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ONCE A MONTH AT TRITONE MUSICIAN MATT DAVIS AND AN 11-PIECE ORCHESTRA TELL US A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT WHO WE ARE.

BY DAVID R. ADLER





Echoes of the City

On the fourth Thursday of every month, Matt Davis and an 11-piece ensemble perform a different musical set about Philadelphia at Tritone.

By David R. Adler • Photographs by Michael Persico

"Philadelphia's my greatest influence," says David Lynch in a DVD commentary for *Eraserhead*. Though he shot the film in Los Angeles, Lynch meant for the strange decaying landscapes of *Eraserhead* to evoke the City of Brotherly Love circa the mid- to late '60s: a hellhole defying description. "There were factories, industrial buildings, neighborhoods dark and forlorn, tucked in somewhere, sort of like you can't get there from here," he recalls.

Speaking to *PW*'s J. Edward Keyes in 2001, Lynch again tried to pinpoint the city's "feeling of mystery in the dark," and his words mirrored some of the signature strokes of his oeuvre: "There was a sense of dread pretty much everywhere I went ... I felt industry. I felt smoke and fire and fear. I felt insanity."

Lynch is neither the first nor the last to discover how art, perhaps as much as sociology or political science,

can capture murky, unknowable aspects of urban life. And while it may be bleak, art like this sometimes conveys an ironic sense of wonder. The takeaway from the *PW* Lynch profile was Keyes' assertion "that any place ... can be weird and twisted and violent and fear-ridden and beautiful and magical and inspiring—all at the same time."

It's that truth that resonates in the music of Matt Davis, a 29-year-old jazz guitarist and composer who's halfway through a yearlong project he calls *City of Philadelphia* 2008.

Davis is not a Lynchian purveyor of the bizarre—no mutant babies, squirming dinner meals or mud-encrusted dead cats find their way onto his aural canvas.

But Davis' portrait of Philadelphia, like Lynch's, is nothing if not cinematic. Every month he writes a new suite of music inspired by a particular population in the city. So far he's focused on the elderly

(*City of Age*), drug abusers (*City of Addiction*), immigrants (*City of Arrivals*), kids (*City of Youth*), religious believers (*City of Transcendence*) and veterans (*City of Service*).

At Tritone on the fourth Thursday of every month Davis performs a new installment of *City of Philadelphia* 2008 with his band Aerial Photograph. This week he turns his attention to the homeless (*City of Want*).

As most musicians can tell you, it's hard work maintaining a band of any kind. But try cramming a group with strings, reeds, brass and a rhythm section into a small bar in Center City, writing new music on deadline and getting it played with inspiration and polish every time out.

Not enough? Go record a short CD every month as well, and be sure to have 30 handmade, limited-edition copies in time for the gig (and downloads for sale at mattdavisguitar.com). Oh, and you'll need to conduct interviews with ordinary Philadel-

phians and weave sound clips into the fabric of the music. So bring your laptop to the show.

Davis lightly dismisses the notion that *City of Philadelphia* 2008 is an insane amount of work.

"Sometimes it's really taxing, very much so," he concedes. "But you know, in any other profession a person would put in double the amount of work I'm doing. I think of people who get up every day, go to their office in the morning and leave at 5 o'clock—if any musician did that, they'd be killing. They'd be incredible at their instrument, playing all the time. But no musician does that."

As he constructs his Philadelphia mosaic, Davis is also telling his own story, getting to the marrow of the town he's inhabited for more than 10 years. It's a feat of artistic focus and creative energy, but there's more to the project than heavy lifting for its own sake. By making the best

Matt Davis

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► of tough conditions and finding his own inimitable voice, Davis is elevating the Philadelphia music scene by hook or crook, showcasing some of its best instrumental talent. He's also broadening the vocabulary and conceptual scope of 21st-century jazz.

Davis has moved about eight times in the last couple of years: Fifth and Master, 43rd and Osage, on and on. "I lived in three different places in Fishtown, and there was one area in the middle of Kensington and Port Richmond where I didn't feel safe," he recalls. "I saw too many things I didn't want to see, so I had to move."

The youngest of four brothers and three sisters (and the only musician among them), he grew up in Lebanon, N.J., until age 11, when the family relocated to his grandmother's farm in Stockton. He's been in Philadelphia since 1997, when he came to study music at Temple.

If City of Philadelphia 2008 seems like the whim of someone with time on his hands, it's not. Davis is a senior lecturer in jazz guitar performance at the University of the Arts. He plays restaurant gigs and private functions every week and works in small-group settings with Philly masters Odean Pope and Bobby Zankel. He collaborates with trumpeter Bart Miltenberger and bassist Mike Taylor in the Chance Trio. He makes a brilliant showing on *Five Simple Worlds* ... and *Ways of Getting There*, a forthcoming album by alto saxophonist Dan Peterson.

But *Aerial Photograph* is Davis' cornerstone, an uncanny blend of intricate arranging, crystalline lyricism and open improvisation, the ideal vehicle for music that aspires to something almost literary.

"I've played in so many scenes in Philly, with so many musicians of dif-



Matt's finish: Davis' end products—handmade limited-edition CDs—can be purchased at his Tritone gigs.

ferent backgrounds," Davis says. "I was inspired by how diverse Philly is, and also interested in starting dialogues. It's such a polarized place, and generally speaking it's pretty segregated. I think it's one of those things where everything improves when people just talk to each other."

Tall and lean, with a high and gentle voice, Davis comes across as an introvert. But he's bold when it counts, able to foster trust and connection with people across the city. He spent a day at a rehab clinic, where "some people were clean for a couple years, some were clean for a day and that was an accomplishment."

He met a homeless 19-year-old, strung out since age 10 thanks to his junkie parents, but clean for five days and

wrestling with too many developmental disorders to count. "It was depressing," says Davis, "but the material ended up being more about recovery than addiction, which I liked."

Other encounters were closer to hand. The woman who cuts Davis' hair turned out to be a refugee who escaped war-torn Laos at 14.

"She had to pay a bunch of fishermen with her mother's jewelry, and crossed the river into Thailand disguised as a fisherman," Davis recounts. "It's an incredible story, seeing people getting shot around her at that age."

On *City of Arrivals* we hear the woman remark that she's been in Philly far longer than in Laos. "I'm lucky. Yes, I'm lucky. I survived."

Exchanges like these made it clear that focusing on specific identity groups wouldn't be best for *City of Philadelphia* 2008.

"I wanted to come up with groups of people that could be anybody," Davis explains, emphasizing the idea of shared humanity, shared fates, the jumble of personal histories that defines the American union. If the project has a political dimension, it's oblique, neutral in a sense, although *City of Service* of course deals with war.

"Getting shot at is just ... different," says one Iraq-Afghanistan veteran who speaks about a fear of entering rooms, stopping at traffic lights and other effects of his posttraumatic stress disorder.

How do these one-on-one interviews translate into music? "You get a sense of a person's life when you're talking to them—their situations, a sense of quietness, a sense of unrest," says Davis. "In January when I was talking to elderly people, I found they've been in their routine for decades and it's very calm. So I wanted to impart that aesthetic."

As for the 19-year-old addict, Davis came up with dense, classically influenced counterpoint "to contrast his horrible experience, which is a mess, with a [functional, highly organized] background. So in the midst of all these baroque motifs are his sound clips about doing crack and losing 120 pounds. You hear that idea in Stevie Wonder's 'Village Ghetto Land'—a really sharp contrast between the lyrical content and the accompaniment."

It's a hot Sunday and *Aerial Photograph* are gathered at Buckeye Recording, on Eighth near Wharton, to rehearse and record *City of Service*. Peter Richan, engineer in residence, acquired the space four years ago and can regale you with stories about its ghosts.

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This was once the Buckeye Club, an infamous mob den, ground zero in the Riccobene-Scarfo war of the 1980s. Frank "Chickie" Narducci ran the place until he took 10 bullets for his involvement in the 1981 nail-bombing of Philip "Chicken Man" Testa, immortalized in the first line of Bruce Springsteen's "Atlantic City" ("Well they blew up the Chicken Man in Philly last night/ Now they blew up his house too"). Narducci's sons took over the club and murdered Rocco Marinucci there in 1982, as detailed in testimony from a New Jersey state commission report:

"Marinucci was lured by Narducci to the Buckeye Club, where Salvatore Grande and Joseph Grande were waiting for them. While at the Buckeye Club, Joseph Grande shot Marinucci to death ... Marinucci's body was left at the Buckeye Club until nighttime, when it was taken out and dumped in South Philadelphia."

Sometimes Richan kicks back at Buckeye Recording

crackles with purpose, and the recording, just less than a half-hour long, is done. In three days—before the Tritone gig—the music will be edited, mixed, mastered and packaged by Davis and a friend using quality hand-cut paper, threaded with colored string at the spine. No artwork necessary. The band name, title, roster and recording details will appear in a simple typeface. It's all very much a sign of the DIY times.

"A lot of the [CD packaging] options kind of suck now," says Davis. "They just aren't that cool. You have four or five templates and a case." Better to go the extra mile and create these alluring *objets d'art* in small numbers, backing it all up online.

Working with Aerial Photograph at this fast and steady a pace is unprecedented for Davis. He formed the band several years ago, releasing a self-titled debut in 2002 and *Before the Stars Burn Out* in 2006. The personnel and instrumentation tend to shift a bit from

What starts as a private dialogue becomes a form of public address, blurring the boundary between the club interior and the street outside.

in the dead of night and reads a book. It's so quiet, he says, that his ears ring. The former nuisance bar and sometime morgue, one of Philly's most threatening locales, is now an oasis of creativity—the one Davis happened to choose to document his paean to a troubled but ever-changing city.

Today Aerial Photograph is short a viola, but there are two violins (June Bender, Maura DiBerardinis), cello (Maura Dwyer), clarinet (Aino Söderhielm), soprano sax/flute (Jon Thompson), tenor sax (Bryan Rogers), trumpet (Bart Miltenberger), trombone (Brent White), upright bass (Leon Boykins) and drums (Justin Leigh).

Davis isn't playing guitar yet—he's conducting the group through a tricky swing-based piece that will decelerate in stages, segueing to an open trumpet solo over a looped electronic cluster created prior to the session. When Davis begins part two, a longer work (song titles are rare in *City of Philadelphia* 2008), he whispers mournful guitar chords at a moderate tempo as the band builds in layers around him.

The rehearsal starts at noon. By 4 p.m. the music

month to month, but this hasn't hindered the development of a cohesive sound, with a jazz component, a chamber music component and an indie, throw-it-in-if-it-works component.

Max Roach's "double quartet" model—strings plus jazz group—is a key influence, and now is a good time for it: Miguel Zenón, Anne Mette Iversen, Joel Harrison, Marlon Simon, Kenny Wheeler and David Murray are just some of the jazz artists who've recorded string projects of late. In much of this new music the strings, far from being syrupy wallpaper, are an integral band voice that enhances harmonic tension and rhythmic muscle.

Classical aesthetics have affected jazz from its inception. Gunther Schuller's "third stream" concept of the late '50s furthered the process and piqued the interest of Charles Mingus, Jimmy Giuffrè, Joe Zawinul and many more. Currently, Maria Schneider and other explorers of modernist, large-group jazz are meeting with major critical success and blurring genre distinctions to a remarkable degree.

This is the lake in which Aerial Photograph swims. ▶

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► Davis writes rigorously for strings and horns, and plays fluent if understated guitar solos, but he also ventures a fragile falsetto on "Here," from *City of Arrivals*.

City of Transcendence features vocalist/lyricist Michael McShane, aka Cowmuddy, on a hazy, alt-countryish waltz called "Back to the One." *City of Youth* includes not only heavily cloaked treatments of "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" and "Frère Jacques," but a sinister track in 5/4 that springs ingeniously from a flute sample off a vintage Little Red Riding Hood record.

Like a lot of jazz players his age, Davis appreciates a wide variety of contemporary music and doesn't consider nonjazz artists a lesser breed. There's a thematic resemblance, perhaps, between his *City of Philadelphia* 2008 and Sufjan Stevens' states project, although Davis shrugs at the mention. (*The Wire*, with its focus on different aspects of municipal culture every season, is another model, though Davis doesn't own a TV.) One band he does bring up is the Dirty Projectors, particularly the album *The Getty Address*, an experimental epic that, to Davis, "captures and reflects what I love about this country more than anything—its diversity. Musically, anything is possible."

From the moment Davis' band members leave the studio to the time

they arrive at Tritone days later, things happen. The music takes its final form in the editing room and becomes a complete sequenced artistic thought.

The group, therefore, will have to react to unknown stimuli while recapturing their in-studio chemistry, and without the aid of further rehearsal.

"We usually don't hear the sound clips until Matt plays them at the gig," notes Bart Miltenberger. In other words, the full emotional impact of the music hits the band and the audience at the same time.

Tritone, the weathered South Street nightclub, carries on following the recent death of proprietor Rick D. One of its lasting virtues is the recognition that Aerial Photograph, Bobby Zankel's Warriors of the Wonderful Sound and other jazz groups it books are properly part of the "alternative" orbit.

But Tritone's busy atmosphere doesn't always facilitate the concertlike listening that Aerial Photograph deserve. It's all the more intense, then, to see Davis and crew playing there to a rapt and silent crowd.

Davis' warm, dolorous melodies and unexpected rhythmic effects have a way of seizing attention. Another factor is the music's newness, the sense of an unfolding and totally different story every month. There's also the pooled virtuosity of the ensemble: the bristling saxophone solos of Jon Thompson and

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Bryan Rogers; the mountainous bass tones of Leon Boykins or Jason Fraticelli; the compelling presence of George Burton, a rising jazz pianist, on his first instrument, the viola.

But in terms of audience dynamics, the real wild card is the sound clips, the voices of anonymous fellow citizens suddenly filling the room. What starts as a private dialogue becomes a form of public address, blurring the boundary between the club interior and the street outside. Some moments are dead serious, as when the war veteran confesses his psychological wounds—a clip that stretches for three minutes with no musical background.

Others are poignant, or out-of-the-blue hilarious. In *City of Youth*, when Davis asks kids to complete the sentence "Philadelphia is," one little guy can hardly wait to weigh in, drawing out every syllable: "Philadelphia is boring ..."

City of Transcendence, the suite on religion, ends with an atheist putting a Philly sports-fan spin on a centuries-old question: "How could there possibly be a sane being, an all-good, creative, loving being, that created this bullshit that we're in?"

This isn't Davis, who grew up Catholic, being wry or dismissive about faith. During *Transcendence* we also hear Bobby Zankel explain his practice of Nichiren Shoshu Buddhism, a creed that seems to resonate with Davis, if not in a systematized way.

"I picked up this beautiful book *Being Nobody, Going Nowhere* by Ayya Khema," he recalls. "It's about meditation and letting go, and I found a lot of parallels to times in college when I'd push myself to play guitar all day, try and go 12 hours without stopping. It's the idea of getting into a quiet place, exploring yourself and music, which I really connected with. I've never considered myself a Buddhist, but I try to maintain the concept of not holding onto things you can't do anything about. It's been a blessing, especially in the music business, when everything goes wrong so often."

Continuing this level of output with Aerial Photograph after *City of Philadelphia 2008* isn't in the cards, although Davis' to-do list includes a small tour and ongoing local gigs with the band. He also foresees capping the series with a boxed set and a single-disc compilation. "It's funny, but it's getting more and more intense as the months go by," he adds, "because a lot of the compositional ideas I've had are getting used, so I'm having to draw from deeper places."

A good sign. Drawing deep, from the recesses of imagination and the enigmas of the modern-day metropolis, was the goal all along. The process is feeding itself—the happiest circumstance an artist could hope for. ■

David R. Adler's last cover story was on the state of the jazz scene in the city. Comments on this story can be sent to feedback@philadelphiaweekly.com



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