

Orrin Evans & The Captain Black Big Band *The Intangible Between*

The Intangible Between is necessarily a part of the human condition. It's "that huge space between 'I did that 'or 'why didn't I do that,'" says pianist Orrin Evans, quoting a line from Philly writer and close friend John "Doc" Holiday. On "Tough Love," the penultimate track on this album, it is a poem by Holiday — written at Evans' request — that takes center stage. And the first time we hear that phrase, *The Intangible Between*, it's spoken by drummer Donald Edwards with a subdued sort of gravity.

Simply put, *The Intangible Between* impacts any arena of life where the imperative is to seize the moment and not throw it away. For jazz artists, so attuned to opportunities flying by at the speed of improvised music, *The Intangible Between* is a thing lived in every song, every gig, every album, every career. It can mean the difference between fulfillment and frustration.

"Did I go for every possible thing that I could have gone for?" wonders Evans, as do most of us. "Did I put all my intention behind that note, behind every soloist? Or am I walking away from that song saying, 'I wish I would've done that.' Or maybe, 'I wish I hadn't done that.' You have to live with both of them, but when you say I wish I *had* done it, that's a rough place to be sometimes, because you never know! You can't go back to that moment and do it. You can only do it the next time."

As an artist, Orrin Evans is finding it more and more urgent to err on the side of "I did that." So in addition to his small-group work (including three albums for Smoke Sessions), the co-led quartet Tarbaby, a new duo project with Kevin Eubanks and of course touring and recording with one of jazz's most lasting and compelling groups The Bad Plus (not to mention high-profile sideman work with Ravi Coltrane and others), Evans has also helmed the Captain Black Big Band for 10 solid years. And now with its second Smoke Sessions outing and fourth overall, the acclaimed unit offers *The Intangible Between* as a testament to Evans' gifts not only as a player, composer and arranger but also someone who fosters communal band vibes like few others. A spirit of extended family permeates all the CBBB's recordings and this one especially.

"Our first two records [*Captain Black Big Band*, 2011; *Mother's Touch*, 2014] featured more of my compositions but arranged by people in the band," Evans recalls. "The third record [*Presence*, 2018] highlighted music by David Gibson, Troy Roberts, John Raymond and Josh Lawrence, but this is the first record where I've really arranged. In 2016 I did a collaboration with the WDR Big Band and Ambrose Akinmusire, so I had to man up. The arrangement of 'This Little Light of Mine,' which I did with Marc Stasio, came out of that. So honestly this is the first record I feel connected to in that way. It's really great to hear these arrangements and the band's interpretations. We've been together 10 years, but this is really the first time they've sat down and said, 'Ok, these are Orrin's arrangements, and it's a different school.'"

Key CBBB founding members Anwar Marshall, Todd Bashore and Stafford Hunter remain in the fold, as does the indispensable David Gibson and of course Josh Lawrence, whose insistent 5/4 showpiece "Proclaim Liberty" leads off the set. "Just read the title, in the present state that we're

in,” Evans remarks. “I thought it was very apropos to start there.” Lawrence is also the arranger of Monk’s “Off Minor,” though it’s a big band adaptation of a quintet concept that Evans created for Tim Warfield’s 2015 release *Spherical: Dedicated to Thelonious Sphere Monk*. “Josh did such a great job because I wanted it to still have that small group feel,” Evans says. “I always wanted that for the big band. That arrangement is so liberal with time and space and it was really great to hear the big band embrace that, and for Josh to find a way to translate it.”

“Off Minor” is also probably the best example to date of the CBBB’s “more the merrier” philosophy in action. There are, for instance, four bassists on the track. Evans explains: “Right before recording it I looked at all the bassists in the room and I was like, ‘Hey man, why don’t *all* of you play on this one?’ Two basses in one booth, two in the other.” In addition, Marshall and Mark Whitfield, Jr. are switching off behind the drum set, their transitions so seamless as to be imperceptible.

Joseph Block’s Fender Rhodes alongside the leader’s piano is keeping with common CBBB practice as well: “When the band first started I wasn’t even playing piano on all the tunes. There was always a second piano player.” The fact that none were booked for this session began to bother Evans, so Block got the call. And when Evans heard trombonist Reggie Watkins messing around at the keyboard with Bashore’s arrangement of “A Time for Love” — a sterling ballad feature for Sean Jones on flugelhorn — Evans asked him to go ahead and play Rhodes on that track as well, with superb results. “Although everybody sounds like themselves,” Evans muses, “after a while everybody starts to really sound like one, in the best way.” And still the individual voices leap out, including Immanuel Wilkins, whose iridescent soprano sax pairs with Bashore’s alto on the unorthodox Evans swing/groove invention “That Too.”

The bassists double up again (just two this time) for an arresting, nearly 16-minute rendering of Andrew Hill’s “Tough Love” — though not the tune of that name from Hill’s magisterial 2000 release *Dusk*. This one appeared on Tarbaby’s 2010 release *The End of Fear*, but Evans takes liberties with a new poetry-steeped version, resulting in a soundscape almost reminiscent of Mingus’ “Scenes in the City.” The poetic theme, naturally, is love: we hear an assemblage of friends and loved ones that Evans credits as The Village, reading Doc Holiday’s meditative words. “I called Doc in Germany and asked him to write what love means to him,” Evans remembers, “and an hour later he sent me that. I put up a post asking people to send me recordings of themselves reading it, and I ended up with 50 versions I could use.” As the album’s titular phrase begins to enter the mix, we hear tenor saxophonist Troy Roberts weaving in and around the music as the piece draws to a determined close.

The second “Tough Love” poem is by Evans’ brother Todd, a.k.a. Son of Black (Captain Black was a term of endearment for their late father, who smoked Captain Black tobacco). “I like to read while I play,” Evans declares, citing his earlier recitation of fellow pianist Donald Brown’s poetry on “A Free Man?” from his 2014 Smoke Sessions release *Liberation Blues*. On “Tough Love,” it’s Evans reading his brother’s poem live while playing and conducting — not an easy task especially given the drama, humor and casually effective timing he’s able to deliver on the take. “In this poem you meet love as a person, a human being, trying to get into this party but it’s blocked — by school shootings, by

hate, everything is keeping love out of this party,” he says. “But if it can get in, it could just change everything.”

The album takes a deeply personal turn with “Into Dawn,” a rare Roy Hargrove piece that appeared on Ralph Moore’s 1990 recording *Furthermore* (with Benny Green on piano). The plain truth of it is that Dawn, Evans’ wife, used to date Hargrove, and the departed trumpet great wrote this song for her long ago. With Hargrove’s passing it seemed to suggest itself as the ultimate tribute.

“Roy never got to hear David Gibson’s arrangement,” rues Evans. “The last time I saw him was in Paris, when he looked so ill. I told him I wanted to do one of his tunes with the big band, but I didn’t tell him which one — there were too many people around, he might’ve gotten weirded out. I called Dawn that night and said this might be the last time I see Roy, and we both cried.”

On a mournful though celebratory note as well, *The Intangible Between* ends with “I’m So Glad I Got to Know You,” dedicated to drummer Lawrence “Lo” Leathers, who died tragically in early June of 2019. “That last night I saw Roy was also the last time I saw Lawrence,” Evans says. “We were all together. I wrote the tune before he passed away; my son Matthew, who’s in college for music production, came up with this groove. Then Lawrence passed and that lyric ‘I’m so glad I got to know you’ came to me and it stuck. He was just a deep dude. My relationship with him was always filled with respect. Such a real motherfucker, straight up. He blessed my life.”

In this powerful finale, Evans’ moody solo piano introduction sets the stage for a tuneful, almost Abdullah Ibrahim-esque theme before Gibson starts his trombone solo, joined soon by Stacy Dillard on soprano for a soul-deep tandem statement. The rhythmic energy grows and grows until, after a crest, the mood calms again and the full band begins to sing. “I’m so glad I got to know you,” they all sing to a dearly missed friend, and they don’t stop singing, even when the band fades away. The *a cappella* voices continue, in gentle harmony, until finally they too fade away. It’s a prayer of thanks, of sheer gratitude that the world got to know Roy Hargrove and Lawrence Leathers, and that they gave so much while they were here. Their song, to paraphrase Irving Berlin, is ended. But their melody lingers on.

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