



CURVED INTELLIGENCE— THE MUSICAL RESOLUTIONS OF SANDY EVANS

Photo by Jane March

By RANDAL McILROY

Stories are being told tonight.

There are perhaps no more than 40 people here tonight in this cozy university recital hall in downtown Winnipeg, but that only adds to the sense of communion as the Sandy Evans Trio plays.

In its economy, the saxophone/bass/drums format leaves little room to hide. The musicians welcome the challenge. With a philosophy that sings for openness and communication—with the listeners as well as with each other—this is not a night for star power. Evans opens the concert solo with Coltrane's "Peace on Earth," and her deep research in tenor honors the Trane tradition. Later, she brings a different approach to the soprano, enjoying the straight-horn quizzicality that echoes Lol Coxhill by seeming at once amused, sardonic and fascinated by musical problems waiting to be unknotted. Well before then, drummer Toby Hall and bassist Brett Hirst make their claim to the music. Hall can play hard, but prowling pieces such as the Korean-influenced "The Secret Garden" reveal a percussionist who knows every inch of cymbal surface for tonal color; presently, he's summoning invisible gongs and temple bells. True to the bass ideal, Hirst is on the money a millisecond before the ears anticipate some deep affirmation. His occasional solos vindicate themselves easily, while the tense ostinato in "Snake Gully" is only one of many examples of a keen detail man.

And then there's the writing. Robust or keening, urgent or watchful, it moves as easily through wry highland marches as grassland lopes, exclamatory spontaneity as Oriental reflection, and always with bright eyes and an open heart. Evans seems at least as well employed as a composer as she is as a performer, with a growing portfolio of commissions. Here, in the intimate compass of the trio, she gives players plenty for chewing.

A few hours earlier, Evans takes a break from rehearsal to speak with *Coda*. True to the music that comes later, she is alert, engaging and welcoming.

Breadth of listening is the place to start. For most North American listeners the story begins with the Catholics; two discs released through Sony spanned continents and moods, from loose-limbed township jive to the funky or the meditative, and always with indelible melodies. While that band continued, Evans also worked in the harder attack of Clarion Fracture Zone. Followers of Peter Gabriel's Real World label were alerted to Mara Kiek's group, Mara!, where Evans matched her saxophones and recorder to stirring Eastern European choral shapes.

"I think of myself as a bit of a music junkie," Evans says. "I hear music and I tend to like it and want to know about it and absorb it somehow. I've always been interested in a lot of different things."

Ambitious learning started early. Born in 1960 in Manley, Australia, close to the Sydney beachside suburb where she lives now, Evans began on piano at an early age, with her

mother's encouragement. From there she moved to flute, for classical studies and performance. By the time she was a teenager she was playing alto saxophone in a big band. Singapore was where she finished high school, as a scholarship student at the United World College of South East Asia; it was also where she began to learn about the performing life via gigs in local hotels. Formal education followed, first on the continent, where she graduated from the jazz studies course at the NSW Conservatorium of Music, and then variously in Europe, Britain and America.

Along the way she was already absorbing. After graduating from high school, for example, she toured extensively in Southeast Asia, drinking deeply from local musical fonts and at one point studying er-hu, a traditional two-stringed Chinese violin. Later, while living in Scotland, she played in both a saxophone quartet and an R&B group.

Not that synthesis always came so easily. She remembers being somewhat overwhelmed by possibilities in her first band, Women and Children First. "In that first band, all those influences collided and I didn't know how to manage them. The trio, I think, is my first attempt to bring them together and try to distill them into one situation where they could exist, hopefully, in a unified way."

It's a different story now, and the quickest summary of current projects is breathtaking. In one corner there's the Australian Art Orchestra, which first performed *Testimony*, a musical-theatre production created with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa and set on the life of Charlie Parker. In another, there's *austraLYSIS*, which she describes as "A sort of avant-garde group which has become involved in a lot of computer-interactive improvisation." This year sees the debut of *GEST8*, a new octet featuring the compositions of her husband, Tony Gorman, whose career as a saxophonist has been curtailed by multiple sclerosis.

Her discography is swelling. The Sandy Evans Trio has already

released the excellent *Not in the Mood* through Australian distributor Newmarket Music. The same company also distributes *Time Never Sleeps*, the debut by the trio, Waratah, with koto player Satsuki Odamura and percussionist Tony Lewis. The cherry-blossom reveries suggested in the gentler passages for Odamura's instrument are only part of a robust mix that finds Evans alternating lean soprano and declamatory tenor.

Having started with alto saxophone, the student moved to soprano—originally with a curved instrument, which she remembers with fondness—and then tenor.

"I feel very differently about each instrument," she says. "I don't feel the soprano is a higher tenor. Certainly, in a group like Waratah there's a quality about the lightness of the soprano that I really like, that I think really fits that music. It seems to blend with the koto very well. I think that probably ties in with my flute background. The shakuhachi is the traditional instrument to play with the koto, and so the soprano has some relationship in that register with the flute."

She credits "a lot of really good friends" on the Sydney scene for encouraging her to explore musically. When asked if Australia's geographical distinctiveness might offer creative freedom beyond Western marketing, she replies in the affirmative. "I think in Australia we have a certain freedom to do what we want, because we've not a weight of history here in terms of Western culture," she says. "I think there is a freedom that comes from that."

The Sandy Evans Trio has been going since 2001, when she introduced the original lineup with Hall and bassist Brendan Clarke at the Australian Jazz Festival in Canberra, prior to a European tour that included a rave night at JazzFest Berlin. This is actually her second saxes/bass/drums trio. Evans led her first in 1986, not long after she graduated, but it took years to find the confidence to lead another. "I think it's the ultimate challenge to an improviser," she says, noting how the demands of Clarion Fracture Zone, by contrast, were mollified by having the support of keyboards and a second horn. "You're not carrying the music the whole night."

A trio makes greater demands. "It's obviously very important who you've got playing with you," she says, laughing, "and this particular trio I'm really, really happy with. And I think what made me want to do it is I feel it's the ultimate setting for playing improvised music, because it allows for total spontaneity and communication with the other musicians of the group the whole way through. Everybody has to be totally into the moment the whole time and really open to what everyone else is doing."

It helps, she adds, that fellow Australian Hall and New Zealand native Hirst also work together regularly in a trio led by veteran pianist Mike Nock. "So they have a really good relationship which they have already developed."

Yet the trio is only one region of her performing life, as performing is only one region of her creativity. Her inspiration is fittingly wide-ranging, from the culture of Australian Aborigines to the stellar photography of astronomer David Malin. She has written sharply about her nation's politics as well, including commentary on the sinking of a boat carrying refugees from Afghanistan seeking Australian asylum.

"I feel very strongly about those issues. I was angry, really, that these things were going on in my country that really reminded me of the motivation of African-American protest music. Because a lot of the music that I love came out of that situation, and then suddenly I knew there was something happening in my country that I couldn't even imagine could happen, where human rights were that badly abused. I'm not proud there was an opportunity to write music about it—do you know what I mean?"

More brightly, there's *Testimony*. The 90-minute work was commissioned by ABC Radio, and though the production was intended originally to be performed only for radio, it had its premiere through the Australian Art Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House in January 2002 for the Sydney Festival. "We had this extraordinary set where the band was on a big scaffold, and we had front and rear projections that were incredible."

At first, dealing with the outsize legacy of Charlie Parker was daunting and then some. "Initially I was completely terrified of that, because it's like dealing with God." There's another wonderful laugh. "I had to go through this whole head trip. I'm not a bebop player, I don't really play bebop, much as I love bebop and studied it. But I decided I'd make my own music in response to Yusef's poetry."

In 2003, Evans was the first winner of the Bell Award for Australian Jazz Musician of The Year. The prize is named for jazz trailblazer and diplomat, Graeme Bell. Although Bell is in his 90s now, he still performs. "He's an extraordinary man," she enthuses. "He's taken an extraordinary interest in what young people are doing."

The success of the Parker project didn't hurt her chances for the gong, she reckons, adding *Testimony* is a work that could entice new listeners to jazz. As such, the hope of taking the project on the road—the cost of moving with 19 instrumentalists and 11 singers acknowledged—burns brightly. Feeling the spirit, *Coda's* man suggests a concert at Toronto's Massey Hall, where Parker and his friends recorded no small moment in jazz history.

"Oh wow!" exclaims Evans. "That would be incredible!" ■