

# MARK DRESSER

## BASSO PROFUNDO

### BY JOHN SHARPE



San Diego-based bassist Mark Dresser's fascination with the sound of his instrument comes through loud and clear. His keen ear made him an integral part of Anthony Braxton's celebrated '80s quartet, but has since illuminated a variety of collaborative projects, his own bands and solo performances, as well as making him a crucial innovator in the field of Telematics (playing across the internet in real time). Regardless of context, Dresser's virtuosity stands out, distinguished by a sure sense of dynamics, intensity and tonality, which he melds in a way that suggests a coherent internal logic and profound musicality.

As a teen playing in rock bands he was drawn toward the experimental, listening to John Cage and Edgard Varèse and early electronic music. "I just started goofing around and overdubbing." Another trigger was hearing Jimi Hendrix and realizing the connection between feedback and playing ponticello (i.e. near the bridge). Dresser pursued his craft seriously, including lessons with bass greats such as Red Mitchell and Ray Brown, and studying with pioneering contrabassist Bertram Turetzky (who in 1974 authored *The Contemporary Contrabass* and whose former UCSD faculty position Dresser now holds). But Dresser's education was as much on the bandstand as in college. Through Turetzky, Dresser met critic-drummer Stanley Crouch and ended up joining his Black Music Infinity, alongside cornetist Bobby Bradford, saxophonists Arthur Blythe and David Murray and flute player James Newton (Dresser's 1977 recording debut was on Newton's *Binu*). He also joined the San Diego Symphony, resulting in an artistically schizophrenic existence, yet always aware of how the bass projected. He explains: "Within the range of the bass, there are microcosms of sound that continue to capture my attention. But one thing I always noticed even as a young ensemble player, is once you start playing with other instruments, a lot of these sonic goodies that I found fun became inaudible because the other instruments cancelled them out." That led Dresser to explore unorthodox methods of amplification. "Then it became a whole other level of learning. Now that I can amplify normally unheard sounds through unorthodox amplification, what are their greater musical potentials?"

The combination of amplification and extended techniques has bequeathed a rich seam of work. He made the first of many solo albums in 1983 and, keen to disseminate his learning, in 2010 issued the DVD/CD/booklet triptych *Guts: Bass Explorations, Investigations, and Explanations*. During the pandemic he set out to write the definitive document of his interests. "Well, that's turned out to be so much more involved than I had ever anticipated. Because once you start looking, it just keeps unfolding all this vocabulary. People call it extended techniques: it's just inherent to the instrument." But it's never just sound for its own sake. "I'm always looking to find how pitch, rhythm, timbre and expression interact

and it's ultimately about finding expressive stuff," he explains. Just how that manifests can be heard in multiple settings over the years.

When the San Diego Symphony went on strike in 1975, a vacation in New York turned out to be the start of something else. The loft scene was in full swing and many of Dresser's colleagues from California had already made the move. The first person he met was David Murray's flatmate, trombonist Ray Anderson, with whom he formed a duo. Other gigs followed, but to escape NYC's intensity Dresser moved to New Haven, CT, where he met future collaborators, including bassist Mark Helias, pianist Anthony Davis and drummer Gerry Hemingway. It was a fertile period of going back and forth between New Haven and New York. But after a couple of years of door gigs, Dresser felt he needed to regroup and sharpen his skill set. He moved back to California and didn't return to NYC for nine years.

Yet the crucial connections had been made. In 1985, while studying in Italy on a Fulbright scholarship, Dresser got a life changing call from Hemingway. "I'm on the road with Braxton, and he needs a bass player. Can you meet us in Ljubljana?" he reports. "I said, 'sure!' So I went and completed the tour." Dresser would remain part of Braxton's quartet until 1994. "It changed everything for me. He was very empowering as a bandleader and made you feel whatever you're contributing is the best. He gave you maximum responsibility in terms of the demands of the music and also maximum amount of agency to be able to make creative choices." Above and beyond those boons, Dresser says that playing with Braxton also gave him a strong measure of credibility. "That changed a lot of things (and) we found a very special quartet dynamic, which was really about another kind of collective playing. It was thrilling."

Hemingway gives an insight into Dresser's style: "A ceaseless reach into the expansion and possibility of expression: he also brings a particular presence and energy, as well as a fearlessness. His breadth of resources is like few other players." He continues: "I think one thing to give a focus to while listening to Mark's music is his never-ending research into the micro world of tonality and rhythm. They are intertwined in his writing and his disciplined research of his instrument. We share a love for the 'hydraulics' when we play together, the ability to invent independent layers of time and tonality and content that add dimension to real time creation."

Their shared experience informed Dresser's own work, albeit indirectly: "What I tried to take from Braxton was to give full confidence in the people that I was playing with. And let them contribute to the music and not to hyper control. I was encouraged to not shy away from complexity, so I brought that into my music and gravitated towards performers that had similar interests." Among them are collaborative groups with pianist Denman Maroney and Swiss flute player Matthias Ziegler, Jones Jones with

saxophonist Larry Ochs and Russia-born, Lithuania-based drummer Vladimir Tarasov, and Trio M with pianist Myra Melford and drummer Matt Wilson, as well as quintets featuring trombonist Michael Dessen, woodwinds specialist Marty Ehrlich, flute player Nicole Mitchell and pianist Joshua White. Dresser's multi-dimensional writing for his own groups contains layer upon layer. As he explains: "I write any way I can, with all the multiple things that interest me, trying to put all the elements of music in them and then also try to integrate all the stuff I've been doing on the bass sonically and try to create a space for that as well. And then try to write for the musicians in the band. So yeah, I like a full palette."

Trio M is one of four ensembles Dresser brings to The Stone this month. After enjoying an excellent chemistry with Melford in various projects, they started a piano trio, playing with different drummers until finding Matt Wilson. Dresser enthuses: "There was just the synergy that seemed to be greater than the sum of its parts." Wilson, reciprocally, reveals why Dresser is such a valued collaborator: "Mark is a legend of modern music. His innovative approach has left an indelible mark on the instrument's legacy. He is fearless and exploratory, continually creating sonic environments that inspire those around him. Most importantly, Mark is a beautiful soul—with a big heart and a brilliant sense of humor."

While none of the other nights feature established groupings, there are both familiar and some not-as familiar faces. On the return of Hemingway, Dresser remarks: "There was a period that I played more gigs with him than any other drummer." On opening night, Dresser reunites with Hemingway in a quartet, which includes veteran saxophonist Earl Howard plus a mystery guest. The rest of the residency includes groups with trumpeter Amir ElSaffar, gayageum player DoYeon Kim, guitarist Alec Goldfarb, bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck, pianist Cory Smythe and drummer Michael Sarin. Says Dresser, "The Stone is a perfect opportunity to try stuff out." And with its wonderful acoustics, it's the perfect place to witness Dresser's own brand of sonic wizardry.

For more info visit [mark-dresser.com](http://mark-dresser.com). Dresser is at The Stone at The New School Oct. 29-Nov.1. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Anthony Braxton—*Quartet (England) 1985* (Burning Ambulance Music, 1985)
- Mark Dresser, Mark Feldman, Hank Roberts—*Arcado String Trio* (JMT-Winter&Winter, 1989)
- Mark Dresser/Denman Maroney—*Duologues* (Les Disques VICTO, 2000)
- Trio M (Myra Melford, Mark Dresser, Matt Wilson)—*Big Picture* (Cryptogramophone, 2006)
- Mark Dresser Seven—*Sedimental You* (Clean Feed, 2015-16)
- Mark Dresser—*Tines Of Change* (Pyroclastic, 2019/2022)





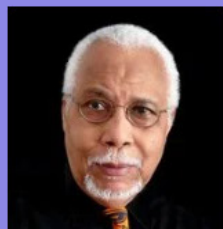
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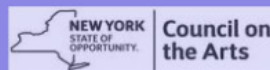


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**Stanley Clarke N•4EVER**  
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Sun, Nov 9 @ 3PM

**Arturo Sandoval**  
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**Savion Glover**  
featuring **PROjECT.9.**  
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**Represent! Social Justice  
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with **Chuck D, Rakim, Slick Rick,**  
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Nov 20 @ 8PM

**Christian McBride**  
**Big Band**  
with **Andra Day,**  
**José James and Ledisi**  
Fri, Nov 21 @ 8PM

**Carlos Varela**  
with special guests  
**Jackson Browne,**  
**Diana Fuentes**  
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Fri, Nov 21 @ 7:30PM

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**plays Jimi**  
Sat, Nov 22 @ 7:30PM

**Nat Adderley Jr. Quartet**  
**Dorthaan's Place Jazz Brunch**  
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**Sarah Vaughan International  
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