

PRIMETIME

ON THE HEELS OF HIS WORK IN PAT METHENY'S
UNITY BAND, **CHRIS POTTER** REACHES EXPRESSIVE NEW
HEIGHTS ON *THE SIRENS*, HIS FIRST AS A LEADER FOR
THE RENOWNED ECM LABEL

by David R. Adler



T WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME. CHRIS POTTER, ONE of the world's most sought-after saxophonists, could point to 15 or so albums as a leader, fruitful stints with Dave Holland, Paul Motian, Steve Swallow, Dave Douglas and others, and countless live and studio gigs as a sideman or guest. ("I don't even know how many records I'm on," he says.) But he had yet to join the ranks of Pat Metheny bandmates, alongside such peers as Christian McBride, Brad Mehldau and Larry Grenadier.

When Metheny, the guitar giant and touring juggernaut, needed someone to boost the presence and sonic range of his new quartet, the Unity Band, Potter was the saxophonist he called. It was Metheny's first time featuring a saxophonist since the classic *80/81*, with Michael Brecker and Dewey Redman. Potter set himself apart, playing tenor but also soprano, bass clarinet and alto flute.

Following a busy year of touring with the Unity Band, Potter makes his debut for the prestigious ECM Records, the label that released *80/81* and a string of other early Metheny titles. Potter had several ECM appearances as a sideman to his credit, including Motian's rapturous 2010 release *Lost in a Dream* with Jason Moran on piano. But he had yet to lead his own ECM project. That's changed with *The Sirens*, featuring Potter with bassist Grenadier, drummer Eric Harland, pianist Craig Taborn and the brilliant David Virelles on additional keyboards (prepared piano, harmonium and celeste).

"I had the idea to take it away from the straight jazz quartet and have a more textural keyboard thing, a different kind of bed to lie on," says Potter. "[Craig and David] don't really take separate solos. When they're both on a tune, they're both playing all the time." At this writing, Potter was readying a version of the group—sans Virelles and with Ethan Iverson in the piano chair—for its third weeklong run at the Village Vanguard.

No doubt, Potter had "made it" long before this. But the Metheny and ECM developments are a boost, a sign of creative breakthroughs in the offing. In a noisy café near his home in West Harlem, where he lives with his wife and 4-year-old daughter, Potter reflects on this chance to refine his voice, compositionally and on the horn, amid the glare of an even larger public. (A few days after this interview, Potter began traversing the U.S. with vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, bassist McBride and others as the Monterey Jazz Festival on Tour, an all-star band assembled in honor of the fest's 55th anniversary.)

"This is one of the wonderful things in my career, that I've had a chance to work with really strong leaders who have completely different ways of approaching music," he says. "It can all work. That's the big lesson from everybody. Working with Herbie [Hancock] and McCoy [Tyner] and Dave Holland and Sco [John Scofield] and Pat—there's a lot of different ways to put it together. It's about

▼ *Sirens Call*: Potter records his debut leader effort for ECM at Avatar Studios in New York City, September 2011



JOHN ROGERS/ECM RECORDS

finding a way that's true to yourself, going with your strengths and finding some good people to work with. And then just go ahead and do it."

"I've been following Chris since he started playing with [late bebop trumpeter] Red Rodney at a very young age, back in the '90s"

"THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT WRITING FROM A STORY," POTTER SAYS, "THAT SEEMS TO GET MY HEAD AWAY FROM THE MUSIC-MATH ASPECT. THE SONGS ARE FAIRLY SIMPLE ON PURPOSE. IT'S NOT JUST BURNING, MAKING A LOT OF HITS AND THINGS. IT'S MUCH MORE VIBEY, WHICH IS HARDER TO PULL OFF."

writes Metheny in an e-mail. "[O]ne thing that has been really apparent is his ongoing research to push his music ... to a transcendent zone where the best stuff seems to live. [H]e really earned it by working his way through some very tough historical terrain and coming out the other side not only intact, but with a lot to tell everyone. ... It's this thing where someone plays great and you can carry a sense of what you just heard out of the club with you. There is a vibe, a spirit and an intangible meaning that goes beyond a style of music or a way of playing, like what happens when someone is telling you something really important."

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CHRIS POTTER WAS BORN IN CHICAGO ON NEW YEAR'S Day, 1971, and raised from age 3 in Columbia, S.C. "I'm a transplanted Southerner," he says. "My mom's originally from Queens, my father's from the Midwest, so I never really got a Southern accent. But I'm glad that I grew up there and got a taste of what that is. Especially now that I've been in New York for more than half of my life."

After dabbling on piano and guitar, Potter took up the saxophone at age 10. "I was lucky very early on to have a few key teachers who saw that I was interested and spent extra time with me," he continues. "I had a fifth grade music teacher, Ms. Hall, who stayed with me after school and we'd play through Dave Brubeck tunes. That was the first music I found. My first saxophone teacher, too, Bryson Borgstedt, he came over to dinner recently. I hadn't seen him in a long, long time. He would make me cassettes of Sonny Rollins or Cannonball Adderley and say, 'You might want to listen to this.' I started playing professionally, too. By the time I was in high school I was usually playing at least two times a week, along with weddings and stuff on the weekend. There were these guys who were totally into bebop, and there were some more open guys. There was a scene, and it was small enough that I was able to do a lot of stuff."

In the late '80s Potter moved to New York, first to attend the New School and then Manhattan School of Music. "It was an explosion of all these things to listen to, all these new influences from the city, all these new people," he recalls. "I was the only one in South Carolina my age who was playing any jazz at all. So to find Brad Mehldau, Peter Bernstein, Larry Goldings, Joel Frahm, Ryan Kisor—all these people [pursuing careers as jazz musicians] who were also my age—that was a whole new thing for me."

On his first major gig, with Red Rodney, Potter got the rare chance "to stand next to some real bebop in every way, and absorb that." The music ranged widely: "We would do some Bird tunes but

we also did some stuff that [pianist] Garry [Dial] wrote. I think we did a tune of mine every now and then. ... [Red] was hysterical. He'd spent his fair share of time locked up, shall we say, so he was kind of a jailhouse lawyer. He knew a lot of stuff about a lot of stuff"

At 22, Potter began working with the great drummer Paul Motian, who drew out some of the saxophonist's most exploratory playing, notably on *Lost in a Dream* and a slew of remarkable live recordings for Winter & Winter (pairing Potter with alto saxophonist Greg Osby, violist Mat Maneri and others). "I've been thinking about Paul a lot," Potter says, reflecting on Motian's death in late 2011. "Now that he isn't here to play his own music, I find myself playing his tunes. I remember him playing piano; he had such an unerring aesthetic sense of what to do and when. I was very happy that [*Lost in a Dream*] got made, that there's a document of that."

Craig Taborn hears the impact of Motian in Potter's writing for *The Sirens*: "I definitely see that influence coming through—things that are composed but much more spare, open to a freer interpretation."

In 1992 Potter debuted as a leader, recording for Criss Cross and Concord before jumping to Verve and then Sunnyside. In 1999 he began another long tenure with Dave Holland, legendary bassist and Miles Davis alum, whose acclaimed quintet was then recording for ECM. The group's driving rhythms, angular and highly precise, were the furthest thing from Motian's jagged-edged lyricism, yet Potter found a home here too: He and the quintet are at their raw and fiery best on *Extended Play: Live at Birdland* (2003).

The Holland-Potter partnership also spilled over to the Monterey Quartet (with pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba) and the Overtone Quartet (with Jason Moran). Significantly, the drummer in both these all-star bands was Eric Harland, who now plays with Taborn (and guitarist Kevin Eubanks) in Holland's latest project, Prism. And Holland's sub when he couldn't do the Overtone gigs? Larry Grenadier, who was also a regular with Motian. The players on *The Sirens* share many entanglements, and it comes through in the music.

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POTTER DOESN'T MAKE THE BIGGEST FUSS ABOUT *THE Sirens* being inspired by Homer's *The Odyssey*. "There's something about writing from a story," he says, "that seems to get my head away from the music-math aspect. The songs are fairly simple on purpose. It's not just burning, making a lot of hits and things; it's much more vibey. Which is harder to pull off—you really have to have some mature musicians to make that kind of thing work."

From the first Vanguard run in early 2011, with Virelles on piano, it was clear that this could be some of the freest, most expressive work of Potter's career to date. "Since the music was easy to play," Harland recalls, "it didn't take that much time for us to

start tremendously communicating through the music. By the time we got to the Vanguard, man, each song, every set, every night was something completely different.”

Taborn, who plays Rhodes in Potter’s funk-driven Underground band, was the leader’s first choice for pianist, but Virelles put such a stamp on the music that Potter decided to record both of them. He was clear about his intention to use acoustic keyboards, not electric, and he put Virelles to work on four tracks (plus a short coda). “Chris brought a harmonium to the session,” Virelles says, “and I wound up using the same one on my recording, *Continuum* [Pi]. For the prepared piano, it was a trial-and-error process. I had these bolts from IKEA that I brought with me. I had a whole jar full of change, so I filled up a plastic bag with coins and then taped that to the piano.”

While Taborn delineates the bulk of the harmony, Virelles adds shifting layers, alternately dreamlike and percussive, opening new channels of dialogue. On the soprano sax feature “Nausikaa,” in a slow and dramatic rubato feel, piano and celeste jointly invent a solo of the darkest, most unusual beauty. If the album has a heart-stopper, it’s this. “Celeste has a connotation of Christmas or children’s tunes,” Potter remarks. “But if it’s played in a more angular way it’s almost a little sinister.”

There are jazz touchstones throughout *The Sirens*: “Wayfinder,” with a spontaneous episode of smoking improv between piano, prepared piano and drums, is a blues. “Kalypso” is written over “I Got Rhythm” changes. “Penelope” is a waltz, “Dawn (With Her Rosy Fingers)” a swaying ballad with a dissonant melody and searching solos all around (Potter goes last). But “The Shades,” a two-minute closing statement by piano and prepared piano, approaches Morton Feldman-esque levels of stillness and space. “That was actually an intro to ‘Nausikaa,’” Potter reveals. “It was something they made up on the spot.”

“The Sirens” finds Virelles on harmonium and Potter on bass

clarinet, expounding a long, haunting legato theme. Grenadier ventures an arco solo of supreme subtlety, without question a highlight of the disc. “[The song] had this snaky melody and I wanted to keep that present,” Grenadier says. “The arco thing was also to create another texture, add another voice, another sound to the band.”

As Harland says, this group brings a transformative energy to every live set it plays. *The Sirens* is but one set of possibilities for this music, at a remove from the audience. The expansively reverberated ECM sound adds breadth, but it can cool the heat that the band creates in a room like the Vanguard. Live is where Potter and his colleagues break this music wide open. (In several YouTube clips from Milan in 2012, Potter can be heard devouring the *Sirens* book and other music with Virelles, bassist Joe Martin and drummer Gerald Cleaver.)

What *The Sirens* does capture is Potter’s evolving interest in programmatic or themed works and expanded tonal palettes. *Song for Anyone*, his tetet album from 2007, featured woodwind and string writing of great talent and imagination. In mid-2011 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Potter premiered an extended work for saxophone, trumpet, violin, bass and drums, inspired by Ellsworth Kelly’s 1951 painting “Seine.” (I interviewed Potter onstage before the show and recorded a podcast for the museum.) Other large-canvas ideas are in the works, for later in 2013 and beyond.

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PART OF POTTER’S STRENGTH, IN ERIC HARLAND’S VIEW, stems from “so many years *not* being a leader. The more experience you have playing with other people, that’s just more vocabulary that comes to your understanding. [It’s about] how to play with other people, versus just expecting other people to play with you.”

Not that Potter even needs a band. On YouTube one can find an unaccompanied 10-minute rendition of “Tune Up” that he



◀ Left: Potter (and bassist Larry Grenadier) at the Village Vanguard in February Right: Grenadier, Potter, David Virelles, Craig Taborn and Eric Harland (from left) during the sessions for *The Sirens* in 2011

improvised at a 2011 clinic in London. Despite the iffy audio, it's as astonishing an example of Potter's virtuosity as you'll find on any official recording: fiercely swinging, complex, endlessly varied, informed from the start by a compositional logic. Every detail of Potter's tone and attack jumps out at you, something that also happens on recordings of Potter without drums, such as Motian's *Lost in a Dream* or Kenny Wheeler's 2005 quartet release *What Now?* (with Holland and pianist John Taylor).

"Chris is a thoroughbred," writes pianist Renee Rosnes in an e-mail. "He played on three of my albums, and in particular I really enjoy listening to him on *As We Are Now*, a quartet date with Christian McBride and Jack DeJohnette. Back in the mid-'90s, when we were both members of Joe Henderson's big band, Joe told me more than once how impressed he was with Chris. No small praise for a man who chose his words as carefully as he chose his notes." Rosnes enlisted Potter, along with Bobby Hutcherson, Lewie Nash and other heavyweights, for a septet tribute to Henderson at Jazz at Lincoln Center last year.

As much as Potter leaps out in a larger ensemble, he's also uncommonly adept in the tenor-bass-drums format. His trio documents happen to be sessions led by bassists: Scott Colley's 1998 debut, *This Place*, and 2000 follow-up, *The Magic Line*, along with Steve Swallow's *Damaged in Transit* (2001), find Potter in superb form on a wide range of material. The Colley-Potter-Bill Stewart trio essentially became Potter's quartet with the addition of pianist Kevin Hays. "Trio is tricky," Potter says. "It's a lot of energy to put out. And to make it coherent to the listener you have to be kind of slick. Sometimes you have to play less. So far, whenever I play trio I find myself going in a more standards direction. Just a few weeks ago I played some trio for the first time in a long time. I set up a gig with Adam Cruz and Larry Grenadier; we did a few nights in St. Louis just for fun."

Amid that kind of informality there's the Pat Metheny experi-

ence, with big sound in big halls, lights and high-tech production, a grueling schedule and big, devoted crowds. "With Pat it was great just getting on the bus," Potter says. "We started off in upstate New York and went all the way to Seattle, back down through Texas, Georgia and then back up to New York. Just drove the whole circuit in like a month and a half."

Metheny is an extraordinary improviser, but he's also meticulous about plotting a set and hitting a certain arc every time out. "I was kind of curious if that was going to drive me nuts or not, to be honest," Potter says. "But it really didn't; I got into it. We played a lot of the same set for many gigs in a row, and I don't usually do that. [As Potter told the *New York Times* in 2001, the monotony of large-scale touring is why he left his high-profile gig with Steely Dan.] But you can really focus on some kinds of detail that might get lost if you're all over the map. You have to find that space every night, and it's not going to be the same." When I suggested how much the layout and sound of the room must influence the music, Potter emphasized instead: "The audience is huge. I don't think jazz audiences realize how much they're a part of the gig."

More than the number of instruments Potter played on the Unity Band tour, what's striking is the number of different guitars—even an orchestration—he was up against. Metheny's steel-string acoustic blended with tenor on "This Belongs to You," his nylon-string with the same on "New Year"; the 42-string Picasso guitar met bass clarinet on "Come and See"; the Roland synth guitar wailed on "Roofdogs" and "Are You Going With Me," alongside soprano sax and alto flute, respectively.

"Chris can do so many things," writes Metheny, "and one of the attractions for me is to try to utilize every aspect of his talent to the best of my ability. In a lot of ways, even with the success of this past year with the Unity Band thing, I feel like we only scratched the surface of what we could do together. I'm excited to keep it all going and see where it can lead." **JT**

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▲ Road Warriors: Pat Metheny, Antonio Sanchez, Potter and Ben Williams (from left) at the Newport Jazz Festival in August