

Matt Brewer **Mythology**

Those who've been following the likes of Greg Osby, Gonzalo Rubalcaba, Antonio Sanchez, Steve Coleman, Roman Filiu and others have no doubt heard the exceptional bass playing of **Matt Brewer**. In 2009, when he propelled himself to a strong top-three finish in the Thelonious Monk International Bass Competition, Brewer's presence on the jazz scene was already hard to miss. His **Criss Cross** appearances on Mike Moreno's **First In Mind** (Criss 1338) and David Binney's **Anacapa** (Criss 1370) have left a lasting impression as well. With **Mythology**, his welcome debut as a leader, Brewer showcases his own writing at the helm of a sextet, with some of the fiercest individualists in the music today.

Born in Edmond, Oklahoma, Brewer was raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a place forever transformed in the imagination by the smash TV series *Breaking Bad*. "They busted a meth lab next to the house I grew up in," the bassist says, "so that stuff does go on. The high school that Walter White taught at, I actually went there for a year. It's really beautiful out there — the natural surroundings are super-inspiring."

The Brewer household was musical. "My grandfather, my mom's dad, was a trumpet player. I never met him, but he played with Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, Charlie Barnet, Woody Herman, back when there was a scene with territory bands in the Oklahoma region. My mom was also a radio DJ — she interviewed Dexter Gordon, Wayne Shorter, Nancy Wilson. My dad plays trombone. When my mom was pregnant with me they'd put headphones on her stomach and play Coltrane, Debussy, lots of different music."

Attending the Interlochen Arts Academy for the first time at age 10, Brewer discovered the bass and knew right away. "My dad taught there during summers for 20 years. I would beg him to take me back to the room where they kept all the basses. I started on upright, and my dad wouldn't let me get an electric bass until I learned all my major and minor scales in all 12 keys." (Brewer plays electric exclusively on Binney's **Anacapa**.)

Ultimately, through studies at Juilliard and immersion in the New York scene, Brewer would strive to bring his musicianship to the highest level, as borne out by the astonishingly high-caliber bandmates on **Mythology**: saxophonists **Steve Lehman** and **Mark Turner** in the frontline; guitarist **Lage Lund** and pianist **David Virelles** as ensemble voices and featured soloists as well; drummer **Marcus Gilmore** bringing a flexible, swinging, highly structured vocabulary to the date.

"One thing that's really important for me is people with a really deep sense of rhythm," Brewer explains. "My music is not very complicated rhythmically, but these players bring an openness and a groove that lifts everything. I've played with Marcus for quite a while — we were in Gonzalo's band for five or six years together. I feel like I've developed a vocabulary with him. There are certain things I feel like I can play only when Marcus is playing drums."

Virelles, for Brewer, is not only a fine soloist but "one of the most gifted accompanists on the instrument, and that's sometimes overlooked on the piano. David is probably the most recent relationship of everybody in the band. I've really only played with David a handful of times, but I knew he was the guy I wanted for this music."

In adding Lund on guitar, Brewer knew he was getting a fluid and brilliant soloist but also someone who could develop texture, counterpoint and harmonic detail in tandem with Virelles. “Some of the music I wrote on guitar, and some on piano,” Brewer says. “They turn out really differently depending on the instrument. Some specific ideas I could have only written on guitar, so I felt I needed that [in the band]. I like that lush harmony, that sound of two things being doubled.”

Lund himself has three dates out as a leader on Criss Cross, and four more as a sideman. “I’ve played in Lage’s band,” adds Brewer, “and we’ve played together in Will Vinson’s band, a number of other people. One thing I really love about Lage is his comping. He has a deep sense of counterpoint and voice leading. When you learn the guitar it’s easy to be shapes-oriented — you learn these stock voicings that move up and down. Lage’s managed to get completely away from that and have this sense of independent voice leading. It’s really musical and opens things up, adds a lot of freedom. He’s unique in that respect.”

One of the richest aspects of **Mythology** is the two-saxophone sound, and in particular the encounter between Turner and Lehman. “They have such big ears and they’re both also so free to go in any direction,” Brewer enthuses. “There are no stylistic limits between the two of them.”

Brewer turned in a pivotal sideman performance on Lehman’s incendiary 2012 trio date *Dialect Fluorescent*. “Steve and I met when I was playing at the Vanguard with Greg Osby,” Brewer recalls. “We went on to play in the band Dual Identity with Rudresh Mahanthappa. The way he writes is so challenging and different. Some people write really hard music and kind of hide behind it, but Steve really is one of the most honest musicians I know, and no matter how challenging it is, I feel like he means every note of it. That’s why I love playing with him. He’s super-rooted in the tradition, studied with Jackie McLean for a long time, and when you hear him play on tunes it’s so clear that he’s deep inside the harmony. I can hear Jackie in his sound so clearly.”

Turner, one of the most esteemed and influential tenor saxophonists of his generation, made his debut on this very label, with the classic 1994 session **Yam Yam** (Criss 1094). He’s had nine more Criss Cross appearances as well — the most recent being drummer Johnathan Blake’s **Gone, But Not Forgotten** (Criss 1368), in a two-sax frontline with the amazing Chris Potter. “Mark is one of the most important musicians in a really long time,” Brewer says. “I can’t say how much respect I have for Mark and how much I’ve learned from him.”

From the first elegant melodic strains of **Abiquiú**, one can hear the band components coming together: snaky and intricate rapport between the saxes, subtle interlaced figures from the piano and guitar, that “deep sense of rhythm” from the drums as well as everyone else. Brewer’s unaccompanied solo midway through is a highlight. “This is a tune I wrote on guitar — I kind of started out writing a bossa and then wanted it to be more open rhythmically,” he says. Abiquiú, he reveals, is a town in northern New Mexico: “It’s barely a town, hardly anybody lives there. But that’s where Georgia O’Keeffe lived, and a lot of her paintings are just landscapes of that part of the state.”

Rose Hill is inspired by the island nation of Mauritius. “My girlfriend’s family is from there,” says Brewer, “although she was born in London. We went there for a month last

January — it's a tropical island, they have a mango tree and a papaya tree in the yard so you wake up and have fresh fruit in the morning. It's a little paradise. The only thing I brought with me was a little nylon-string guitar. I wrote the beginning of this tune in that house." You can picture the surroundings in the swelling water-like quality of the harmonies, which prompt vivid and exploratory solos from Turner and Lund.

Fighting Windmills, a *Don Quixote* reference and an older tune of Brewer's, is all about Turner and Lehman up front: their duo saxophone intro is a rare pleasure, spiraling and breathing and forging common ground from dissimilar approaches. "We've done that live a few times," Brewer says, "and the things they come up with are so far-reaching and creative. It's a good excuse for me to just sit back and listen to them for a while during a set." Turner and Lehman play shifting roles in the intro before they hit the darting unison line that brings in the full band. Brewer offsets the coiled tension of the piece with an elegant straight-eighth feel and flowing melodies, giving Virelles wide-open space as the only soloist.

Lehman sits out on the striking ballad ***Joya***, which Brewer named for Malalai Joya, one of a number of women to have served in the Afghan parliament. "She received death threats and spoke out against drug lords and warlords in her country, putting herself at grave risk for doing so," Brewer says. "I remember being really moved by [her story]. The beginning melody to me sounds anxious and tumultuous and dark but then there's this really pretty release at the end. I can't believe how astonishingly beautiful Mark plays on this. I love the things Mark implies that are outside the harmony, yet still so related to the tune and so gorgeous. When I wrote this I was listening to a lot of Bartók, and there's something of that influence in the melody, in those intervals. I was really thinking about melody/bass note relationship, and then where Mark starts soloing, a prettier open section."

Moorings, much of it 3/4 time, is a "water" piece to pair with ***Rose Hill***. "One of my childhood best friends was really into sailing," Brewer recalls. "He's taken me a couple times, and I remember spending one night sleeping in the sailboat and they attached it to the mooring, the little ball that's anchored and floating with the waves, keeping the boat in place. That image got stuck in my head." Brewer sets up a rolling 3/4 feel to evoke that experience, while the tune's harmonic and melodic ideas are "pretty directly influenced by Milton Nascimento, who's one of my big heroes," the bassist adds. "I wanted to have a tune that starts with just Lage and Mark, something different. Lage sounds beautiful, and he got the Nascimento influence right away."

The one non-original of the set is ***Free***, from Ornette Coleman's 1960 landmark *Change of the Century*, in an uptempo version that finds Turner and Lehman tackling the uncanny precision unison lines of Ornette and Don Cherry. "Steve and Mark naturally came together on that," Brewer says. "The melody was not counted off, they just looked at each other." Given that Brewer's pieces gravitate toward midtempo, he felt a need to include something fast. "I love Ornette's music, and I really love playing walking bass lines, so I wanted to have a tune where we could just swing. Also, Billy Higgins and Blackwell are two of my favorite drummers, and Charlie Haden remains an incredibly huge influence on me."

It might not be immediately apparent, but ***Sun Symbol*** derives from Brewer's love of synths and electronics. "I just purchased an analog synth from the early '80s, a Juno 60. I love those sounds — I'm a big Zawinul fan. One night I had my Fender Rhodes and my

synth on top of it, and I was messing around with doubling voicings to see what it sounded like. That's sort of how the second part of this tune, the solo section, came about. The first part is out of time, pretty directly influenced by Paul Bley's music. There's an album called *The Paul Bley Synthesizer Show* [1971], in particular a haunting tune called 'The Archangel' — they're all Annette Peacock tunes. The sound of that album was kind of in my head when I started writing this."

Brewer wrote the closing title track, ***Mythology***, for a Jazz Gallery commission roughly two years ago. Composed on piano, it's one of the more unusual cuts on the record: "It seems like my more esoteric things are written from the piano, while the simpler, more singable tunes are written on the guitar." Describing ***Mythology*** as "a Steve Lehman concerto," Brewer notes: "To me it's obvious how much Steve loves the drums, and that's why you see him with people like Marcus and Damion Reid and Tyshawn Sorey, all these people, some of the most rhythmically profound musicians. That's what I love about playing with Steve's trio. He wants to be pushed rhythmically."

While Brewer relies on piano for ideas, he's self-effacing about his chops. Yet he's serious about improving them, adding in every way to the sum total of his musicianship: "There was this Mozart piece I'd been working on for a long time on the piano, and one day I got frustrated and my mind started wandering. I got stuck on a certain voicing or something. I was trying to practice something very serious and I got fixated on what ended up being the first chord in ***Mythology***. I was also fixated with this idea of counterpoint, where the alto has the melody and then there's a simple counter-line that the tenor plays throughout the whole thing." In relating this, Brewer points to something inspiring about artistry as a whole: in working past the deepest vexations and hurdles, one can find creative breakthroughs, deeper insights, ways of one's own. This exceptional debut, brimming with commitment and a sense of freedom, certainly bears that out.

David R. Adler
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