasts are unaware of Earshot's 2005 Golden Ear jazz instrumentalist of the year, pianist/composer Bill Anschell.

His upcoming fall record release, *More to the Ear Than Meets the Eye*, may finally change that.

A Seattle native, Anschell graduated from Wesleyan University where he studied with Bill Barron and South Indian mrdangam master, T Ranganatham. He then spent several years in Atlanta where he served as the jazz coordinator for the Southern Arts Federation. During this period he also found the time to publish two books, *Jazz In the Concert Setting*, an analysis of the barriers to presenting jazz outside the nightclub venue and *Who Can I Turn To?*, a guide to acquiring local, regional, and national music grants.

I recently had the opportunity to talk with Bill and preview a couple of the tracks from his upcoming recording and was completely taken by the first tune, his arrangement of the standard, "Alone Together." Where most modern-day arrangements of standards can sound like dull imitations, his latest recording treats us to his own personal creative interpretation while paying respect to the music he loves, a task much more

difficult than perceived. Having also had the opportunity to hear Anschell live on several occasions, it's here where I have been most impressed. Each musical setting was influenced by his creative voice while remaining humble and sensitive to those he collaborates with.



Here is a fascinating look into the mind of one of our very own unique and aspiring talents, Bill Anschell.

Charles Mingus said that you cannot teach style but that you can teach someone to appreciate it, that style is the way you play and a very personal thing. Do you believe you have created your own individual style and how would you describe it?

I agree with what Mingus said, and I think individual style is becoming something of an endangered species nowadays. The jazz education system has gotten really good at teaching the skills necessary for students to negotiate jazz tunes. There are college and even high school kids who can totally blaze over hard chord changes; it's pretty scary and sometimes intimidating. But at the same time, there's a little bit of a paint-by-numbers syndrome: Use these scales over these chords; transcribe these solos to learn how these players did what they did. It can be pretty scientific, and it has created a ton of really

accomplished young players who sound an awful lot alike. But there are always the exceptions, who get all the good stuff from their education, and still strike out on their own path.

I had either the good or bad fortune to get a very unorthodox jazz education.

I'm not sure I knew even the most conventional chord progressions when I graduated from Wesleyan with my music degree. I certainly had never played along with an Aebersold record. And although this may be considered blasphemy by 90 percent of jazz players, I've done very little transcribing of other pianists. Instead, I've looked for more broad based musical ideas that interested me, both within and outside of jazz, and worked on ways to build them

into my practicing and writing. And I'm fortunate to have perfect pitch so that a lot of times when I'm listening to music I'm able to slip into the analytical mode and figure it out as it plays.

The net result of all that is that, at the risk of sounding immodest, I really do believe I have my own style. It's mainly my rhythmic approach, because rhythm has always interested me more than harmony. That's a little unusual among pianists, since in a typical band we have the primary harmonic role, but piano is also a percussion instrument. I spend a lot of time working on harmony as well, and I hope that I have some of my own identifiable voicings and scalar approaches. But when I get excited by a piece of music on the radio or on a CD, it's almost always the rhythms that are doing it to me.

LP: We previously discussed why certain approaches to jazz keep the music fresh but other approaches add weight to the music. You seem to be able to create this. Can you explain it?

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BA: That's really nice of you to say. It's a pretty complicated subject. At the risk of oversimplifying, I think most jazz music falls into one of two camps. From the musician's perspective, you can either restate things that have already been said, or try to make your own statement. When I put it like that, it sounds like I'm saying the second camp is somehow better than the first, but that's not really my intention. There is a real art to trying to say something just right, and the musicians and audiences who prefer music that recreates styles like swing and bebop are true connoisseurs. Saying something people already know, but saying it with all the right inflections, and absolute certainty – it's like a well-spoken sermon, and it makes people feel good; it's an affirmation of their beliefs. I respect and appreciate that, though it's not my preference.

The flipside is this: How many people do we need to have saying the same thing? How many more piano players do we need who can play like Oscar Peterson or Bud Powell, but not quite as well? I like trying to play in those styles, but I also realize that I'll never sound as good as them, so for me it makes more sense to go after my own sound.

It comes down to a very personal preference: As a listener and as a player, I like to be surprised, and to be part of something that isn't always predictable. And although I understand and respect where they're coming from, I'm disappointed that so

many listeners and players prefer the familiar. I wish people were more curious.

At the same time, though, I don't really relate to improvisers or listeners who reject repeating forms and harmonies entirely. Again it's all subjective, but harmony and form for me offer a context for a player's statements. By way of analogy, when I'm checking out a new CD, I always like to see how the musician treats a standard. Because I know the tune and its structure, I have a context in which I can appreciate the player's personality. In a broader sense, whether musicians are playing originals or standards, if there's a form and some harmonic progression as a reference point, it's easier for me to see their thinking come through.

Time in the musical sense is obviously a significant part of your arrangements but doesn't get discussed that often. Can you describe your relationship and approach with time?

What intrigues me most is superimposing one rhythm on top of another, or piecing together smaller rhythmic units so they play out in unusual ways within larger ones. The first approach is more typical of African polyrhythms, the second is what I find in South Indian music. Both of them can exert an incredible pull. If you listen to them just right, it's like living in two realities at once, it's almost disorienting or dizzying. And it's somehow more than just musical. I can't describe it better than that, but the effect,

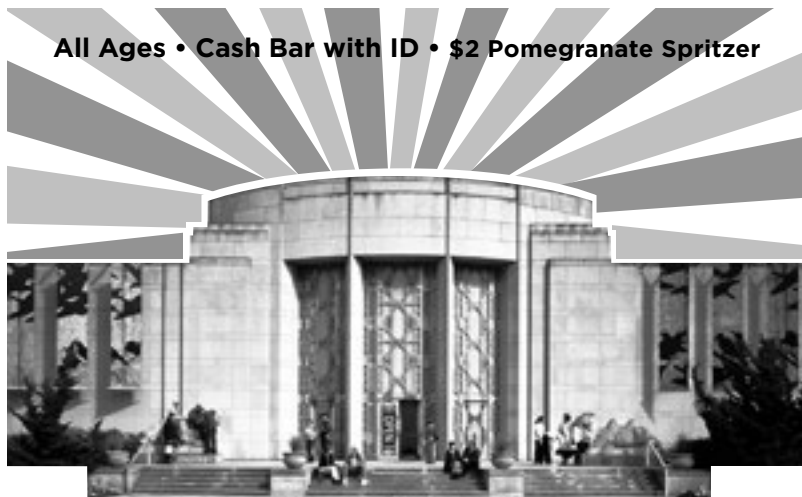
for me, can be trance-like. It also can add a lot of excitement to the music.

Generally, the rhythmic feel of the music is influenced by the bassist and drummer yet you are one of the few pianists that has a voice on their instrument that is strong enough to lead, set or change up that feel. Where does this come from?

Well, to the extent I'm able to do that, I hope I'm always respectful of what's going on around me. I've worked on rhythm so much, and it's so much a part of what I listen for in music, that I can get restless when the music is rhythmically static. Sometimes, not even consciously, I may take it upon myself to try to agitate things a little. But there are certainly situations where it's appropriate for rhythm to take a backseat, where really good music can be made with a focus on texture, interplay, and harmony.

How would you explain your compositions to those that are unfamiliar with your work?

Strange as it may sound, writing music is pretty easy for me; much easier than playing. Lately, it's enough for me to close my eyes, wait until I hear a melody I like, and start following it, notating as I go. It usually has an implied harmony, and I'll expand that harmony to add interest and make it worth improvising over. Then I'll add some vamps and rhythmic figures in the bass and drum parts. As a last step



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I finally take it all to the piano, tweak it and can usually come up with a melodic piece that way.

But some of the more interesting compositions I've written start from rhythms instead of melody. That's been the story behind most of the pieces I've composed that involve the South Indian material I've studied. Those pieces usually demand a lot more rehearsal, but to me they're ultimately more exciting and certainly more unique. I also like to start by presenting myself with unusual challenges – setting up parameters that force me into unfamiliar territory as a composer.

No matter what approach I take, I try to force myself to hear it all in my head before I go to the piano. It's good for my ears, and it imposes a certain logic and listenability on the end result. I think pieces written without ear involvement usually sound like theory exercises, and I have no interest in that.

You are currently working on new recordings and arrangements. What can we expect to hear?

As on my past CDs, some of the more interesting arrangements are built around polyrhythms and other rhythms of interest to me. There's a wide variety of grooves and we only swing on one or two of the tunes. One thing I did on this CD that I've never done before is to play a few tunes unarranged, without preconceptions in the same way we would on a gig. And a couple of them really came out

great. Jeff Johnson, John Bishop and I must have been really relaxed, because the trio dynamic is strong on those.

I also think there is also a humbleness that comes through in your playing and it's quite refreshing. Where does it come from?

Thanks – I take that as a huge compliment. I decided long ago that the ego is the enemy when it comes to being a jazz musician. It's true in several ways: Playing in a group, you have to try to get rid of the part of yourself that is, in an almost Freudian way, wanting to supervise or critique your actions, rather than allowing you to submerge yourself in the music and react more intuitively to the people around you. In a more conventional sense, big egos on the bandstand stand in the way of the equality you need if the music is to really be interactive. And, both on and off the bandstand, you have to be careful about your motives. Anyone who gets into this music wanting fame, fortune, adulation, or even undivided attention is going to be disappointed. Sometimes the best music can happen on the crappiest gig, in front of an audience that couldn't care less. If you're too busy feeling insulted, the moment can be lost. I can't by any means claim to be ego-free, but I do work hard at it.

Do you have an idea of the direction of your music looking towards the

future or do you concentrate on the here and now?

At any given moment I'm concentrating on the here and now – the gigs I'm playing, or am about to play. But I certainly look to the future, too. My long-range goal when I practice, which I still do regularly, is all about trying to become a player who has more ideas at his disposal, and has the facility to execute them.

Although I like to think my sound is pretty identifiable, all of my CDs to date could be described as “modern mainstream jazz.” I have my own twists and turns I'm trying to add to the equation, and I'm not thinking about labels when I'm playing or writing, but so far I've never ventured really far from jazz. That may change at some point, because my interests are much broader. I studied electronic music quite a bit in college and have a home MIDI studio. I'm working on programming and am planning to get up to speed on a laptop so I can bring much more than just acoustic piano sounds to keyboard gigs. I still have all my notes from my South Indian music studies, and I'm hoping to get back into practicing those rhythms and incorporating them into more compositions. Maybe someday I'll even get my classical piano playing together. The great thing about music is that, unless you simply lose interest or burn out, you'll never run out of new challenges.

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