

Zach Brock **Purple Sounds**

When violinist **Zach Brock** debuted on **Criss Cross** in 2012 with **Almost Never Was** (Criss 1349), he had serious talent on board. Pianist Aaron Goldberg, bassist **Matt Penman** and drummer Eric Harland gave Brock, on a silver platter, the ideal conditions for an inventive, hard-swinging and memorable session. They'll all likely record together again.

In the meantime, Brock has welcomed a pair of twins, three months old at the time of this writing. He's also put together a follow-up album, **Purple Sounds**, that takes a different turn: while Penman stays on, guitarist **Lage Lund** enters the picture and transforms the harmony and texture of the music. Drummer **Obed Calvaire** rips and roars and plays with utmost sensitivity as well.

The focus remains modern straightahead jazz, which Brock has embraced alongside his work with the great Stanley Clarke, Gregg Bendian's Mahavishnu Project and other decidedly "plugged-in" projects. But Brock's larger purpose on **Purple Sounds** is to highlight and transform a wealth of material associated with violin masters, particularly those whose work with guitarists subtly altered the jazz landscape. What springs to mind, obviously, is Django Reinhardt and Stéphane Grappelli, and Brock has considerable expertise in that milieu, working with master guitarist Frank Vignola and others.

But Brock is also keen to break out of any constricted role: "I realized that I'd gotten myself into some hot water because as a violinist working in jazz, I'm constantly being pulled backwards. I'm not crying about this — it's cool in a certain way but it's something I was always trying to escape from, the pull of the 1930s. I think it's taken me this long to even think about doing a record with some of that material, because I didn't think I could escape 'the jazz violin thing.'"

Along with Grappelli and Reinhardt or Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang, Brock wants to add Jean-Luc Ponty with Frank Zappa to the discussion. Or Zbigniew Seifert with John Scofield. The great swing-to-bop violinist Stuff Smith is a major influence. So is the obscure Harry Lookofsky, an orchestral player and multi-tracking pioneer whose work in bebop alongside Barry Harris and Bob Brookmeyer made a considerable impression on Brock.

Lage Lund brings to all of Brock's arrangements an effortless contrapuntal approach and fluid, out-of-the-park soloing chops. In addition to his work with Maria Schneider, David Sanchez and other top bandleaders, Lund has put himself forward on Criss Cross with **Early Songs** (Criss 1307), **Unlikely Stories** (Criss 1321) and **Foolhardy** (Criss 1360), as well as sideman sessions with Seamus Blake and Will Vinson.

"Lage and I were in the Betty Carter Jazz Ahead program together and we were roommates," Brock says. "He was already this hotshot guitar player, he had just left Berklee and was in his first year at Juilliard. I was coming at things very differently. I was totally outside of any sort of jazz scholarship stuff. I didn't even know about it. But Lage's playing was incredible, and his writing especially was incredible. We haven't really traveled a lot in the same circles but I've been following his music. He and a few other players are doing something with a new vernacular in jazz that I find really exciting and compelling."

In addition to Brock's previous CD, bassist Matt Penman has recorded on Criss Cross with Jonathan Kreisberg and John Ellis. "Matt and I live close together in Brooklyn and we share other little connections," says the violinist. "He's an incredible guy to hang out with. His ability to make sense of obtuse music is unparalleled. He's got everything I like to hear in a bass, that growl, stuff you'd associate with older recordings. But he's not just a thumper, he can solo great, play impossible stuff that you give him. And I've learned a lot about wine from him. And Lage and all those guys."

Obed Calvaire made his Criss Cross debut in 2012 as the drummer on Yosvany Terry's **Today's Opinion** (Criss 1343). Brock recalls: "When I still lived in Chicago I was dipping my toe into the water of moving to New York. I knew a few people going to Manhattan School of Music, so I would come to town and get a lesson from somebody, play sessions with my friends. I met Obed when he was in school there, playing on somebody's recital. And he blew my mind then. I recently had the pleasure of working with him on a recording of original music co-written by myself and pianist Phil Markowitz. Obed has been the drummer in Phil's trio for a few years. It gave me the excuse to get to work with him even more."

Brock and company lead off with ***Purple Sounds***, originally from the 1957 Verve album *Dizzy Gillespie & Stuff Smith*. "I was thinking of Stuff with [guitarist] Herb Ellis," Brock says, "but this particular tune was done with Dizzy and Wynton Kelly on piano." The bassist was Paul West, the drummer J.C. Heard. (Some perspective: Miles Davis was in his Prestige period and would soon enlist Kelly for *Kind of Blue*.)

"That was a really satisfying record for me to find," Brock says of the Smith-Gillespie release. "I was looking for something minor blues-ish, not too crazy, But it was also just this really weird tune, a bare-bones minor blues and then this totally bizarre bridge. I thought this was obscure enough to spark my imagination to do something different." Brock's version switches between a bright mixed-meter feel and slower walking swing, giving soloists the chance to improvise on one or the other. "The blowing we decided to simplify," says Brock. "What will happen on future live dates, we shall see."

Next, Brock tackles the Reinhardt-Grappelli gorilla with a reworking of the famed ballad ***Nuages***. "That just seemed crazy, to even do that. I had to take an extreme departure with it. With Django, it's not just his legend and his playing but also his writing — it's such a strong flavor, such a strong sound. If you're going to rearrange that stuff I don't think you can be too subtle. I had to just say, 'OK, think about the melody, people will hear it no matter what you do.' So that gave me more options. I was thinking about the music I'd been listening to, expanding different types of wide-interval stuff that's happening now. A lot of it comes out of what guitar players like Lage and Kurt Rosenwinkel and Jonathan Kreisberg and others are exploring in their voicings. I don't think I portrayed it exactly, but from my own violinistic brain I was trying to take a stab at it. In that arrangement there might even be a little bit of The Police in there. That's also music that I love. It all kind of comes out in the wash."

Frank Zappa's ***Twenty Small Cigars*** appears on *Chunga's Revenge* (1970) as a kind of rock-inflected jazz ballad, with incredible unison lines and counterpoint for talk-box guitar and harpsichord. Interestingly, Jean-Luc Ponty recorded the tune first on his 1969 release *King Kong: Jean-Luc Ponty Plays the Music of Frank Zappa*, another aesthetic touchstone for Brock. "People that don't know Zappa don't have an understanding of

how much beauty he can create,” Brock says.

The Zappa piece leads Brock to a deeper discussion of Ponty’s legacy. “I discovered Zappa before I knew that Ponty played bebop,” he recalls. “I was trying to figure out if I wanted to play jazz violin, not really understanding why so many jazz violinists didn’t participate in the new movement that was happening with bebop. When I found out about Ponty’s bebop records, specifically *Sunday Walk* and *Jazz Long Playing* — and this double-CD set of Jean-Luc when he was 19 playing with an organ trio — that was enough to spark my total obsession and admiration. It gave me a gateway to go back and listen to the other fusion stuff.”

Little Willie Leaps, a classic bebop line from Miles Davis’s first official recording as a leader in 1947, is actually Brock’s homage to Harry Lookofsky. “You wouldn’t normally think of a guy named Lookofsky being from Kentucky, but he was, and I am too. Back when Toscanini was conducting the radio orchestra here in New York, Lookofsky was a badass violin player and he got a gig there. It also just so happens that he was obsessed with bebop. The record he released, *Stringsville* (1958), is I believe the first record that had violin featured as bebop frontline instrument. It’s also the first record I know of with the recorded baritone violin. Lookofsky also did all this multi-tracking, Les Paul-style, which Ponty copied 10 years later on *Jazz Long Playing*.”

Quo Vadis is a slow-burning swinger by the late Polish violinist and innovator Zbigniew Seifert, “one of my guiding lights,” says Brock. The original 1979 version from *Passion* featured the likes of John Scofield, Jack DeJohnette, Eddie Gomez and Richie Beirach. In this version Lund uses a very strange washed-out sound for the opening rubato section and the initial theme. Brock reveals the secret: the Electro-Harmonix Superego Synth Engine pedal. “I don’t think of Lage as an effects guy because there’s so much other stuff going on in his playing. But he’s always experimenting.”

That Seifert is “obscenely forgotten,” in Brock’s words, makes his death from cancer at age 32 all the sadder. “The reason his playing excited me, besides its incredible genius and virtuosity, was that it was similar to my first discovery of what Ponty was doing, but applied to the post-Coltrane language. That was a big moment for me, to hear that this person had done it on the violin. My wife is working on a film, which is in pause mode right now, but we did interviews with all those guys about that record. Seifert is somebody who proved just by living his life and doing what he did that the violin is not necessarily relegated to a novelty instrument, but can be an authentic voice in a contemporary jazz language.”

Brock initially conceived the lyrical waltz ***Folkloric*** as a trio tune, and he preserves some of that flavor by having Lund play the initial melody alone. “I was thinking of a real guitar-based jazz tune that would come out of a folk thing — not writing melodies on upper extensions, but almost nursery-rhyme simple, something you would imagine people singing in a circle.” This paves the way for ***Brooklyn Ballad***, also first intended for trio. “I recently started playing it with Phil Markowitz, and hearing his amazing piano voicings and treatment of the harmony reopened the tune up for me. I wanted to play baritone violin because the key is very bright, and I wasn’t happy with how it was speaking on the instrument. So I thought the baritone would ground it a little bit more and make it more mellow.”

To close out with the Creamer & Layton standard ***After You’ve Gone*** is to refer explicitly

to “the jazz violin canon,” as Brock terms it. “It’s like ‘Oh Lady Be Good,’ ‘Honeysuckle Rose,’ ‘Limehouse Blues,’ all these tunes every violin player plays. This song is not only one of my favorite recorded Stuff Smith solos, but also one of my favorite recordings of Joe Venuti.” Mention of Venuti sends Brock into an intelligent though wistful discussion of Eddie South, race relations, Paul Whiteman and the less-than-ennobling performance situations that many musicians found themselves in. As he seeks “to cast the violin in a more contemporary setting,” Brock is confronting this history at every step. “This song is so hard to approach because there’s different ways you can go with the arrangement,” he continues. What came about is a spacious but slightly tense odd-meter feel with a recurring vamp interlude and a very gradual fade.

Despite his confessed “obsessions” with violinists of various eras, Brock knows that the greatest achievement is to transcend one’s instrument and express the secrets of the soul. That’s what exemplars like Seifert or the others referenced on **Purple Sounds** have to offer. “It’s a great reminder that the goal is much higher,” Brock concludes. “It’s more about the deepest life questions you can ask — like, ‘What are you doing as an artist?’”

David R. Adler
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