

RUSS LOSSING

6
P H R A S E

Russ Lossing's previous two CDs, *Dreamer* (Double Time) and *As It Grows* (hatOLOGY), included eloquent liner-note tributes from Richie Beirach and Art Lange, respectively. It is humbling to join such esteemed company. It is also a thrill to ponder at length the work of Russ and his trio companions, bassist John Hebert and drummer Jeff Williams. Their achievement on this new album, *Phrase Six*, doesn't require the aid of words. But I am happy to share a few thoughts on the background of this extraordinary pianist, and the nine splendid tracks you are about to hear.

Originally from Columbus, Ohio, Russ has been active on the New York creative jazz scene since 1986. He began on piano at age five, majored in classical performance as an undergraduate and earned his Masters in jazz. He has worked with some of the leading minds of the modern idiom, such as Dave Liebman, Paul Motian, John Abercrombie, Michael Formanek, and Mat Maneri.

Russ is also sought after by a new generation of promising player/composers, including the alto saxophonists Loren Stillman and John O'Gallagher. To spin Stillman's *Gin Bon* (FSNT 163) and *How Sweet It Is* (Nagel-Heyer), or O'Gallagher's *Abacus* (Arabesque), is to hear Russ at the height of his powers. And do add to your list of essential listening, the OmniTone release *Change of Time*, an enlightening commentary on Bartok's "Mikrokosmos" featuring Lossing and Hebert with saxophonist Adam Kolker.

Russ surmises that he has played "every kind of music under the sun," from rock to electric jazz to classical music. His study of 20th century harmony has left an enormous imprint on his jazz playing, and gives his music an air of bottomless mystery. "That's my sound, a thing I found in myself, a theory of harmony that I've developed," he says.

Phrase Six is the first recording by the Lossing/Hebert/Williams lineup. Both *Dreamer* and *As It Grows*, by contrast, featured our man with Paul Motian and bassist, Ed Schuller. "*Dreamer* was different concept," says Russ; "it was more about tunes, forms and time." *As It Grows* focused on material that was far more abstract. "It had form," in Russ's words, "but it was more open. *Phrase Six* is a mixture of the two." Everything on the CD is a first take.

Add it up. Take his piano chops, his expressive-ness, his formal discoveries, and the myriad of challenges he throws at his bandmates, and the case for Russ Lossing as a serious contender in new jazz is unassailable.



VIRGIL

This is a cyclical bass progression in F minor (eight bars), then in C minor (six bars), using shifting qualities of chords throughout. The melody is a thematic "long line" designed never to come to a resting point. The chord progression also gives the feeling of no cadence." One chord per measure is the general rule in this 36-bar waltz, although deceptions abound: roots remain static while chord qualities change, phrases end in places where a phrase would usually begin. These maneuvers are effective because Russ doesn't overuse them.

DOWN BY THE GLENSIDE

An Irish ballad by Peadar Kearney, co-author of the Irish National Anthem. "I love folk music of the world," says Russ, who is not Irish. "I think there's a lot of melodic similarity in all kinds of folk music. I ran across this song somewhere along the line, and I pulled it out at the date. I didn't give the guys a chart, we just played it."

KOAN

"An exploration into bi-tonality and form structure. The harmony is two 11-bar phrases. The second 11 bars are the first 11 bars backwards, and the second 11 bars are also the first 11 bars forwards with the bottom and top triads switched." Obvious, no? The marvel, however, is not the Byzantine architecture, but rather the marvelously lyrical result that Russ is able to wring from it.



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This album is dedicated to Frank Herbert Lossing.

PHRASE SIX

The sixth in a series. It begins with a limping bass line and expands from there. At the bottom of Russ's chart are four bass motifs, each consisting of two bars (one in 4/4, one in 5/4). Each motif is numbered, one through four. Above the bass parts are four lines of piano melody, with the numbers (again, one through four) appearing at various spots in the form. The numbers over the melody coincide very loosely with the numbers over the bass parts. The time signatures and the rhythms are just 'suggestions'; the tempo is flexible. Russ calls this method "transparent composition." When Hebert hears the piano play one of the numbered melodies, he has the option of playing the corresponding bass line. But just as often on this take, Russ reacts to the changing bass patterns, joining them in unison or harmonizing them. "The interesting thing," he says, "is that this piece sounds completely different depending on who is playing it."

SPIDER'S WEB

No bar lines, no time or key signatures. And yet this twelve-tone piece follows a very deliberate method. "I composed the main 'row,' then I made a Magic Square (a la Schoenberg) showing the row in all 12 keys—original, retrograde, inversion, retrograde inversion. Then I composed the piece using the Square freely." Piano and bass play the snaking line in unison, over a brisk yet free-floating drum accompaniment. The rhythms are meticulously notated, but every phrase is allowed to breathe.

SILENT KNOWLEDGE

This piece dates back to the spring of 1991. "The melody is a two-bar 'cell' repeated and transformed for the whole song. A study in rhythmic displacement." Hebert sets the mood with an impressive solo intro. Then the trio negotiates an exceedingly difficult form with dense chords, mercurial bass lines, precise rhythmic figures and several transitions from 3/4 to 4/4 time.

ZeroUno

"Named after a killing wine I had in Sicily." This free improvisation was the first take of the day. ("No discussion at all," notes Russ.) A remarkable calm settles over the trio just before the five-minute mark.

CANTO I

Another piece without bar lines, time signature or keys, and this time without Schoenbergian roots. "I have written many pieces using this concept – pure melody. Wherever you see a whole-note rest, it is wide open improvisation." There are four whole-note rests, to be exact. The fun part – for players as well as listeners – is determining when they begin and end.

DEXTERITY

A brief rubato daydream on Charlie Parker's B-flat rhythm changes line from 1947. "I chose it because it is one of Bird's most lyrical bop tunes. I looked at most of his compositions trying to find something like that. 'Dexterity' is a good one to play slow."

David Adler
Contributing Writer – *Jazz Times*, *Down Beat*