



Bio information: **THE MICROSCOPIC SEPTET**

Title: **MANHATTAN MOONRISE** (Cuneiform Rune 370) Format: CD / DIGITAL

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**FILE UNDER: JAZZ**

*The Microscopic Septet, NYC's Fave Purveyors of Swing,  
Roar Back into the Limelight with Manhattan Moonlight,  
an Album of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tunes Dedicated to their Beloved Manhattan*

Music lovers and romantics entranced with New York City's jazz life, take note: **The Microscopic Septet** are back in the jazz spotlight, disproving **F. Scott Fitzgerald's** comment that there are no second acts in American lives. Since roaring back into action in 2006 after a 14-year hiatus, the indefatigably creative ensemble has continued to evolve, burnishing and extending a well-earned reputation as one of the most consistently inventive jazz bands of the 1980s and 2000s/2010s. Reverently irreverent, insistently playful, unfussily virtuosic and unapologetically swinging, the band offers further evidence of its resurgence with *Manhattan Moonrise*, the Micros' first project with newly composed originals in 25 years.

As the title suggests, this is urbanely urban music that moves and grooves, marked by beautifully intertwined lines that unwind in unexpected directions. With co-founders/co-leaders pianist **Joel Forrester** and soprano saxophonist **Phillip Johnston** crafting all the album's compositions and arrangements, the band plays with the loose-limbed precision of a dance orchestra in the midst of a six-month tour. The strength of the Micros flows from the old-school virtue of consistency. Along with the co-founders, the seven-piece ensemble features largely the same cast of improvisers with which it emerged from Manhattan's wild and woolly Downtown scene in 1980. Drummer **Richard Dworkin**, baritone saxophonist **David Sewelson**, bassist **David Hofstra**, and altoist **Don Davis** (who replaced **John Zorn** in 1981) have all been along for almost the entire Microscopic journey, while tenor saxophonist **Mike Hashim** joined the fold in 2006.

Though some Micros are no longer based in the Big Apple – co-leader Johnston now lives in Sydney, Australia – *Manhattan Moonrise* embodies the rough and tumble elegance of New York City in much the same way that **Damon Runyon's** elaborate tough guy patois affectionately evokes a vision of underworld panache. "The Micros---no matter where we play, let alone where we live these days---has always been a New York band," says Forrester. "We bring The City to our music, and this amounts to a form of high lunacy." At the core of the Micros' music is strong affection for New York, and an inclusive respect for the century of jazz that sprouted from its sidewalks. If a movie was made about New York City, a timeless romance that cast jazz in the central, mythic role, the Micros' music would be the ideal soundtrack.

*Manhattan Moonrise* touches on the band's entire three and half decade history, with several previously unrecorded tunes from the Micros' early years, such as Forrester's lushly orchestrated "**No Time**," which sounds like a catchy back page from **Cedar Walton's** songbook. Johnston's brief but scorching "**Obeying The Chemicals**" is another early piece, a deliciously telegraphic booting barrelhouse romp. And then there's the new work, like Forrester's episodic closer "**Occupy Your Life**," which makes sly reference to **Beethoven**. There are pieces designed to showcase the band's vivid voices, like "**Hang It On A Line**," Forrester's vehicle for Sewelson's lithe bari in all its tough-and-tender glory. And there are tunes that demonstrate why no band this side of the **World Saxophone Quartet** can do more with a riff, like Forrester's slightly off kilter "**Star Turn**."

Whatever the music's vintage, it shares the unmistakable Micro stamp, a convivial marriage of ingenious craftsmanship and extroverted improvisation. If the band has a patron saint, it's clearly **Thelonious Sphere Monk**, whose presence is manifest in the Micros' cagey humor, harmonic syntax and hurtling rhythms. In much the same way that Monk's music existed apart from contemporaneous bebop, drawing directly on **Ellington** and Harlem stride piano while inhabiting its own avant-garde zone, the Micros are avid students of jazz history but unburdened by revivalist notions. Nothing better captures the band's imaginative power than the last release, 2010's widely hailed mash note on Cuneiform focusing on Monk's lesser known masterpieces, *Friday the Thirteenth: The Micros Play Monk*.

"I've always considered that the Microscopic Septet presents an outward show of being a 'revival' outfit," Forrester says. "But we what attempt to revive...never existed. A revival of the future, then?"

The future has never sounded so hip.

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Simultaneously embracing the past and the future makes perfect sense when you consider the fraught time and place that gave birth to the Microscopic Septet. In the early 1980s the New York jazz scene was divided, sometimes bitterly, between irony-laced Downtown players eager to explore new territory drawing on free jazz, rock, funk and later Balkan influences. At the same time, the emergence of young players following in the footsteps of trumpeter **Wynton Marsalis** came to define mainstream jazz by looking backwards to 1950s hard bop and 1960s post bop. Rejecting allegiance to any particular camp or faction, the Micros forged their own path with an ethos succinctly summed up by Johnston: “Break all the rules and respect all the saints.”

Embracing jazz’s populist legacy, the Micros brought Uptown jazz back Downtown, where they made a compelling case that swing could look forward as well as backward. The band adopted a name that playfully alluded to its orchestral palette. As Johnston explained at the time, “The instrumentation is enough to give us a big range of colors and work compositionally in a more expansive way.” But the name also described their compositions, which often distilled the essence of an era within an artfully executed voicing. “Through its command of idiomatic detail,” opined *The New York Times*, “the group summons the sound of an Ellington orchestra, or the feel of a 50’s rhythm-and-blues band, with a few well-chosen phrases and sonorities.”

The band was built upon the felicitous partnership of Johnston and Forrester, who met in the early 70s and bonded over shared musical aesthetics, humor, and similarly skewed worldviews. Eager to break away from the jazz straightjacket of head-solo-head formats, they honed extended, lapidary jazz compositions that segued gracefully between different themes in a single piece, hearkening forward to forms employed by **Sun Ra**, **Duke Ellington** and **Jelly Roll Morton**. The music drew on the entire history of jazz, as well as polkas, tangos, antic cartoon themes, klezmer, and new wave rock. No matter how eclectic their influences, the Micros always hewed to the band’s prime directive: “It’s gotta swing, whether its Latin or R&B or straight-ahead blowing,” Johnston says. “That’s the foundation of what we do.”

Prolific composers, Forrester and Johnston had created a songbook of nearly 200 tunes by the time the band called it a day in 1992. During the Micros’ first incarnation they only got around to recording 34 pieces on four albums, which were all released on small labels to an impressive array of critical acclaim. The band’s 1983 debut LP, *Take the Z Train*, came out on Press Records and featured cover art by San Francisco artist **Bill Paradise**. “It is as if the entire history of improvisatory music is on parade,” *Cadence* exclaimed. The Micros followed in 1985 with a live album *Let’s Flip!*, which was recorded in Rotterdam and released by Dutch label Osmosis Records.

Osmosis released 1986’s *Off Beat Glory* and Stash put out *Beauty Based on Science* in 1988 with liner notes by “New York School” poet, **Ron Padgett**, album cover art by painter **Bob Tuska**, and cartoons by **Collin Kellogg**. In keeping with the band’s perverse ways, they were reaching a vast new audience when they disbanded. Forrester’s theme song for the long-running NPR show *Fresh Air with Terry Gross*, which continues to be heard by millions of public radio listeners every day, was introduced in 1990.

After the turn of the Century, The Microscopic Septet began a collaboration with DC-based Cuneiform Records. Cuneiform’s decision to reissue all of the band’s early albums on two double albums in 2006, *Seven Men in Neckties* and *Surrealistic Swing*, introduced the band to a generation of jazz fans who came of age in the ensuing years. Featuring striking album artwork by Pulitzer Prize-winning New York cartoonist **Art Spiegelman**, (creator of the graphic novel *Maus*), the *History of the Micros* albums contain all the music from the four original albums and 11 previously unreleased tracks.

The reception was so positive that the band reunited for a European tour, which led to the Micros returning to the studio for 2008’s *Lobster Leaps In*, an acclaimed Cuneiform album featuring beloved tunes and overlooked gems from the band’s original book. They followed up two years later with the great Monk album *Friday the Thirteenth: The Micros Play Monk*, which appeared on numerous “Best of Year” list by jazz critics and magazines worldwide. Featuring cover art by celebrated *New Yorker* illustrator **Barry Blitt**, and Johnston’s and Forrester’s arrangements of Monk tunes, *Friday the Thirteenth* has become a venerated classic among Monk aficionados, regarded as one of the best tributes made.

After paying tribute to the music that sparked their formation decades before, The Microscopic Septet now make a major leap back into the future with *Manhattan Moonrise*, an album that shows the Micros are still a cutting-edge ensemble forging boldly into, and inventively re-imagining, traditional jazz territory. As Johnston noted at the band’s revival, “although we are not as good as we used to be, we are better.”

*Manhattan Moonrise* was recorded through the assistance of a \$10,000 Kickstarter campaign, supported by longtime and new Micros’ fans. The album’s cover art is by **Antonia Pesenti**, an Australian graphic artist best known for *Alphabetical Sydney*, a children’s book done with playwright **Hilary Bell**.

The Microscopic Septet will hold a record release party for *Manhattan Moonrise* at **Small’s Jazz Club** in NYC’s Greenwich Village on June 12, 2014. Co-leaders Johnston and Forrester are available for interviews about the album, and will perform as a duo in June 2014 on both the East (Spectrum NYC) and West (Oakland, CA) US Coasts. Also in support of *Manhattan Moonrise*, the Micros will perform on the East Coast in October 2014. The Microscopic Septet look forward to also performing live at jazz festivals worldwide.

*For more information on The Microscopic Septet:*  
[www.microscopicseptet.com](http://www.microscopicseptet.com) - [www.cuneiformrecords.com](http://www.cuneiformrecords.com)

*We asked the Micros co-leaders, Phillip Johnston & Joel Forrester, some questions about Manhattan Moonrise. Here's what they said:*

**What does the album NAME mean to you?**

JF: *MANHATTAN MOONRISE*---The title evokes the moment when nighttime in New York struggles to come to life. The Micros---no matter where we play, let alone where we live, these days---has always been a New York band. We bring The City to our music: this amounts to a form of high lunacy.

**What can you tell me about this album? What does THIS ALBUM -- THE MUSIC ON IT -- MEAN to you?**

PJ: *Manhattan Moonrise* contains a combination of new and old music. Some of the tunes are brand new, written expressly for this record ("Occupy your Life" by Joel is an example), some of them are old tunes, but re-arranged, with the perspective of time ("Obeying The Chemicals" is one of these); a few are tunes from our 80s repertoire that never got recorded. Of these, "No Time" is one of the earliest, and "Hang It On A Line" one of the later ones.

**What would YOU like the public to REMEMBER about this album?**

JF: I would like the listening public to remember their first moments in New York; were they cowed by all that spurious "purpose" on people's day-faces? I certainly was. And did they come to embrace the (somewhat gentler) nighttime hours? I did.

**Any interesting EVENTS happen when you were making/ recording this album?**

PJ: We raised \$10,000 on Kickstarter to fund the recording. Thank you Kickstarter backers!

**How is this album DIFFERENT FROM your previous works? How is this album the SAME AS your previous works?**

PJ: It's different because it's the first CD containing newly composed original music that we've made since 1988's *Beauty Based on Science*, circa 25 years ago. It's the same in that, the personnel in the band has remained consistent (with one change: Mike Hashim replacing Paul Shapiro) since before that time.

**What about the COVER ART?**

The cover art is by an Australian graphic artist named Antonia Pesenti; her most recent work, with playwright Hilary Bell, is *Alphabetical Sydney*, an art book/children's book on New South Press. <http://www.antoniapesenti.com/> <http://alphabeticalsydney.tumblr.com/>

**Do you consider The Micros to be part of any current MUSICAL MOVEMENT or STYLE?**

JF: I've always considered that the Microscopic Septet presents an outward show of being a "revival" outfit; but we what attempt to revive...never existed. A revival of the future, then?

**Tell me a little bit about your recent activities & future plans outside of the Micros.**

JF & PJ : Joel Forrester and Phillip Johnston will perform as a duo at SpectrumNYC in New York City on June 10th, and at Duende in Oakland, CA on June 15, 2014

Joel Forrester:

2013: A week playing for silent films at the Louvre;  
five steady, weekly gigs in New York;  
solo (and duo with Phillip Johnston) concerts via Radio Bremen;  
three years' participation in the Celestival (Auxillac, France);  
five years granted week-long outdoor solo concerts in Bryant Park.

August 2014: shows in France at Chateauneuf Festival, Abbe d'Aulp, and Celebration in Sciez

January 2015: touring in France with Joel Forrester's French Quintet.

Future plans: Completing AS IT WERE, an interactive music piece set in 30 rooms. Working with my singer X (aka Christina Clare)

Phillip Johnston:

2013: Premiere of *Wordless!* with Art Spiegelman at the Sydney Opera House. <http://www.johnshand.com.au/wordless/>  
Premiere of original score for Lotte Reiniger's *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) in Sydney. (Randwick Town Hall/Parramatta Riverside Theatre)

Performances w/ Tight Corners: the Phillip Johnston/Jex Saarelaht Quartet plays the music of Thelonious Monk, Herbie Nichols & Steve Lacy at the 2013 Wangaratta Jazz Festival & the Capital Jazz Project (Canberra).

Performance with Claire Daly Sextet at the Sydney international Women's Jazz Festival.

Choral work 'This Breath' for *Cutaway* (Adelaide).

2014: US Premiere of *Wordless!* with Art Spiegelman at Brooklyn Academy of Music, w/ subsequent performances in Colorado Springs & Chicago.

Art Spiegelman and I will be touring the US in OCT 2014 with *Wordless!* (8 cities on board so far).

A further *Wordless!* tour is planned for early-2015

Future plans: new development workshop of *Do Good And You Will Be Happy*, a musical-theatre work with playwright Hilary Bell.

Finishing mixing of soundtrack for *Prince Achmed*.

Hope to record Tight Corners this year as well.

Preparing for a 1 week 'residency' at John Zorn's venue The Stone in NYC from March 3-8, 2015.