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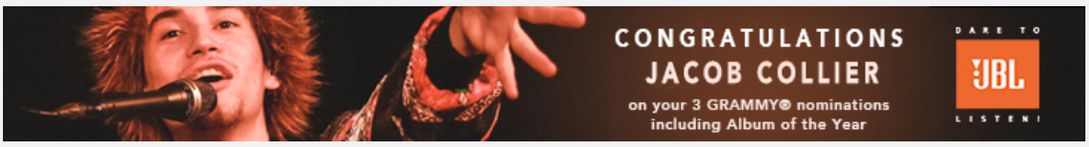

Tyshawn Sorey: The Maestro

How an eager young sideman from Newark became one of the most gifted, ambitious and multifaceted figures of the avant-garde

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Tyshawn Sorey

Months before the release of his *Blood Sutra* in 2003, pianist Vijay Iyer and his quartet premiered music from the album in a concert commissioned by the Jazz Gallery (then still on Hudson Street in Lower Manhattan). Iyer had developed a generative rapport with drummer Derrek Phillips on past projects, but Phillips was no longer in New York. The gig went to an up-and-comer, a Newark, New Jersey native and undergraduate at William Paterson University named Tyshawn Sorey, who completed the *Blood Sutra* lineup with Rudresh Mahanthappa on alto saxophone and Stephan Crump on bass.

Sorey stunned listeners that night with his raw, inventive rhythmic approach and gale-force chops. But few people, perhaps not even Iyer, were yet aware of the breadth of Sorey's talent.

What Iyer did know is that Sorey also played piano. He played it not just adequately, but with a skill "seemingly unprecedented in its precision and scope," Iyer wrote in an email, recalling having heard "fully rigorous serialist improvisations, for example, or a spontaneous Nancarrow-like blast through 'Little Willie Leaps,' or an utterly haunting Mingus rendition with exquisite tone control, or a selection from Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*."

Iyer also knew of Sorey's trombone playing, "which equally caught me off guard with its fluidity and clarity. As a performer [Tyshawn] could have chosen any one of these paths, to great success." In a sense, he's chosen all of them.

It's something to see: A fired-up young sideman blossoms into one of the most multifaceted and restlessly evolving artists of our time at age 36. It's hard to tally just the most recent accomplishments. In February at the Ojai Festival in California, Sorey, on piano and drums, premiered a work commissioned by the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) called *Perle Noire: Meditations on Josephine*, a Josephine Baker-inspired song cycle in collaboration with famed opera director Peter Sellars, soprano Julia Bullock and poet Claudia Rankine. Another ICE commission is now in the works.

Meanwhile, Sorey's *Alloy* trio with pianist Cory Smythe and bassist Christopher Tordini has played weeklong stints at the Village Vanguard. In late July, the same trio premiered a work commissioned by the Newport Jazz Festival that Sorey plans to release soon, along with material from the Vanguard run. Sorey also appeared at the Vanguard in no less than three different bands, including a stupendously thrashing quartet led by trumpeter Peter Evans, during John Zorn's Bagatelles week in mid-August.

Sorey's new two-disc release for double trio, *The Inner Spectrum of Variables* (Pi), finds him, Smythe and Tordini joined by three additional string players. About 85 to 90 percent of the music, Sorey estimates, is either notated or "spontaneously conducted by myself using Conduction, with cards and things like that." (Sorey wrote a touching remembrance of his mentor Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris, creator of the system of gestural cues known as Conduction, in the April 2014 issue of *JT*.)

Meeting over coffee near his home in Brooklyn's Sunset Park, Sorey spoke more about *Inner Spectrum*: "This was the CD where I felt, coupled with my experience as a student working with [composer] Fred Lerdahl [at Columbia University], that I was really being myself and feeling I should embrace the difference between myself and my colleagues. And that I should embrace the connections that I have with other forms of music."

In spring 2017 Sorey expects to complete his doctorate in composition from Columbia. The following fall he'll return to Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where he received his master's in 2011, to begin a tenure-track professorship in the wake of his mentor Anthony Braxton's recent retirement. (Wesleyan is also where Sorey met his wife of five years, Amanda Scherbenske, an ethnomusicologist and scholar of Jewish music. The two are expecting a child.)

While busy with academic work, Sorey has remained just as committed to performing, applying his outsize drumming talent to the music of Fieldwork, Paradoxical Frog, Steve Coleman, Steve Lehman, Stephan Crump, Mario Pavone, John O'Gallagher and more. "I see Tyshawn as part of a cohort," says veteran pianist-composer Myra Melford, who recruited Sorey for her magnificent *Snowy Egret* quintet. "You know, Kris Davis, Ingrid Laubrock, Mary Halvorson, Taylor Ho Bynum, that generation: Some worked with Braxton, some are likeminded peers, but what's exciting is that they're putting their own stamp on this lineage that I see coming from my mentors in the AACM. I see them as carrying this lineage forward into the 21st century."

Crump, along those lines, describes Sorey as "a rocket ship into the future." Here and there since the *Blood Sutra* days, the two had reunited, but on Crump's profoundly swinging new quartet release, Rhombal, we hear them reach another level as a unit. "When I'm engaging with him in that swing mode," the bassist remarks, "it feels so deeply rooted and loving of the tradition without being stuck in it in any way. It's risky territory, that mode of playing, but [with Tyshawn] it feels very honest to me."

Pianist Matt Mitchell, who has dealt with Sorey's swing feel in bassist Mario Pavone's *Blue Dialect* trio, ventures his own space analogy: "In Mario's trio [Tyshawn] is playing time of various kinds, but even when it's more or less 'jazz swing,' if you really listen you'll hear all this other totally bizarre shit. You can zone in: It's like those 'powers of 10' videos where it starts off in space and it moves in by powers of 10 and you're gradually down to the subatomic level and then you zoom back out. If you do that with Tyshawn's playing your perspective is like, 'Holy shit, what is he doing?' But then you zoom back out and it totally serves the music. … You're sometimes distracted from how insane some of the things he's playing are because of how beautiful it sounds."

It all started with a toy drum kit around the age of 3. At 5 or 6, with his father's encouragement, the young Tyshawn would put together makeshift kits "with cardboard and hangers, banging around with pencils." By age 14 he'd shown enough lasting interest for his grandfather Edward Herman Sorey to buy him his first drum set. "He said, 'I'll warn you now, you better be playing those drums,'" Sorey recalls. "He wanted to see how serious I was. He wanted me to prove that."

Sorey's father and mother had split up when he was a toddler. "I grew up in my [maternal] grandparents' house for a five- or six-year period," he says, "then my mother and I moved out I think in '88 or '89. I lived with my mom for a few years, and then I lived with my [paternal] grandmother-she raised me for much of my adolescent life."

Sorey's uncle also played a key role early on, taking Tyshawn on his first trips to the record store: "I was maybe 7 or 8. He would let me pick a couple of records each time. Dizzy's *To Bird With Love* was one I picked out. He had stuff by Wynton, he'd also have Herbie Hancock's post-Headhunters music, or Grover Washington Jr., or things by David Sanborn as well as older recordings of Duke, Basie, Joe Williams. My uncle helped me understand the importance of having these recordings."

Obsessively, Sorey began recording things off the radio as well. Columbia's WKCR-FM expanded his horizons. "My grandfather would let me get up in the middle of the night. If I heard something cool I would get a cassette tape and record it," he recalls. "I listened to a lot of country and bluegrass because they would broadcast that music early in the mornings. I dug how it sounded and I dug what it talked about, even though I was all of about 8, 9, 10 years old and didn't really know too much. Also, at certain times they would play stuff from the Mississippi Delta for three hours. I recorded that, I made recordings of jazz vocalists, I recorded classical music programs. Also some contemporary stuff that I didn't understand, but I loved it."

In the basement, Sorey practiced drums day and night. He arrived early to Camden Street Middle School to practice more. His grandfather took him to play with bands in and around Newark, and to church functions with a distant cousin, Walter Sorey, a gospel organist and keyboardist. Along the way Sorey took trombone lessons as well. At 14 or 15 he was recruited for gigs by a local bassist: "I was underage but I still would play clubs and weddings. We'd play Motown, James Brown, gospel, stuff by Miles and Cannonball, Kool & the Gang, free stuff. From the get-go, this whole idea of participating in many genres was definitely stemming from those experiences."

Sorey has perfect pitch and something close to a photographic memory; his associates all have stories about him being handed a complex chart, looking it over and then not even using it on the gig. A gift like that may have accelerated his progress, but his omnivorous aesthetic and high-level jazz sensibility evolved through contact with great teachers, both at William Paterson and the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), including John Riley, Mike LeDonne, Michele Rosewoman, Bill Goodwin, Kenny Washington, Billy Hart, Ralph Peterson and Harold Mabern.

Interestingly, Sorey started at Paterson as a classical trombone major. "I was playing brass quintets, playing with the college orchestra, playing solo repertoire and stuff like that," he says. But he switched and began to seek his place in the lineage of drummer-composers, including underappreciated ones like Freddie Waits and Joe Chambers. In part it was his interest in composing that led him to Wesleyan, where Braxton and others led the way toward a "trans-idiomatic" viewpoint.

"[Anthony] would let me conduct his ensemble classes and also the concerts," Sorey says. "Sometimes he and I would split the conducting duties. I found a sense of freedom working with Anthony's music, which is very highly structured. When I started to alter the structure of his pieces, he allowed me to have that flexibility even with his own music. I'd never seen a composer do that before. That gave me the opportunity to grow as a spontaneous composer."

At Wesleyan Sorey also explored Japanese *taiko* drumming, music of Ghana and Togo, Klezmer music in an ensemble led by his future wife, and on and on. When he began his degree work at Columbia, however, he wasn't as comfortable at the start. "I was trying to appeal too much to people in the program, to a certain ideal that I felt Columbia represented, which I was completely wrong about," he says. "Because in fact it's much more open than I thought." George Lewis and Chris Washburne, two fellow trombonists, helped him find a foothold. But it was esteemed composer and music theorist Fred Lerdahl who gave Sorey a "third eye" in regard to scoring and form, rekindling his love for the tonal classical music he once taped from the radio as a kid.

"One of Tyshawn's main challenges has been to make musical notation work for him and not against him," Lerdahl says. "When he first came to me he was trying to figure out how to write complex harmonies that were still tonally based. His written music at first was much less coherent than his improvisations. Because he had learned four-part harmony, sometimes his textures started looking more like that, rather than what his real inspiration was. He's made huge progress-he works hard and he always surprises you."

Already on his 2007 double-disc debut, *That/Not*, Sorey made clear his interest in music that went well beyond the drums. Disc one includes a 42-minute Morton Feldman-inspired solo piano work performed by Cory Smythe, a player who has come to occupy a central place in Sorey's oeuvre. Smythe is similar in his ability to move between the classical and improvised music spheres and to destabilize the boundary between them. He knew Sorey as a drummer, but was surprised to see him live on piano one night long ago-so astonished, in fact, that he asked Sorey then and there for a lesson. "I would do that again if that experience played out today," Smythe insists.

Sorey remembers what he terms this "so-called lesson" that took place in Smythe's Queens apartment around 2004. The two ended up chatting and sharing music for hours. "I'm like, you don't need no lesson from me!" Sorey laughs. "You need to work with me!"

"Tyshawn is brilliant and inscrutable to some extent," Smythe muses, "and I revel in that mystery about him and his work. I think he does sort of delight in not being pinned down to any set of musical expectations. If you know his music from a few years ago, I don't think you'd expect to hear some of what he's writing now. He's become more interested in some Romantic-era classical harmony, so there are bits of 'Movement,' from *Alloy*, that come off as almost Brahms-like. But even if he's applying himself to that language he still does it in this idiosyncratic way." On *Inner Spectrum* there are also episodes, for example "Movement IV" on disc two, where we hear a folkloric, almost dance-like melody-a result of Sorey's deep affection for Ethiopian and Turkish music and the work of Béla Bartók.

On the 2009 release *Koan*, guitarist Todd Neufeld and bassist Thomas Morgan joined Sorey in a trio of a very different type. The three first came together working with trombonist Samuel Blaser, on a busy quartet tour and subsequent 2009 Clean Feed release, *Pieces of Old Sky*. "The trio moments [on that tour] were so special to me and I wanted to document it," Sorey says. "I wanted to create music that was more like 'tunes' than these elaborate structures I'd been working on. I wanted to take a break from that element of music-making and just focus on our chemistry together as a trio by writing these one-page pieces."

"Tyshawn chose to record the whole album tuned down," Neufeld says of *Koan*. "Not quite a full half-step but pretty close. It's almost like baroque tuning. It made the guitar and bass resonate in a certain way, darker and warmer. I think unconsciously it leaves a unique impression on the listener."

This tuning wasn't discussed ahead of time, Neufeld clarifies: "This is just like, 'Oh yeah, right now, tune your bass and guitar down,' just like that. That's the way my man rolls, amazingly. That trio went into the studio one other time, earlier, and recorded an improvised session. I played only acoustic guitar. And for that one Tyshawn had us tuning every track differently. It's almost undoable, but you don't want to tell him that. I had certain strings down, certain strings up. Thomas, same thing."

"It's almost unlearning the instrument; that's how I looked at it," Sorey says. "I even set my drums up incorrectly [at the *Koan* session]. For something like this I didn't think there was any wrong way of doing anything."

During a weeklong residency at the East Village avant-garde hub the Stone, coinciding with his birthday on July 8, Sorey reserved one night for a rare solo concert. He played it all: first piano, then drums, then trombone, interspersing archival recordings from the Yiddish Radio Project via laptop. As he accessed and played this out-of-left-field sequence of voices in Yiddish and English-a clip from *Rabbi Reuben's Court of the Air*, another from C. Israel Lutsky, a.k.a. the Jewish Philosopher, to name just two-Sorey built something like an interactive sound installation, improvised and fleeting yet strong in form. Later he mentioned Fluxus, the Dada-influenced art movement of the '60s and '70s, as an inspiration.

After a scintillating night with Mario Pavone's trio, the final three Stone gigs showed Sorey in another light: not alone, but surrounded by a throng of musicians he calls the Banff/NYC Improvisers Orchestra, mostly students he's taught at the Banff Summer Workshop. On the agenda was Conduction: a hybrid of Butch Morris' system, Braxton's system and Sorey's own prompts.

The first Conduction fell on Sorey's birthday, when spirits were high. Sorey joked with band members as they warmed up. You could tell he meant every one of his last four words before the downbeat: "Let's have some fun!"

There were four upright basses, four electric guitars, drum set and drum machine, plus percussion, cello, violin, various reeds and brass, piano and keyboards, and three vocalists. The sound was otherworldly, experimental and, yes, fun. As the band played, my eye wandered to the mosaic of photographs on the wall of the Stone, similar in its way to the walls of the Vanguard. There in the middle, in perhaps the most arresting photo of all, is Butch Morris, poised with baton and looking determined Sorey remembers how Morris "made me learn something about myself: that I should be able to make music with almost anybody, at any time, and it shouldn't really matter the level of the musician or the style or tradition they come from. What that told me was that if there were children up there, I should be able to make good music with them."

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Originally Published November 25, 2016

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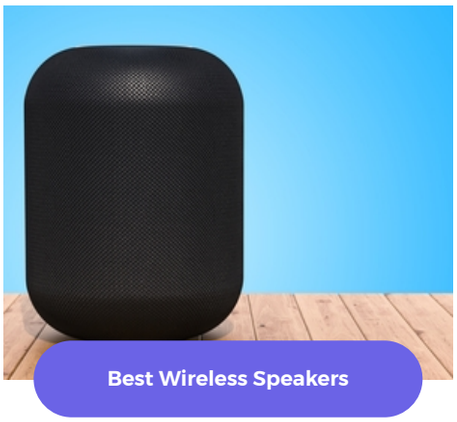

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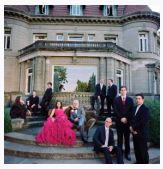

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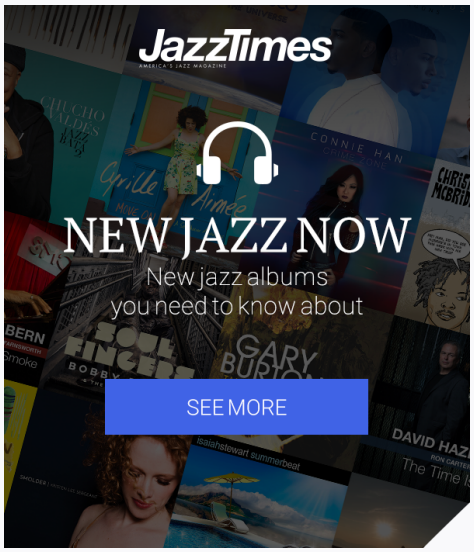

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