

Confounding The Genre Police

Pianist Donal Fox yearns to knock down the walls between jazz and classics, mere rumble-strips in other cultures.

"Jazz is following a condensed chronology of classical development; notation is to the forefront; schools teach it; Gunther Schuller and Wynton Marsalis play jazz as classical repertory, imitating past recordings to the letter," Fox says. "Players who say it's harder to play jazz can't hack the classical technique; classical players who say jazz players don't play in tune can't swing."

Fox confounds both the jazz and classical "police" by reversing the trend; he tries to loosen up the classical world, not ossify jazz. Classical forces for Fox include Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Stravinsky, Bartok, Shostakovich, Ligeti and Penderecki. He even tries to make Webern swing.

Straddling the jazz and classical worlds, Fox admits the duality keeps him hopping. "It can be a balancing act using different parts of the brain," he says. "Social differences also come into play. One day you're in a community setting, the next in a jazz club, then a symphony hall."

Fox lives his duality while leading bands at Regattabar in Cambridge, Mass., and touring with his trio in Europe—all while preparing to premiere Anthony Kelley's Piano Concerto with the Richmond Symphony (in Virginia) next year.

Yet he never feels he's walking a knife edge: Improvisation links his jazz and classics. "I never found myself on one side of the fence or the other," he says. "When I was young, I started my day with Bach, and soon realized he was a great improviser, with figured bass and melodic lines. I made up a boogie woogie on [Beethoven's] 'Pathetique Sonata.' The composer in me always wanted to make up something new."

His latest work, *Gone City* (New World), is a study in juxtaposed views: death vs. life, spoken texts by poet Quincy Troupe vs. wordless song, jazz vs. classical. "I wanted to link the art forms, to write music where listeners couldn't tell whether it was fully scored or improvised," he says. Listeners can hear these ambitions take form on the album, for example, when tenor Bill Brown improvises his totally notated wordless vocal on "T-Cell Countdown," expressing the outrage and pain of AIDS.

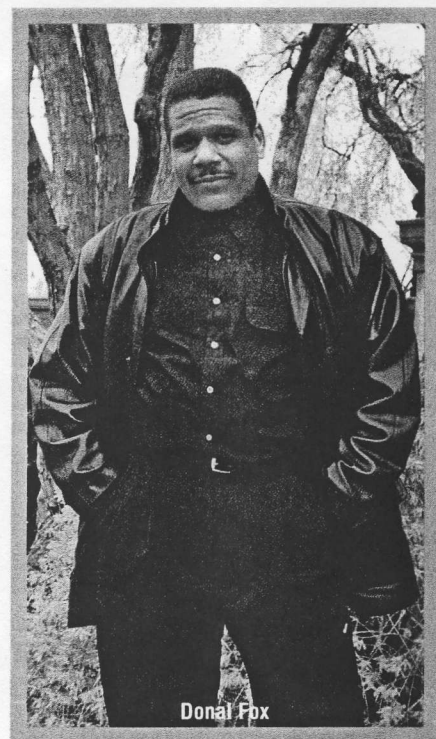
A notable series of encounters with saxophonists Oliver Lake, John

Stubblefield, Billy Pierce and David Murray have helped place Fox on the jazz map. Sessions with the latter two allowed Fox to revive in a new context jazz piano's left hand tradition—second-nature for players like Art Tatum, Earl Hines and Dave McKenna but long atrophied among post-boppers.

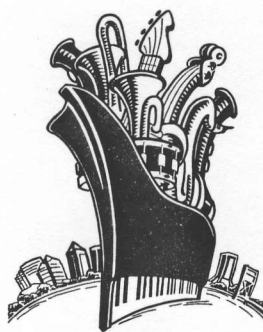
Fox is not alone in the ranks of jazz pianists who have surveyed the classics: Willie "The Lion" Smith played Chopin, Fats Waller experimented with Puccini and Tatum played Dvorak. These pianists heard the proposition, "Do you want to swing it or play it straight?" and replaced the "or" with an "and."

Crediting Thelonious Monk as one of his main jazz men, Fox rebuilt Monk's blueprint of "Jackie-ing" to new specs, adding a curve: At Regattabar, his quartet displaced the cells with added eighth rests and manipulated the repeat motif up and down chromatically. "We had fun with harmonic colors, playing with the flat-five, extending the pulse," he says.

Born to a Panamanian mother and Russian-American father, Fox views winning fellowships (1997 Guggenheim, 1998 Bogliasco, Italy) as "forms of validation that make you feel that maybe you're on the right track." They keep him inspired and focused on dual long-term goals he has set himself: to combine his creative impulses in composi-



tion and improvisation and preserve them in scores and recordings; and to insert the spontaneity and spark of jazz and its social context into the classical world's structures, forces, audiences and concert hall rigors. —Fred Bouchard



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