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Deluxe Bebop

SHERYL BAILEY

UPDATES THE CLASSIC JAZZ ORGAN TRIO

BY ADAM LEVY

LOTS OF GREAT JAZZ GUITAR PLAYERS—INCLUDING WES Montgomery, Pat Martino, and John Abercrombie—have performed and recorded in the organ-trio format (electric guitar, Hammond organ, and drums). It's easy to appreciate why such players are intrigued by this configuration. A skilled organist can draw a virtually limitless range of timbres and textures from the instrument, all while handling melodic, chordal, and bass-line duties. Such dynamic flexibility makes the organ trio an ideal vehicle for exploring all sorts of musical vistas, from ostentatious funk to hard-swinging blues to tender balladry. Yet wherever the music goes, and whatever the tones the players choose, the prime sonic characteristics of the organ and the electric guitar remain simpatico.

Another jazz six-stringer who enjoys working regularly in this format is New York-based guitarist Sheryl Bailey, whose latest record, *A Meeting of Minds* [Cellar Live], is her fifth organ-trio release. The album's title is apt, though it could've been called *A Melding of Minds*, because the players (Bailey, drummer Ian Froman, and organist Ron Oswanski) are so in sync that they seem to finish each other's musical ideas at times. Though it was recorded in a studio, *Minds* has an undeniably live feel. The playing is bold and energetic, and each member of the trio spurs the others on while keeping their own ears wide open.

Faint echoes of classic organ-trio recordings of the '60s can be heard here and there, but the mood of the album is neither nostalgic or retro. The compositions here—all Bailey's own—are modern in conception. The improvisational flights are forward thinking. The tonal quality of the recording is warm, yet with ample definition and dimension. Listen on a great pair of speakers or headphones and it's easy to imagine yourself right there in the room with Bailey, Froman, and Oswanski.

How did you get that live feel in the studio?

We didn't do more than two takes of anything. Honestly, most of the tunes are just one take. We could do that because we've played a lot of gigs together, for at least five years. That's what I wanted to document and what I want to promote, because there is something to be said for a working band.

When you're only going for one or two takes, how do you know when you have the keeper?

You look at each other and you know—*yep, that's it*. If we did it again, could we play it better? You get diminishing returns after awhile. You want to keep it fresh. In terms of playing together, we've already explored these tunes a lot and stretched out on them. We've refined where the peaks are. None of it is worked out exactly, but you get a sense of where to take it. Also, we've played these tunes enough together so that everyone really knows the melody. That's a big thing—knowing the *phrasing* of a song.

Is your tune "Unity" a nod to organist Larry Young and his mid-'60s



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album of the same name?

No, but I really love the way that Ian and Ron took to “One for VJ” because it reminds me of that record. They totally got it.

What other organ-trio records are you a fan of?

The Dynamic Duo—by Jimmy Smith and Wes Montgomery—was a big influence on me.

In what way?

The swing. If an alien from another planet came here and asked, “What is swing?” you could just play that stuff!

Your tone is rich, yet really clear as well.

So many guitarists sacrifice one for the other. How do you think about tone, and what are the elements of your rig?

I play a Ric McCurdy Mercury Sheryl Bailey signature model through an Acoustic Image Clarus 2R head, into a Raezer’s Edge cabinet with a 10” speaker. That’s my whole rig—except on “Cheap Jersey Gas,” where I used a bunch of pedals. I’m always on my students about this—practicing with an amp, so that you’re aware of the sound that you make. You develop your touch when you practice with an amp. Without an amp, you’re gonna overplay. Just turn up the knob if you need more volume. You don’t need to dig in to play an electric guitar.

I’ve watched you play, and your picking form is unconventional. Can you break down your right-hand technique?

I play with a sort of upside-down right hand, which I learned from Rodney Jones. I call it the “Benson technique.” It puts your pick at the same angle as your fingers would be if you played classical guitar. Classical guitarist obsess over their fingernails because that’s what hits the string. I use a Fender Medium, which is more-or-less the thickness and flexibility of a human fingernail. That—to me—produces the best sound. The way those classical players develop their tone is through their fingernail and the angle of the nail on the string. I’m doing the same thing with a



piece of plastic. That’s my theory, anyway.

Many jazz players seem to think that a heavier pick equals better tone.

Well, you had to come to a woman to find out size doesn’t matter. [Laughs.]

You mentioned using some effects on “Cheap Jersey Gas.” That’s a wild tone in the intro. What’s going on there?

It’s supposed to feel like you’re sitting in traffic on the Jersey Turnpike, so I wanted something like a radio sound. I used an overdrive pedal, and I have an old Boss pitch shifter—I did some stuff with that. We also took an intro from another take and ran it backwards along with what I played live on the main take.

You play some really interesting contrapuntal things on “5-1” near the end of the tune’s melody. You’re sustaining the top notes your chords while the lower voices move independently. Is that something you’ve worked on a lot?

It’s something I’m always working on. When I’m practicing, I’ll take a tune and play the melody with bass notes underneath, then I’ll start improvising from there. Over time, you can start to see chords like more like moving melodic shapes instead of static chunks of sound. I wouldn’t say I’m good at it, but it’s something I’m practicing.

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It seems like a pianistic approach, more so than the kinds of chordal things that guitarists are prone to.

I love a lot of piano players, and I grew up in a family of piano players. They can do that so effortlessly—playing little lines inside of a chord. I love how [pianist] Horace Silver comps. It's almost like a little big band. And I get to hang out with [guitarist] Gene Bertoncini sometimes. He's a total master of that.

Your McCurdy signature model—is that the guitar you play all the time?

No, actually. I'm on the road now playing guitar for a band called Ancestral Groove. It's a little more funk based. I'm playing a Strat-style McCurdy guitar with that band.

That's so different from your Mercury, which is a semi-hollow ES-335 type of instrument. I can't picture you with a Strat.

As much as I love the guitar, it's still foreign territory. Ric's making me one now with a shorter scale. I'm a Gibson-scale girl. He's making it with that scale.

What difference does the scale make?

There's a difference in the way the instrument speaks. It's more singy, to me, in short scale.

Had you ever owned a Strat-style guitar before?

My very first guitar was a Harmony solid-body from the J.C. Penney catalog, but my first serious instrument was an ES-335, which I'd saved up my money for. I still like that style of guitar. I think people tend to stay loyal to their first experiences.

You do a lot of teaching—at Berklee College of Music in Boston and the Collective in New York City, as well as offering online courses through TrueFire. How is teaching online different from working with a roomful of students?

One thing I'm doing with TrueFire is their Sherpa program. I've created a curriculum and it's kinda like my college, in a way. I've shot almost 300 little video lessons. I have students all over the world—they subscribe—and they range from someone who is just learning what a 7th chord is to guys who can really play. Creating these short lessons has helped me streamline my approach as a teacher, because I've realized that sometimes a three-to-five-minute lesson is really what they need. I used to always assume that if someone's here for a lesson, I should give them everything I can think of on the topic. But sometimes people just need one little nugget. 🍌

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