





Matthew Shipp by Phil Freeman

I've written about Matt Shipp almost annually for over a decade. I've reviewed his albums, interviewed him, profiled him at length in *Burning Ambulance* magazine, and discussed the work of other musicians with him in person, on the phone, and by email. I am not an objective observer when it comes to Matt Shipp or his work. I consider him a friend.

Despite this blurring of the line between critical appreciation and personal friendliness, I think it's safe to say that Matt's doing the best work of his career right now, that his voice on the piano has matured into something powerful, unique, and almost instantly recognizable. He even manages to make the piano trio sound interesting, something I might otherwise have argued was impossible in 2012.

Matt's most recent trio album, *Elastic Aspects*, is a perfect example of how he's breaking the rules governing the jazz piano trio while still creating music of great, and accessible, beauty. He grants a tremendous amount of space to bassist Michael Bisio; indeed, there are times when the piano is almost totally absent, when it's just bass, or just bass and drums, and yet the music retains the feeling of suspense, of continuous forward movement and multiple co-participants' simultaneous concentration on a single shared idea that is the heart of jazz.

He has long abandoned many of the clichés of the avant-garde, having arrived at a sound that is far more indebted to post-bebop piano players of the 1950s and early 1960s than to so-called free players of the '60s and beyond like Cecil Taylor, Bobby Few or Dave Burrell, though he'll happily praise those men, too. Matt aims for a kind of cosmic, post-free spiritually exploratory jazz, something that conjures the same spirit of letting the universe flow through one's fingers and onto the keys that Alice Coltrane, Sun Ra and even players like Randy Weston or Muhal Richard Abrams seemed to make their own. He seeks to become a conduit for something much larger than himself, larger than the audience, larger than mortal existence itself. He is a mystic of sorts, without the gimmickry of robes or incense or twirling dances as he approaches the piano. He simply walks out, sits down, and allows the music and the moment to take over. He is both the impetus for what happens, and a mere passenger on the same journey the listeners are on.

When I listen to his records, I feel like I'm hearing music of genuine importance. This is not true of most jazz I hear in 2012. There are a lot of records I enjoy, but very few that I think aspire to anything beyond being enjoyable. If they do, they fail. Most jazz now, whether avant-garde or traditionalist, whether it's new music or one more run through the old standards, is pretty take-it-or-leave-it stuff. It's extremely rare to hear anything that I could claim with a straight face has changed the way I think about anything. I mean, piano, bass, and drums—what could be more clichéd than that?

Matt has found ways to make the piano trio exciting not by doing anything radical to any of the three instruments (he plays a regular, non-“prepared” piano; Michael Bisio's bass is acoustic; Whit Dickey sits behind a small jazz kit, not some progressive rock-sized monstrosity), but simply by composing pieces, and then improvising on them, in a manner that induces deep emotional responses in the listener. His music is just better than other pianists'.

For example, let us return to the subject of *Elastic Aspects*. The debut studio recording by his current trio, previously heard on one disc of 2011's live two-CD set *The Art of the Improviser*, is a dense series of short, percussive vignettes that should almost be co-billed to Shipp and bassist Bisio; the latter gets several solo spots (“Alternative Aspects,” “Explosive Aspects” and “Rainforest”), one of which opens the disc, and his thick, bowed drones are a dominant presence at all times. This allows Matt to focus on his melodies, which are structured like tiny cells of sound laid end to end, with intense energy and fierce concentration. Only one track on the album, “Elastic Eye,” has the kind of hammering power he displayed on older trio records like *Prism*, *Circular Temple*, or *The Multiplication Table*. *Elastic Aspects* feels like a suite, even if the tracks aren't explicitly linked through melody or rhythm. And it's an album that can't be absorbed in a single listen. It almost demands to be heard again as soon as it's over, not just because it has a somewhat looping structure but because the level of emotional and intellectual involvement clearly audible on a performance level works its way into the listener's mind and heart, and makes you want to commit to it as fully as the three players did. That's something that just doesn't happen with other jazz records, at least not to me.

As I write these words, Shipp and Bisio have just released a duo record, credited primarily to the bassist, called *Floating Ice*. It's more improvised than their work within the trio context, and more of an exchange of ideas between equals—Bisio is not Matt's bassist on this disc, they are partners working together to elucidate something that cannot exist without total commitment from both at all times.

Matt works in duo format surprisingly often—he's paired off with saxophonist Rob Brown, guitarist/bassist Joe Morris, and bassist William Parker twice each, and a bunch of other people, including violinist Mat Maneri, saxophonists Sabir Mateen and Evan Parker, and guitarists Mark O'Leary and Jason Spaceman, once each. Clearly, there's something about direct one-to-one communication that appeals to

him. Something about the focus it permits. The intensity of expression, the unfilteredness, the ability to transmit concepts with nearly 100 percent purity even as the ideas and concepts of one's creative partner are given maximum consideration and support.

Listening to a Matt Shipp duo performance with another musician is a lot like having a conversation with him. He's got a lot to say, but he's really listening—he doesn't just watch your lips move until they stop, then launch into whatever he was gonna say anyhow. Despite being one of the most confident players around, and one of the most committed composers, thoroughly immersed in his own vision of his music, he cares about encountering new perspectives and always allows for course corrections based on new information. That's as key to his music as it is to his relationships to other human beings. It's why I call him a friend, and it's why I keep listening.

* * *

Phil Freeman is a music critic, writing for newspapers and magazines such as the *Aquarian Weekly*, *Alternative Press*, *Magnet*, *Jazziz*, *Don Beat*, *Juggernaut*, *Metal Hammer*, *MSN Music* and *The Wire*. Author of *New York Is Now!: The New Wave of Free Jazz* (2001). He is keen on avant-garde jazz, hardcore and death-metal. Editor of *Burning Ambulance*: a journal of music and the arts. For more information:

<http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/PhilFreeman>

<http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/In-Conversation-with-Phil-Freeman/>

<http://burningambulance.com/tag/phil-freeman/>

Matthew Shipp's website: www.matthewshipp.com

Picture by Peter Gannushkin