

MICROSCOPIC SEPTET:

FEATURES:

“... My father went to the music critic at The Pittsburgh Press, who...didn't like jazz at all. He talked this fellow into giving my father all the free jazz records he was supposed to review. I inherited all those records. The first record...was, “Modern Jazz Piano: Four Views.” And the pianists on there were Erroll Garner, Art Tatum, Mary Lou Williams and Lennie Tristano. That music was so weird to me, so exotic to my Pittsburgh experience...I would listen to that stuff as if I were in a separate world. One of the other records I got was “Thelonious Monk – At the Blackhawk,” a club in San Francisco. Thelonious Monk seemed like a wizard to me.

I had a...piano teacher. His name was Henry Volz. ...he taught me to play by ear, which is very important to a jazz musician. ... He was also more interested in performance value than in mastery of playing. ...

After I graduated from high school, I was drafted. I had already decided to resist the draft. ...

... while in prison I learned to compose music away from the keyboard. ... After six months, I was released on parole. ... I played for silent films under the name Dr. Reel in a coffee shop in the North Beach section [of San Francisco]. One of the conditions of my parole is that I couldn't play using my real name.

As soon as my parole ended, we moved to New York City. ...

Several big things happened to me about the same time. One was meeting the Baroness Pannonica [de Koenigswarter] in a ribs-and-chicken joint in the Village. ... We got into a conversation that lasted about an hour and a half. ... She told the club owner, “Victor, this man wants to play here.” So I played “Pannonica,” the tune Monk had written for her. Well, that got me the gig. So that led to my fast friendship with the Baroness, and she would take me to her place in Weehawken to meet Monk. Thanks to her, I got a chance to play for him over the next couple of years.

During that same time I met this fellow Phillip Johnston. Phillip, like me, was influenced by the music of Charles Mingus and Monk. ... we formed the group the Microscopic Septet. We stayed together for 12 years. We played jazz clubs, but we also played rock clubs because we wanted young people to hear us. ... We're...going to get together and make an all-Thelonious Monk record. It will be his arrangements and mine. I don't know what Monk would think. But I think he would like some of it. I'll go that far. This is what I've learned from Monk: to write music that people have never heard before. I am now up to 1,500 compositions. ...”

– *Ozler Muhammad*, “A Piano, a Baroness and Thelonious Monk,” *The New York Times: Lens Blog*, May 26, 2010, lens.blogs.nytimes.com

“The only Awards Show with no acceptance speeches! JUST PURE ENTERTAINMENT by the best in Cabaret, Comedy, and Jazz! ... Outstanding Jazz Combo Performance: ...Finalists:... Microscopic Septet...”

– *Siegel Presents!*, 2007

“...the saxophone-heavy Microscopic Septet drew on a cache of inspired improvisers and two of the era's most sophisticated and stylistically slippery jazz composers and players—the pianist Joel Forrester and the saxophonist Phillip Johnston. This reunion promises equal parts zaniness and braininess, as heard on the band's recent album, “Lobster Leaps In.””

– Steve Futterman, *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2009

“Their wit, smarts, varietal swing, and bopping quadruple-sax arrangements made the Micros the most entertainingly pomo of eighties New York jazz outfits. A couple of cool 2006 anthologies cemented their legacy and brought them back for their first gigs together since 1992 and a fine 2008 album, *Lobster Leaps In*. They're still the finest retro-futurists around, and I'd recommend getting here early because this petite joint will be packed.”

– Richard Gehr, *The Village Voice*, December 08, 2009

CONCERT REVIEWS:

“On Dec. 13th, the Microscopic Septet made its only 2007 Manhattan appearance at Sweet Rhythm. The brass-less little-big band...played in a simultaneously retro and ‘progro’ bag. Culling material from four albums, the arrangements...were strong-themed pastiches with catchy melodies and superb part-writing... The gig also showcased the traditionally-rooted yet eccentrically-eclectic solo styles of the hornmen. Among the highlights: the mercurial mood shifts of “A Strange Thought Entered My Mind”; the disjunctive lines and tonal poetry of the Strayhorn-esque “Lies”; Sewelson's amazing feature on “Money, Money, Money”, employing an uncanny mix of tonal manipulations... Davis' soulful swinging on “Disconcerto For Donnie”; Hashim's lush Johnny Hodges vibrato on “Take the Z Train”; and Forrester's flamboyant showmanship and just-right piano punctuations. Above all, it was fun; people danced and Cho, the veteran barkeep, could barely contain his glee.”

– Tom Greenland, “New York @ Night”, *All About Jazz-New York*, January 2008, No. 69

“Nightlife Awards for NYC Jazz Artists

...These awards honor the best in NYC night life, in the categories of Jazz, Comedy, and Cabaret. ...

In the Jazz category, this year's winners are: ... Jazz Combo - Ben Riley's Monk Legacy Band (Finalists: Roy Haynes, The Microscopic Septet)."

– *Jazz News*, 1/2007, home.nestor.minsk.by/jazz/news/2007/01/1303.html

CONCERT PREVIEWS:

“Top live show: The Microscopic Septet, Joe's Pub; Fri 1 Sat 2

The downtown scene of the '80s is nostalgically remembered for its squawking duck calls, hammering guitar armies and cut-up aesthetic; it's easy to forget that actual jazz was still being played south of Houston Street. The Microscopic Septet...served up serpentine bop melodies, suave four-saxophone arrangements and Dixieland-style collective raves—sometimes in the space of a single chart.

In place of downtown irony, the Micros cultivated a polystylistic whimsy, complete with choreographed stage moves and quirky titles like “Pack the Ermines, Mary”... Even at its breeziest, however, the band played hard...

When the band celebrated its 20th anniversary at Town Hall in 2000, it had no product to flog beyond a handmade CD-R... These reissues are cause for celebration, not least because they've lured Johnston back from his new home in Australia for two more nights of surrealistic swing.”

– Steve Smith, “Top live show: The Microscopic Septet”, *Time Out New York*, November 30–December 6, 2006, Issue 583

“Last year the complete output of this high-spirited outfit was reissued by Cuneiform, thwarting any notion that jazz in the 1980s was strictly a conservative affair. Here — on the heels of a European tour, and on the eve of a studio session — the group plays previously unreleased tunes by its diabolical resident composers.... At 8 and 10 p.m., Sweet Rhythm...West Village...”

– Nate Chinen, *The New York Times*, December 7, 2007, www.nytimes.com

“... the **Micros** were a local sensation during the 80s, playing intelligent, swinging and oddly traditional jazz leavened with a high quotient of wackiness, in terms of both content and presentation. You could actually dance to most of what they recorded on albums that should have sold in the millions and made them network TV regulars. ...their best LP tracks are now available on a pair of double-disc CDs issued on the Cuneiform label... Acquire them!”

– Paul Blair, *Hot House*, December 2006

“The Microscopic Septet which featured two of the most sophisticated and stylistically slippery jazz composers and players—the pianist Joel Forrester and saxophonist Phillip Johnston—reigned on the downtown music scene in the late eighties and early nineties. ...the group is reuniting for a brief tour that comes to Joe’s Pub.”

– “Lucky Seven”, *The New Yorker*, November 20, 2006

“This rambunctious but soundly ensemble has put together a pair of retrospective releases on Cuneiform Records, and a tour to support them. ...Tonight at 11:30, tomorrow night at 9:30, Joe’s Pub...East Village...” – Nate Chinen, *The New York Times*, December 1, 2006. www.nytimes.com

“Listening to the septet’s output, recently reissued in two dual-disc sets on Cuneiform Records, it’s clear why the National Public Radio host chose the band to compose her theme. They embrace the history of 20th-century American music with intellectual curiosity and cheeky wit. Fiercely swinging, the little-big-band arrangements by Saxophonist Phillip Johnston and pianist Joel Forrester work on their own merits as well as a pastiche of jazz and pop forms.

...They insist this is a one-time-only reunion, with Gross returning the long-overdue favor by emceeding. World Café Live, 3025 Walnut Street, 9p.m. Thursday....”

– Shaun Brady, “Super-swinging septet back for a reunion”, *Philly.com*, Fri. November 24, 2006, www.philly.com

“...I got a double-dip of great radio on last night’s Fresh Air broadcast Yesterday (11/29/06) because, in addition to the Ariel Levy Q & A, Terry interviewed musicians and composers Phillip Johnston and Joel Forrester of The Microscopic Septet, who wrote the show’s theme and whose tunes are used as incidental music between segments...these guys are quite tight...the group will reunite for a series of shows but..alas, they’re only performing on the east coast which is a bummer because I won’t get to see ‘em...”

– Crash Pryor, “The Microscopic Septet—Rockin’ Reeds & A Reunion!”, *Rhino Insider*, November 29, 2006

RECENT INTERVIEWS RADIO INTERVIEWS

NPR “Fresh Air with Terry Gross”/WHYY: “The Microscopic Septet, Enlarged”: November 28, 2006

Interview with Phillip Johnston and Joel Forrester and music

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6549018

WFMU 91.1 “Irene Trudel’s Show”: “Two Micros and Honeycut”:

Interview with Phillip Johnston and Joel Forrester Monday Nov. 27, 2006

www.wfmu.org/~irene

“In September of 2006, Cuneiform Records released two double CD sets of The Microscopic Septet, entitled...The History of the Micros...To commemorate this hysterical event, we are reuniting the Microscopic Septet for a one-time-only tour in November and December of 2006, consisting of a few dates in the Northeastern US and more in Europe. ... “I was interested in more arranged, compositionally-oriented music from within the swing big band jazz tradition,” Johnston recalls, “as opposed to (the conventional jazz) head-solos-head format.” ... When he originally named the group, “Claude Funston and the Psychic Detectives” it proved too “unwieldy,” he changed it to the “Microscopic Septet,” who played their first “regular gig” at New York’s Ear Inn in 1981.”

– “Phillip Johnston of the Microscopic Septet”, *Green Arrow Radio-WHUS*, November 28th, 2006

Green Arrow Radio WHUS 91.7, Interview: Phillip Johnston of the Microscopic Septet, November 28th, 2006

www.greenarrowradio.com/2006/11/28/phillip-johnston-of-the-microscopic-septet

RECENT INTERVIEWS-PRINT

Beppe Colli, “An Interview with Phillip Johnston (The Microscopic Septet), *Clouds and Clocks*, Oct. 22, 2006

www.cloudsandclocks.net/interviews/MicroscopicSeptet_interview.html