



Bio information: **CURTIS HASSELBRING**

Title: **NUMBER STATIONS** (Cuneiform Rune 356) Format: CD / DIGITAL

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**FILE UNDER: JAZZ**

Mysterious coded messages float through the ether aimed at secret agents who, if they still exist, serve as pawns in a twilight struggle fought deep in the shadows. While this ominous phenomenon sounds like the plot of a new Thomas Pynchon novel, for the confoundingly creative New York trombonist/guitarist **Curtis Hasselbring** it's the point of departure for his latest project. Inspired by the persistence of mysterious shortwave radio broadcasts that date back to the start of the Cold War, *Number Stations* is Hasselbring's **Cuneiform Records** debut.

Born out of a suite composed with a 2010 **Chamber Music America** Doris Duke Grant for the Creation of New Jazz works, *Number Stations* serves as an apt topic for Hasselbring's music, which combines propulsive grooves, dark humor, ambient spaciousness and highly choreographed ensemble passages. The album brings together Hasselbring's two primary bands, the longstanding **New Mellow Edwards** with **Chris Speed** (tenor saxophone and clarinet), **Trevor Dunn** (basses) and **Ches Smith** (drums and marimba), and the more recent quartet **Decoupage** featuring guitarist **Mary Halvorson**, vibraphonist **Matt Moran** and percussionist **Satoshi Takeishi**.

The highly unusual instrumentation is ideally suited for Hasselbring's fascination with patterns that expand, contract and decay. In a sly echo of **Spy Vs Spy** skullduggery, *Number Stations* often plays elements of each ensemble against each other. He's developed an open-ended concept that provides the musicians in this all-star ensemble information regarding their alliances, covert missions and espionage activities via composed music and improvisational stratagems.

The music is often sardonic and virtuosically playful, but Hasselbring is under no illusions about the deadly serious origins of the covert signals. As *Wikipedia* explains, a number station is "a type of shortwave radio station characterized by their unusual broadcasts...often created by artificially generated voices reading streams of numbers, words, letters, tunes or Morse code. They are transmitted in a wide variety of languages and the voices are usually female."

"No government acknowledges they exist, but it's pretty well established they were sending out codes to agents," Hasselbring says. "It's a Cold War artifact, and they may still be going. In *Number Stations* the tunes are fictitiously coded messages, part of a whole narrative I developed about a spy receiving a series of coded messages."

The album opens with Takeishi setting an ominous mood with the improvised percussion clatter that introduces "First Bus to Bismarck," the cryptic piece that sets the adventure in motion. As the tune gains momentum and the band adds chords and a shimmying melody, the music remains spacious and unsettled, a headlong rush into the unknown. "Make Anchor Babies" is a quintessentially Hasselbringian mélange inspired by **Bernard Herrmann**'s score for Hitchcock's underappreciated 1956 paranoia inducing classic "The Wrong Man" (with Henry Fonda playing a jazz bassist) and a vaguely Brazilian theme that keeps devolving to an angry ostinato. The piece builds to a beatific Halvorson solo with chirps, twangs and crunching chords characteristic of an improviser with her own distinctive vocabulary.

The album's centerpiece, sequentially and conceptually, is "It's Not a Bunny," the composition that Hasselbring initially composed for the Doris Duke grant ("It was so much fun working on music for such amazing musicians I just kept writing," Hasselbring says). The album's longest track, it unfolds as a series of face offs, with the New Mellow Edwards playing the melody that's picked up later by Decoupage. But when Moran steps forward to solo, he's switched sides to interrogate the New Mellow Edwards rhythm section.

The mission continues with "Stereo Jack's Bluegrass J's," another cryptic direction, possibly steering an agent to a drop spot. Based on repeating chords and designed to sound like random interplay, it's the album's most abstract and rhythmically discursive piece. *Number Stations* closes, appropriately enough, with a set of coordinates that, according to Google Earth, refer to a stunning road, Hell's Backbone, near Bryce Canyon National Park in southwestern Utah. Essentially an engaging pop tune, the album ends on a stirring note, as if the mission has been accomplished or at least survived. For Hasselbring, the conclusion offers more questions than answers.

"I see the listener as this character wandering around this landscape trying to figure out what's going on," he says. "Those longitude and latitude coordinates, is that the pick up location? Could it be where the mystery gets solved?"

Nothing better illustrates the vaunted position Hasselbring occupies than his ability to corral so many brilliant and sought after players. More than a forum for his sly and slippery investigations into stripped down harmonic and melodic movements, the New Mellow Edwards has become a thriving conspiracy against musical clichés and tired jazz conventions. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to infiltrate this singular musical outpost and uncover the messages embedded in *Number Stations*. The bus is leaving for Bismarck. Have fun.

*For more information on Curtis Hasselbring, see:*

**www.curha.com**

**CURTIS HASSELBRING** [www.curha.com](http://www.curha.com)

There's no mystery about Hasselbring's extensive history as a creative force. Born in Indiana and raised in Ashland, Ohio, he started playing trombone in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and got serious about the horn as a freshman. At the same time he studied classical guitar and soaked up the rock 'n' roll of the 1980s. He turned onto jazz via his stepfather's extensive LP collection, particularly **Miles Davis** ("I listened to *Kind of Blue* every night for years," he says). Part of a prodigious wave of musicians who studied at New England Conservatory in the mid 1980s, Hasselbring connected with Boston peers like **Josh Roseman**, **John Medeski**, **Jim Black**, **Donny McCaslin** and **Chris Speed**. He cites his experience in **Russ Gershon's** invaluable **Either/Orchestra** an education as important as his degree at NEC.

"At the time I joined I was the youngest player in the band," Hasselbring recalls. "They were all into **Afropop**, the **AACM**, the **Meters**, all kinds of things you wouldn't hear in the context of music school, and that all had a huge impact. It was also a lot of fun. You'd get together with a case of beer, turn off the lights and improvise. Nobody was judging anybody on their technical prowess or mastery of their instrument as much as their ability to work with each other to create great music."

Since settling in New York City in the early 1990s, Hasselbring has performed and recorded with a daunting array of artists. A founding member of **Slavic Soul Party**, he's collaborated widely with **Medeski Martin & Wood**, **Bobby Previte**, **Andrew D'Angelo**, **John Hollenbeck**, **Satoko Fujii**, the **Jazz Passengers**, **Frank London**, **Tom Harrell**, **Matt Darriau Ballin' The Jack**, **Cuong Vu's Vu-tet**, **Roberto Rodriguez**, and **Anthony Coleman** among many others. He appears on more than 60 recordings including two earlier New Mellow Edwards releases on **Skirl Records**.

Currently Hasselbring performs with the klezmer rock combo **Golem**, a trio with saxophonist **Briggan Krauss** called **Han Blasts Panel**, **Trio Blasphemy** with trumpeter **Ben Holmes** and tuba expert **Marcus Rojas**, and the wind trio **The Spokes** with **Phillip Johnston** on soprano saxophone and **Andy Biskin** on clarinet. He also creates electronic/electro acoustic music under the name **Curha**, including two self-released recordings, and remixes for artists such as Slavic Soul Party, Frank London and Golem. A prolific composer, Hasselbring has written music for a wide variety of contexts, including chamber ensembles, television scores, and large jazz ensemble pieces as well as his electronic works for the Curha project.

He assembled the first incarnation of the **Mellow Edwards** in the late 1980s as a jazz/rock band with **Jim Black** that eschewed the era's fusion conventions. After a decade-long hiatus Hasselbring relaunched the band in 2001 as the New Mellow Edwards with Speed, Dunn and drummer John Hollenbeck. While often inspired by rock, Hasselbring sees the band as standing apart from fusion. "I like exploring spare minimal grooves and then you can do anything on top of it," he says. "Some pieces are very stripped down and some sound glaringly loud. It's not death metal. There's a dark humor about it too, a certain sardonic sense that takes its natural course in the music."

**CHRIS SPEED** [www.chrisspeed.com](http://www.chrisspeed.com)

His acute sensibility and prodigious output as a composer has attracted some of jazz's most creative figures. Like Hasselbring, Chris Speed moved to New York City in the early 1990s and has forged an extensive array of productive relationships. Over the years he's lead or co-lead a raft of celebrated bands, including **Pachora** with Jim Black, **Skúli Sverrisson**, and **Brad Shepik**; **Human Feel** with **Andrew D'Angelo**, **Black**, and **Kurt Rosenwinkel**; **yeah NO** with Black, Sverrisson, and **Cuong Vu**; and **Trio Iffy** with **Ben Perowsky** and **Jamie Saft**. He's also worked extensively with **Tim Berne's Bloodcount**, **The Claudia Quintet**, the **John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble**, and **Slavic Soul Party**.

**TREVOR DUNN** [www.trevordunn.net](http://www.trevordunn.net)

Trevor Dunn earned a reputation as a fiercely creative artist on the San Francisco scene in the 1990s with the experimental band **Mr. Bungle**. A highly adaptable player who has worked in an extensive array of styles, he's performed widely with singer and Mr. Bungle co-founder **Mike Patton**, **John Zorn**, and the group **Secret Chiefs 3**. He tours and records with **The Nels Cline Singers** and even finds time to lead his own projects, most importantly **Trio-Convulsant**, a volatile trio with Mary Halvorson and Ches Smith.

**MARY HALVORSON** [www.maryhalvorson.com](http://www.maryhalvorson.com)

Halvorson is recognized as one of the most important and galvanizing new voices on guitar to emerge in the past decade, a doggedly idiosyncratic artist who "has an amazing sound," Hasselbring says. "Being a guitar player myself I'm very snooty about who I like, and she's one of my favorites in the jazz world, someone I love to improvise with." She often collaborates with violist **Jessica Pavone** in a tough, sonically expansive duo and leads a combustible trio with bassist **John Hebert** and Ches Smith.

**CHES SMITH** [www.chesssmith.com](http://www.chessmith.com)

Whether playing drum kit, percussion, vibes or marimba, Smith is an astonishing musician who thrives in experimental rock bands, and small and large jazz ensembles. He has performed with **Good For Cows**, **Marc Ribot**, **Theory of Ruin**, Mr. Bungle, Secret Chiefs 3, **Xiu Xiu**, **Beat Circus**, **Sean Hayes**, **Ben Goldberg**, **Ara Anderson** and **Fred Frith**. He's also performed and recorded *Congs For Brums*, an album of his solo percussion pieces.

**MATT MORAN** [www.mattmoran.com](http://www.mattmoran.com)

At the center of an innovative group of New York musicians who blur the boundaries of composition, improvisation, and folk traditions, Matt Moran "plays the vibraphone like a speed-chess master, always darting off into flurries of ingenious, unexpected activity," writes the *Village Voice*. A founder of **Slavic Soul Party**, he's performed and recorded with artists as diverse as **Mat Maneri**, **Lionel Hampton**, **Combustible Edison**, **Ellery Eskelin**, and **Saban Bajramovic**.

**SATOSHI TAKEISHI**

Born in Mito, Japan, Satoshi Takeishi immersed himself in Colombian music during a four-year South American sojourn before moving to Miami in 1986, where he began working as an arranger/producer as well as a performer. Since moving to New York in 1991 he's performed and recorded dozens of heavy hitters in jazz, Latin music, Latin jazz, chamber music and beyond, including **Ray Barretto**, **Carlos "Patato" Valdes**, **Eliane Elias**, **Marc Johnson**, **Eddie Gomez**, **Randy Brecker**, **Dave Liebman**, **Anthony Braxton**, **Rabih Abu Khalil**, **Erik Friedlander**, **Paul Giger**, **Toshiko Akiyoshi Big Band**, **Ying String Quartet**, **Metamorphosen Chamber Orchestra**, **Lalo Schifrin** and **Pablo Ziegler**. "He's incredibly intuitive, and he never ceases to surprise me," Hasselbring says.

**PROMOTIONAL PHOTO**



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