

LASTING FLAVOR

JACK VARTOGGIAN

RALPH PETERSON JR.: BIG FO'TET PLANS

Get ready." That's what a friend told pianist Orrin Evans several years ago as he prepared for his first gig with **Ralph Peterson Jr.** There are drummers, and then there is Peterson, a bear of a man who brings extraordinary power and individuality to his instrument. On and off the bandstand, he is an experience. "One thing I can say is that you can hear about six beats and know it's me," Peterson says, his boastfulness tempered by an air of mirth and affability. Behind the kit he's got something of the old-school showman in him, bringing to mind his mentor, Art Blakey. In conversation he's voluble and sagacious, his skin thick from nearly two decades in the trenches.

"I just turned 40," Peterson declares, resigned but optimistic. "I'm entering another phase of life. My daughter will be a teenager this year. I'm realistically facing the halfway point in my journey."

It's been a bumpy ride for the Garden State native, whose father, Ralph Peterson Sr. (also a drummer), is a three-term mayor of Pleasantville, N.J. After gaining recognition in the mid '80s as a co-leader of the Blue Note supergroup Out Of The Blue, Peterson launched a solo career that established him not only as a great drummer, but also one of the best new composers and bandleaders in jazz. (He's also proficient on trumpet and piano.) In the ensuing years he released a batch of fine albums, most notably with his flagship ensemble, the Ralph Peterson Fo'tet. But all the while he wrestled with a drug problem that endangered his career, not to mention his life. "There was a period when association with me was risky," he recalls. "But it's history. That speaks in my playing, in my composing, and in my abilities as a teacher, parent and friend."

Peterson has been on the march since getting clean in 1996. His recording career continues apace, although all his early work on Blue Note is now out of print, a source of continuing frustration. But after putting out several strong discs on the Evidence and Sirocco labels, Peterson signed with Criss Cross

and released *The Art Of War* earlier this year, leading a fiery new quintet. The follow-up, *Subliminal Seduction*, is out this fall. He's also developing a new, expanded Fo'tet project, the Fo'tet Augmented. Meanwhile, the quintet has been heating up clubs in New York and on the road. "I'm thrilled with the quintet as a working band," Peterson says. "It's made up of some of the workingest cats around," namely, Jimmy Greene on sax, Jeremy Pelt on trumpet, Orrin Evans on piano and Eric Revis on bass. "It's not always easy to get them all together, but that's OK. Behind every guy there are two or three others who could step up and play the book."

Clearly, Peterson likes to test the younger players he hires, recreating the tough apprenticeship conditions that he once went through—and that he sees as disappearing. His new band is a school of sorts, which is fitting, since he maintains a busy schedule as a jazz educator at Rutgers (his alma mater), the North Netherlands Conservatory in Groningen, the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's Jazz for Teens program and other institutions. His private students have included Ari Hoenig, Antonio Sanchez, Rodney Green, E.J. Strickland, Dion Parson, Darren Beckett and Jonathan Blake. "What's important to me about teaching is sharing the totality of my experience, not just musical information," he says. "It's another level of learning."

Peterson's pedagogical approach stems directly from his own schooling, in both academic and gig environments. "I got to Rutgers at an extremely fertile period, and came under the tutelage of Michael Carvin, who prepared me to do exactly what I did in the '80s," he says.

He soon began logging priceless hours with the late pianist Walter Davis Jr. "Words can't express all that I learned from Walter," he says. "If I didn't know an arrangement the first time, I definitely knew it the second time. He never got me twice. Somehow I don't see as much of that anymore, that kind of dedication to respecting another cat's bandstand. I was taught that when you sit in with someone, you learn their book. How? By any means necessary."

Peterson serves as a mentor now, but he started out like other young jazz artists, soaking up information from all available sources. One of his pivotal early connections was with Blakey. He sat in for Blakey repeatedly with the Jazz Messengers toward the end of the master's life and also played in Blakey's two-drummer big band. In September, Jazz at Lincoln Center held a reunion tribute to Blakey with Peterson in the drum chair. "I'm very proud of the fact that Art chose me last before he checked out," Peterson says. "There aren't that many drummers who have had as close a look at him as I have. I've got some information to impart." More recently, Peterson served as the "on-deck guy" for Elvin Jones during the Blue Note's 19th anniversary celebration. "It's really gratifying when drummers of that caliber have such confidence in what you do," he says.

That confidence is widely shared, for Peterson has racked up one of the most diversified sideman resumes in jazz. He played in the neo-bop frontlines in the '80s with the Marsalis brothers and the Terence Blanchard/Donald Harrison band, but also in less traditional environs with David Murray. He went on to form lasting bonds with two of today's least categorizable musicians, Don Byron and Uri Caine. Among his many recording credits, two stand out as bookends to a decade of artistic ferment: Byron's *Tuskegee Experiments* (1992) and Caine's *Goldberg Variations* (2000). Charles Lloyd, Stanley Cowell, Tom Harrell and Michael Brecker have also used Peterson's services, as have younger talents like pianist George Colligan.

Adaptability is one of Peterson's greatest strengths. Byron, a member of the original Fo'tet, had a group with Peterson and Bill Frisell that worked often at the old Knitting Factory, the heart of New York's Downtown scene. "Ralph hadn't played with anyone like Bill, exactly," Byron recalled. "His ability to absorb that flavor was great. Some of the Downtown cats didn't know what to make of him, but I knew he was one of the swingiest drummers I'd ever heard. I didn't need some kind of confirmation."

Years later, Peterson made a similar impression on Brecker. "I held auditions and Ralph walked in and absolutely killed," Brecker said. "It wasn't even a decision."

However, with ears like his, Peterson could never be content as a drummer for hire. From early on he prioritized his work as a leader, documenting his own music with trios (*Triangular* and *Triangular 2*), quintets (*V*, *Volition*, *Art*, the new Criss Cross sessions), and the Fo'tet, with five albums to its credit. For Peterson, each ensemble fulfills specific musical goals. "The Fo'tet will always be my platform for addressing odd meters, and the swing that exists there," he says. "The quintet is more

straightforward. *The Art Of War* was designed to be a high-impact, up-in-your-grille project. On *Subliminal Seduction*, the new one, the yin-yang, hard-to-soft ratio is more balanced."

But it is the Fo'tet, with its idiosyncratic sound and instrumentation, that has earned Peterson the most recognition. The group started out with Byron on clarinets, Bryan Carrott on vibes and Melissa Slocum on bass. After two records, Steve Wilson, playing soprano sax exclusively, replaced Byron and Belden Bulloch took over for Slocum. (Ralph Bowen now occupies the soprano chair.) Carrott, who brings an elegant, harmonically sophisticated touch that moderates Peterson's driving intensity, has been a Fo'tet member from the start. "I don't know if I could have a Fo'tet without Bryan. To me, he's the most important vibes player of his generation," Peterson contends. "And since his generation," he adds. "How it is that he got overlooked is one of the mysteries of the Sphinx."

For mid-career musicians around Peterson's age, jazz is an insanely tough business. "We're being neglected, when we're the ones most capable of consistently producing work that will stand on its own," he insists. "The industry is so short-sighted." The fact that his earlier discs are unavailable to new fans doesn't help. "People are still asking me for the Blue Note records," he laments. "Every time I release a new one, they could probably sell a couple hundred of every record that I've ever done. When a music lover becomes aware of an artist, one of their first reactions is to say, 'Let me see what else I've missed.' Somehow the industry, in its constant search for the next flavor of the month, has lost sight of that."

—David Adler

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