Jeff "Tain" Watts: How He Revolutionized Jazz Drumming

The Tainish Tinge

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Jeff "Tain" Watts, Newport Jazz Festival 2013

It's day two of the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival at Marcus Garvey Park in Harlem in August. Jeff "Tain" Watts is dancing in the wings. He hears Camille Thurman sing "Skylark," and he starts to sway. He holds out an arm ceremoniously to fellow drummer Johnathan Blake, due to play with Dr. Lonnie Smith in a couple of hours. Blake and Watts proceed to link arms, twirl, break away and spin, perfectly nonchalant. Watts' good cheer is infectious, heightening anticipation for the following set by his quintet with tenor saxophonist Troy Roberts, guitarist Paul Bollenback, pianist David Budway and bassist Chris Smith. They're here to play material from *Blue, Vol. 1* and *Blue, Vol. 2*, Watts' first solo releases since 2011, both on his Dark

Key label.

When Watts takes the stage, he shouts out Harlem and mentions his time as a resident long ago, adding, "I haven't appeared much here under my own name. That'll change."

****

A Pittsburgh native, Watts debuted as a leader in 1999 with *Citizen Tain* and has devoted more and more time to composing and bandleading ever since. (*Megawatts*, a 1991 trio session with Kenny Kirkland and bassist Charles Fambrough, was released as Watts' debut without his authorization. Sunnyside reissued it in 2004, with Watts onboard.)

Before emerging as a leader, Watts proved to be one of the most consequential sidemen of the last 30 years, revamping and revitalizing the art of swing itself with Wynton Marsalis' group from 1982 to '88. His volatile, precise, poetic approach to the beat is seared onto the landmark Marsalis albums *Think of One* and *Black Codes (From the Underground)* , among others. These recordings are all the more crucial for documenting pianist Kenny Kirkland, the dearly missed "Doctone," Watts' musical soulmate, bestower of the nickname "Tain." (While on tour, Kirkland spotted a road sign for Chieftain Gas and somehow came up with "Jefftain.")

Together Watts and Kirkland went on to form a much longer association with Branford Marsalis; Watts played both quartet and trio with the celebrated saxophonist, staying another decade after Kirkland's tragic death in November 1998. Along the way Watts gained three years' experience with Marsalis and Kirkland in the house band for *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* and amassed sideman credits with Kenny Garrett, Michael Brecker, McCoy Tyner and Alice Coltrane, among others. When he finally left Branford's group in 2009 and yielded his chair to the young and worthy Justin Faulkner, it seemed to signal a decisive career shift. "It was time," says Watts.

Although Watts is still busy with Jerry Gonzalez and the Fort Apache Band, saxophonist Yosvany Terry and others, he's on an independent streak. He's giving free rein to his virtuosity, eclecticism, devious humor and, now and then, even his singing; his vocal alter ego is Juan Tainish, an inversion of "Tainish one." ("I don't trust him," Watts says.) He's also hiring new players, breaking them in as they strengthen his music in turn: Troy Roberts, Chris Smith, pianist James Francies, bassist Orlando Le Fleming and more. "So many roads that I've looked down, they invariably lead me back to Africa in some kind of way," Watts remarks, sizing up his calling as a drummer-leader in the footsteps of jazz masters Elvin Jones and Tony Williams but also nourished by fusion, rock, R&B and classical music.

At 55, Watts has also entered a new phase personally, and it might explain his joyful demeanor offstage: He left Brooklyn in 2013 after 25 years and relocated to Easton, Pa., with his wife, pocket trumpeter and vibraphonist Laura Watts (formerly Kahle). Their twin daughters, Isis and Jelena, are almost 5.

Dominating a quiet residential block, the Watts family home was once St. Peter's Fifth Lutheran Church, a weathered but impressive red brick structure built in the 1870s. The pews are intact, the stained glass is vibrant and the raised stage is ample, perfect for recording and rehearsal. (One pew is filled with over a dozen snare drums, aligned like congregants.) There are additional soundproofed booths downstairs, installed by a previous owner. There's an adjoining house, the old rectory, with living space to spare. There's even a vegetable and herb garden. Watts recorded both volumes of *Blue* here, in "The Sanctuary." Musicians love making the journey. "I took a break after *Family*," Watts says, referring to his 2011 quartet date with alto saxophonist Steve Wilson, pianist David Kikoski and bassist James Genus. "I got the family going, and my mom passed away in between. The whole series [*Blue*] is dedicated to her."

****

The list of Pittsburgh jazz royalty is long-Hines, Strayhorn, Roy Eldridge, Kenny Clarke, Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, on and on-and Watts stands humbly, respectably in that lineage. He was playing drum set by age 12, but wasn't a jazzhead until later. "I did classical percussion and drum corps kind of stuff during the day," he says, "and then at night I would play along with the radio-R&B and classic rock. Eventually I got exposed to '70s fusion and that led me toward the core of jazz music."

Watts specialized in timpani at Duquesne University, "and I could play them," he asserts. "I would like to be in a professional situation now playing timpani. Perfect pitch helps greatly in just being musical and stuff like that. Even right now I feel like I can play timpani with anybody, and I can't wait. I'mma have the timpani battle, the timpani challenge-I'm gonna practice for six months.

"But anyway, I enjoyed that. I was learning the old pieces and playing Bach stuff on marimba, learning 20th-century stuff, new music. There was one semester when the orchestra at Duquesne every week would play some different Beethoven, just rolling through the symphonies. [I was really] trying to make those timpani parts musical. But I ended up wanting to be a studio musician, like Harvey Mason or somebody like that, playing drums but also percussion back when the studio scene was happening."

After Duquesne, Watts arrived at Berklee and hooked up with Branford Marsalis, fellow drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith and other lifelong compatriots. "A number of musicians kept saying that they didn't like playing with Jeff because he plays funny," Marsalis recalls. "I was intrigued. The whole postbop thing had a pretension to it that I found uninteresting. The guys who were saying Jeff played funny were very conventional players, so I tracked him down and immediately I was like, 'Wow. OK. I get why they don't like him.' When Wynton said he needed a drummer, I said, 'I got your guy.'"

"Tain is an absolute, thorough, complete, once-in-an-epoch master of form," declares Wynton Marsalis. "In the six years I played with him, I never heard him get off the form, ever."

His approach, however, was uncommonly adventurous. "There were a lot of guys that kept time," Branford notes, "and then the flurry of activity just before the 1, and then a big crash down on the 1. What Tain started working on in Wynton's band was that every four or eight bars there wasn't gonna be a big crash, so that meant we had to understand the form. … Tain is able to assist in actually playing form, as opposed to playing a string of four- and eight-bar phrases. It's quite incredible."

Watts could even hear tempos within tempos on the form, bringing a fresh rhythmic dimension to Wynton's music. It's most readily apparent on tunes like "Autumn Leaves" and "April in Paris" from *Marsalis Standard Time, Vol. 1*, released in 1987 and featuring bassist Bob Hurst and pianist Marcus Roberts (or J Master, as Watts dubbed him). "Tain was the one who taught it to me," Wynton says of these rhythmic devices, which make time speed up or slow down in exact proportion against an underlying beat. "We had heard Miles' group and Mingus play a third above the time," Marsalis continues. "Duke Ellington does it on 'The Tattooed Bride,' but I didn't know that music then. … Tain took it to another level. I learned the concept from him and constructed harmonic things around what he was doing."

On *Secret Rhymes*, the newest release from Troy Roberts, "Up Jumped Spring" by Freddie Hubbard appears in a distinctly Tainish rendition that harks back to early Marsalis. Watts himself is playing drums. "It's straight-up Tain's ideas," Roberts says. "The metric modulation where, for example, dotted-quarter equals quarter to go down [in tempo], or quarter-triplet equals the new quarter to go up. No one really talks about it, but it happens on other people's records, and it's all over Tain's own records and compositions." The arrangement of Monk's "Brilliant Corners" from *Blue, Vol. 1* is a case in point. "Rhythm-a-Ning" from Branford's *Metamorphosen* (2009) takes a related path.

"A general agenda for Wynton's early groups was to look for extensions of things from the tradition," Watts remembers. "It has precedent in a whole bunch of world music, [like] African music that just stops on a dime and every tempo means something in life. I started thinking about these cycles and little theorems, and Wynton asked me to help implement some of this stuff in the band. We didn't really get to complete the work, but I gave rhythm-section exercises: Cats might be playing a standard form and it'd almost be like a round, like everybody would be in a different frame of reference or slice of the pie as far as time. You get comfortable with resolving phrases, little decisions that you have to make. The goal was to achieve the type of fluency and intimacy and conversation that happens in free music, but to have very direct control of it."

****

Some of Watts' freest playing on record occurs on Branford's 2006 quartet date *Braggtown*, which finds the band at peak "burnout," furiously swinging with no inhibition. "That's what we did, man, we showed up and burned the fuck out for three hours," says Eric Revis, the quartet's bassist.

“I remember pieces of fingers falling off.” It’s no accident that the songs with “Tain” in the title over the years-Branford’s “Waiting for Tain,” “Citizen Tain” and “Tain Mutiny”; Kirkland’s “Chambers of Tain”-fall on the aggressive side.

But also on *Braggtown*, Marsalis could render Henry Purcell’s “O Solitude” and rely on Watts for the ideal shading and coloration. “Because Tain was a multiple percussion major he hears sound differently than a guy who just listened to Blue Note records that whole time,” Marsalis observes. “What people noticed [about Tain’s playing] was the density of it, and that’s the part they tried to replicate. All of the melodic interplay and the way he relates to solos, and when he changes cymbals, and the colors he creates on ballads, it’s not even referenced. It’s just, ‘Let’s play real loud like Tain.’”

“I wish people realized what [Tain] played on Branford’s [2004 ballads] record *Eternal*,” says pianist Joey Calderazzo, who had the unenviable task of replacing Kirkland in the Marsalis quartet. “Tain orchestrated all those songs to make them sound the way they did. And the interesting part was watching how he would get into the song when he was given a new piece of music.”

Revis sounds a similar note: “Tain is by far the best orchestrator on the bandstand that I’ve ever encountered. … We deal with 3D; I think Tain is dealing with like 5 or 6D at this point.”

It was Kenny Kirkland who imbued Watts with the confidence to be a composer, and several Watts tunes in fact became staples of Branford Marsalis’ repertoire. The hall-of-mirrors “Wry Köln” first appeared on *Citizen Tain* and was reprised on *WATTS* (2009), a quartet super-lineup with Branford, Terence Blanchard and Christian McBride that Watts intends to revisit. (“Dance of the Niblets,” from *Megawatts*, is an early version of “Wry Köln.”)

“Vodville,” Watts’ tribute to vodka, appeared on his 2002 sophomore release, *Bar Talk*, and became a Marsalis quartet vehicle as well. “‘Vodville’ had a form that was so ghastly,” Marsalis says. “We butchered that song for six weeks until we figured out how to play it. I mean sheer butchery.” The secret was finding an inner simplicity or at least directness in Watts’ writing. “Parts of the song became trigger points,” Marsalis adds. “With Tain, when people ask me what the form is, I don’t know because I don’t have to count. The melody [is] distinctive. You have all these cues-[*sings*]-it just rolls off the tongue, and that’s how I learned the songs. I didn’t stare at the changes and try to subdivide it and work it out, because then the solos would sound worked out. … If your brain is focused on pattern and scale complementing chord structure, it’s hard to play those songs. They’re less effective that way.”

“The architecture of [Tain’s] tunes is really deep, the way he lines things up,” Revis concurs. “His tunes are never like exercises; they were always tunes first, and the underlying complexity would just add to it.”

The examples abound: “Countronious Rex,” from *Contemporary Jazz*; “Blakzilla” and “Seed of Blakzilla,” from *Braggtown* and *Folk’s Songs*, respectively; “Samo©,” from *Folk’s Songs* and *Metamorphosen*; the vocal epic “Like the Rose,” Watts’ approximation of a Sting tune, from *Bar Talk* and *Detained at the Blue Note*; and “Same Page,” another Juan Tainish specialty (“a well-constructed ditty,” Watts says, “my low-rent ‘Little Wing’-I have to do a remix and let somebody sing it”).

“Tain is prolific,” says Paul Bollenback. “Every time I work with him he’s got so many tunes. His book is huge, probably approaching 100 tunes.” His individuality, moreover, has everything to do with how he picks musicians: Bollenback on electric and acoustic guitars, Grégoire Maret on harmonica and Henry Hey on supplemental keyboards, or on *Blue, Vol. 1*, vocalists as dissimilar as Frank McComb and Frank Lacy. Watts produces his own recordings and has a rich sonic fabric to show for it.

*****

Leaving the Marsalis orbit and creating all that he has in its stead does not imply that Watts is burying the past. He refers lovingly to “those Marsalisy creatures,” at one point enthusing over a very old photo of himself with Wynton, Branford and Ellis. “He’s my brother, man,” says Wynton. “He’s Tain. We were young when we started up together. You play in a band with somebody and create a new kind of sound. … All those ups and downs you go through, you don’t replace that kind of relationship. Herlin Riley loves Tain, Ali Jackson loves Tain. It’s the tradition of the band: The drum chair always has Tain in it. They revere and respect him, they talk about him."

"We go on these musical trips when we play," says Branford. "We played together last year and it's still there. There are times in my solos when he has something to say. I can feel it and I just stop playing; he does his thing and then I start up again. I haven't been able to do that with anybody else."

SIDEBAR

The Lions' Den: Checking in with Tain's '80s-era drumming peers

Carl Allen stepped down in 2013 from 12 years on the faculty at the Juilliard School, including five as the director of jazz studies. He is currently the leader of the Art of Elvin, a tribute to his heroes Art Blakey and Elvin Jones, as well as the drummer for the Buster Williams Quartet, Christian McBride & Inside Straight and the Mack Avenue Superband. He is also the house drummer for the annual Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition.

Winard Harper is the leader of Jeli Posse, an ensemble of varying size and membership that explores the intersections of jazz and Caribbean and West African music, which performs regularly in New York City and the surrounding area. The Jersey City resident also spearheads a weekly project there at Moore's Lounge called "Keep Jazz in the Neighborhoods," designed to present quality jazz without a commuter train. He performs regularly as a sideman with Delfeayo Marsalis and Jimmy Heath.

Lewis Nash continues to pile onto his claim as the most recorded jazz drummer in history, with recent sessions including those led by Houston Person, Frank Kimbrough and Ryan Truesdell. Additionally, he played festival dates this past summer with Joe Lovano, George Cables and John Clayton. At Colorado's Vail Jazz Party in September, Nash presented a multimedia tribute to his drumming idols. He also leads his own quintet, featuring Jeremy Pelt, Jimmy Greene, Renee Rosnes and Peter Washington.

Ralph Peterson toured during the summer with Wayne Escoffery, and in the fall with Victor Gould. He owns his own record label, Onyx Productions, and in 2016 plans to release three recordings. Two will be from his established projects, the Triangular Trio and Fo'Tet; the other will premiere a brand new quintet,

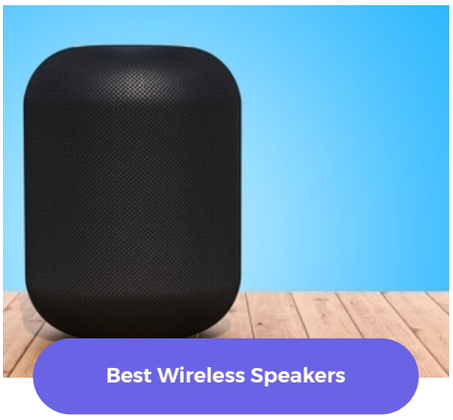
Aggregate Prime, with saxophonist Gary Thomas, guitarist Mark Whitfield, pianist Vijay Iyer and bassist Kenny Davis (featuring new compositions from each member).

Herlin Riley made his debut as a leader at the 2015 Newport Jazz Festival, with a quintet featuring trumpeter Bruce Harris, saxophonist Godwin Louis, pianist Emmet Cohen and bassist Russell Hall. He used that same quintet to record a CD, New Direction, for Mack Avenue (release date TBD). In the summer he toured Europe with Dr. John, but took time out for a special collaborative concert with fellow New Orleans drummers Jason Marsalis and Shannon Powell in France. MICHAEL J. WEST

Purchase this issue from Barnes & Noble or Apple Newsstand. Print and digital subscriptions are also available.

Originally Published November 20, 2015

Sponsored Ads



1. First Signs of Lung Cancer
2. Vinyl Albums For Sale
3. Used Guitars on Sale
4. Rare Vinyl Records

Festivals & Events

Dec 31
From 9:00 PM to 11:00 PM EST
Pink Martini: Good Riddance 2020!

Dec 18 - Feb 21
From 12:00 AM to 11:59 PM EST
Marcus Roberts, the Modern Jazz Generation, and American Symphony Orchestra: *United We Play*

Jan 6
From 6:30 PM to 8:00 PM EST
[iNSIDE] THE JAZZ NOTE Guest Artist Series: "50 Years of Weather Report" Hosted by Christian McBride
Montclair, New Jersey

SEE MORE

Editor's Picks

LISTS

10 Best Jazz Albums of the 1970s: Critics' Picks

What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary...

Ad

BREAKTHROUGH GUITAR
Skip Guitar Theory - Do This
Avoid The Headaches 97% Of Guitarists Fall Into. Do This To Play Guitar Without Thinking

SPEAKIN' MY PIECE WITH DEKEL BOR

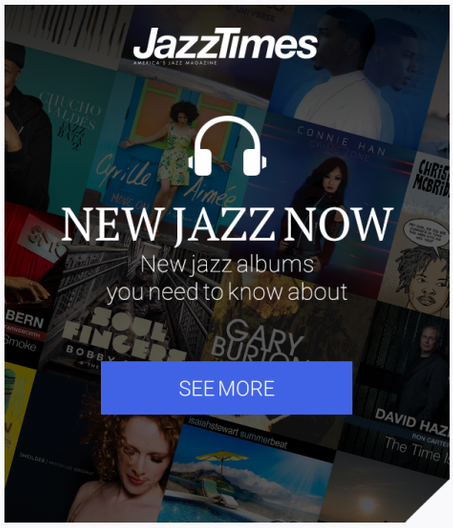
Speakin' My Piece with Dekel Bor

JazzTimes, in association with Ropeadope Records,...

PROFILES

The Changing Nature of Protest in Jazz

What we went to offer is a positive notion, a...



Advertisement

Related Posts

John Beasley Reflects on Miles, Herbie, and (of Course) Monk

One night in L.A. in the early '90s, a 30-something John Beasley found himself, improbably, occupying the "second keyboard" chair alongside Herbie Hancock, one of … Read More

Noah Haidu Pays Homage to Kenny Kirkland

Noah Haidu remembers the first time that he really "got" fellow pianist Kenny Kirkland. Haidu, still in his teens at the time, was with his … Read More

The Royal Bopsters Keep Their Group Identity Alive

At a quick glance, the Royal Bopsters' new recording, Party of Four (Motéma), appears to be a straightforward continuation of their 2015 debut, The Royal Bopsters Project. The … Read More

An Examination of *Black Coffee* by Peggy Lee

In April of 1953, Peggy Lee embarked upon a recording project that would produce a top-ten jazz vocal album of all time—her peerless and legendary … Read More

Advertisement

JazzTimes Newsletter

America's jazz resource, delivered to your inbox

SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE NEWSLETTER

JazzTimes
AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

Published since 1970, *JazzTimes*—"America's Jazz Magazine"—provides comprehensive and in-depth coverage of the jazz scene. Often controversial, always entertaining, *JazzTimes* is a favorite of musicians and fans alike.

FOLLOW US

© 2020 Madavor Media, LLC. All rights reserved.