

to offer Lage a special program that allowed him to take only the courses he wanted while leaving him enough space to craft his songwriting and his album. With Steven Epstein producing and Richard King engineering, *Sounding Point* came together while Lage worked toward his degree. The decision to showcase the various aspects of Lage's musical personality was deliberate. Building the group tracks around a cello-saxophone mix, he says, "was tricky because I didn't want to put in a cello for cello's sake. I wanted saxophone and cello to create a hybrid harmonic. That adds a

dynamic that I can't do on the guitar at all. It was a process of discovery. As we began playing together we realized we were going for something different than what we had done before, more like a chamber group."

Similarly, the pairings with Fleck and Thile, and the duets with Eigsti, suggested more unusual textures than usually found on jazz-guitar recordings. "As soon as you see banjo, mandolin and guitar it offers you something that's so vast and so different, and we worked well together," says Lage. "Béla I've worked with since I was 12 or 13, and I want-

ed Thile because I admire him tremendously. He's one of the greatest musical minds I've ever come across. We can bridge anything. The solo guitar pieces, meanwhile, connect everything. I wanted every song to be a different theme. By the end I don't think you're exhausted because you've been given pushes and pulls. I'd love for people to feel somewhat different than they did before they heard it. And this is only one hour, a day in the life kind of thing. There's a lot more to come. I'm counting on it. I've got a lot of work ahead of me." **JEFF TAMARKIN**

## The Commitments

The Fat Cat Big Band brings a diehard attitude to a leisure-filled venue

**G**uitarist-composer Jade Synstelien has several bars of Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing" tattooed on his left arm. On the other arm is a fragment of an original called "Woody and Stella All Night on the Bridge."

"Number 10 in the book," he says, referring to the 99 tunes and counting he has amassed for the Fat Cat Big Band (FCBB). He's an uninhibited whirlwind in conversation, a self-professed disciple of Duke and Mingus who brings his own melodic conception and eclectic vibe to the table. "I've never known a musician who believes so much in what they're doing," says Phil Stewart, the FCBB's longtime drummer.

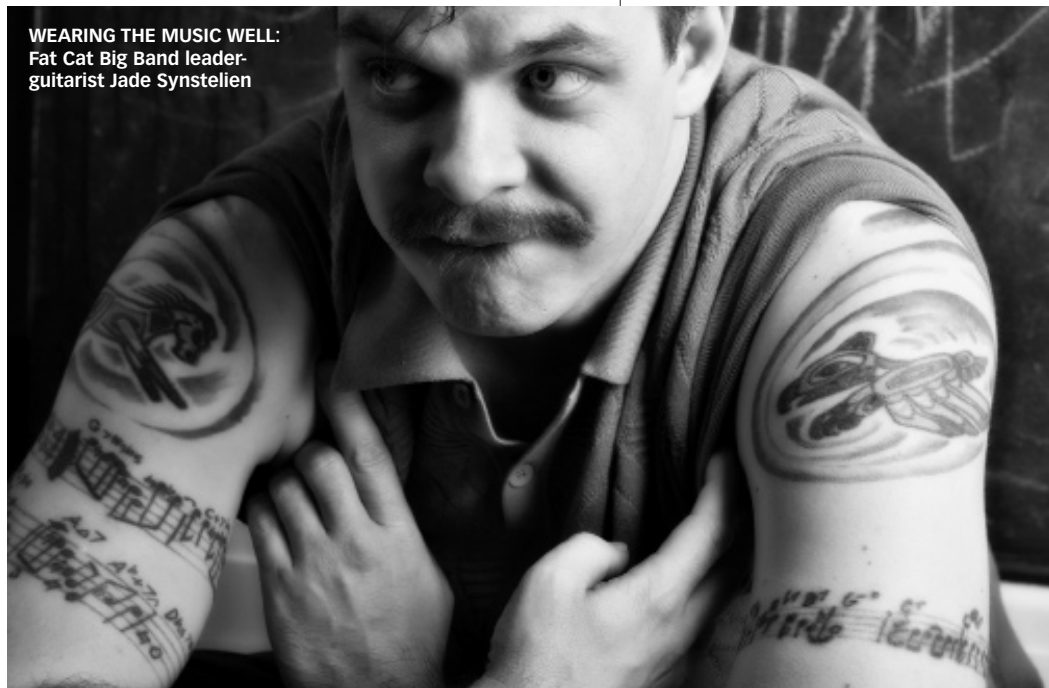
For seven years, Synstelien and the 11-piece band have had the benefit of a regular Sunday night gig at Fat Cat, the unique jazz hang and pool hall in New York's West Village. Having ripened in that environment, they're rolling out a trilogy on Smalls Records, beginning with *Angels Praying for Freedom* and *Meditations on the War for Whose Great God Is the Most High You Are God*. The forthcoming *Face*, due out in October, was recorded in the same marathon session. "We recorded 31 tunes in two days," Synstelien declares.

The music swings hard, and the soloists—among them altoist Sharel Cassity, tenorist Stacy Dillard, trumpeter Brandon Lee and trombonist Jonathan Voltzok—light a fire inside Synstelien's challenging charts. "I want to have a combination of the badass-ness of Duke, the heavy pow-wow groove of Count Basie and the intimacy of Mingus' small band when he's on tour in 1964 playing 'Meditations on Integration,'" Synstelien offers. "I want that combination to go on at all times on every single song."

At Fat Cat, college kids come to play pool, table tennis, shuffleboard and chess, largely oblivious to the music. Yet somehow the FCBB sets a mood and feels like an integral element

in the room. And the band does attract its share of attentive listeners. There used to be a walled-off music space, but the wall came down after the club was forced to shut down for code violations in late 2006. The club reopened in early 2007 and now hums under the management of Noah Sapir. It's no longer affiliated with the nearby Smalls, which has undergone its own saga of closings and re-openings. "Jade's big band is one of the handful of steady gigs," says Sapir, "and then we have a lot of rotating slots. And we're

WEARING THE MUSIC WELL: Fat Cat Big Band leader-guitarist Jade Synstelien



pretty much the only place left that does jam sessions every night into the wee hours, like Smalls used to do."

If new names seem to crop up regularly at Fat Cat, it's partly by design. "There's three or four of us who do the booking," Sapir adds, "but we encourage all the musicians in our circle to submit recommendations, and if

we end up booking it we give that person a referral fee. The idea is to get musicians to promote other artists and get paid for it."

Synstelien leapt into the creative hot-house that was Smalls and Fat Cat when he arrived in New York in 2001. "My dreads were down to my ankles," he says, recounting his work in reggae and worldbeat bands, playing hand drums in Arizona and New Mexico even as he began building momentum as a jazz composer and leader. "I cut my dreads off, so when I got to New York I'd had all this power that was gone. I was a brand-new musician all over again. I did the osmosis thing." First he formed the Staring Into the Sun Orchestra, and for a period hired Nellie McKay to sing with the band,

which led to Synstelien and Stewart playing on McKay's 2004 pop-smash Sony debut, *Get Away From Me*.

Synstelien's writing reflects a doggedly idealistic view of jazz's essential ingredients—not a focus on raw complexity or virtuosity, but an intangible excitement brought about by the quest for the perfect song, the melody you just can't wait to dig into. "It's always an unfulfillable, insatiable, never-ending, have-to-play-it-or-we-might-die, do-it-for-the-unification-of-human-beings kind of feeling behind the notes," he insists. "That's what makes a tune."

With the infectious content of the FCBB discs, Synstelien puts his money where his mouth is, bringing highly developed arrange-

ing craft to music of marked accessibility. "The thing about Jade's music," says Stewart, "it's guaranteed [that] after every gig, either later that night or the next day, I'm fuckin' singing one of his tunes in my head. He's got a certain pop sensibility." Heightening the heart-on-sleeve element, Synstelien sings several numbers in a throaty growl, conceding, "I ain't no fancy singer, but I sing the melodies honest and true."

In the end, what Synstelien expects, from himself and his bandmates, is commitment. "Max Seigel, my bass trombonist, his music for 'Meditations' is submerged in blood. Every time he plays it he bleeds, week after week, and he puts the blood on the music. It's the most beautiful thing." **DAVID R. ADLER**

## For Love, Country & Family

Philly-based vocalist Venissa Santí addresses her musical and cultural heritage

**D**espite having been born a mere 17 years after her family fled the Castro regime, vocalist Venissa Santí felt Cuba was as unreal as Narnia or Oz.

"When I grew up, it was like the Cuba thing happened a million years ago," said Santí, 31, across her kitchen table in South Philadelphia. She recalls her father, a writer, returning to Cuba in the 1970s with a group of fellow intellectuals.

"In my brain I imagined him wearing a trench coat, with a notepad, floating in a canoe with Fidel. My mom told me that as a girl she would let her hair dry in the heat, and I pictured her on a barren island with palm trees and a hut. It was a distant dreamland, but yet it was so close to me. I had no idea that I would ever go there."

Santí was born and raised in Ithaca, N.Y., where she describes the local Cuban population as a community of two—her mother and father. Her musical exposure to her family's homeland was not much more diverse, largely limited to Celia Cruz and Gloria Estefan. But her grandfather, Jacobo Ros Capablanca, was a composer in Havana. He moved to the states and did menial labor for years, ending up in Miami where he recorded himself singing his music a cappella because he didn't own a piano.

Upon her grandfather's death, Santí inherited a shopping bag full of his scores, some published, some handwritten and many unfinished. "It's overwhelming knowing that I have this stuff and am responsible for it," she sighed.

As a first step toward honoring that responsibility, Santí included one of Capablanca's songs—and a brief sample of his voice—on her debut CD, *Bienvenida* (Sunnyside). But her grandfather is only one of a diverse set of influences that Santí showcases on the album, which combines her winsome jazz stylings with Afro-Cuban and pop inflections.

She fuses these styles with a graceful agility, as she does when combining "Tender Shepard" and "Little Girl Blue" into a piece too



LUKE KAVEN

ALYSSA MALOOF