

PETER EVANS

MORE IS MORE

BY JOHN SHARPE



I still vividly remember the first time I encountered trumpeter Peter Evans. Clean cut and unassuming, he was part of drummer Guillermo E. Brown's Cut Up Quintet at the 2005 Vision Festival. His first entry was explosive: his cheeks puffed out, like Dizzy Gillespie in his prime, only to expel the air in a fearsome controlled blast that seemed to levitate him off the stage. He was simply astounding. Such virtuosic maneuvers, deployed with phenomenal speed of response and put to thoroughly musical use, have come to define his subsequent trajectory, making him an in-demand collaborator, bandleader and composer across a wide range of modern musical practices. As a consequence he has performed with numerous contemporaries (guitarist Mary Halvorson, fellow trumpeter Nate Wooley, saxophonists Jon Irabagon and Ingrid Laubrock) and luminaries (pianist Craig Taborn, saxophonists Evan Parker and Mats Gustafsson and saxophonist-composer John Zorn). But of course this distinctive voice didn't arrive out of nowhere.

Attracted to the trumpet by the example of Miles Davis (in his case it was 1981's *The Man With The Horn*, Davis' first album following a six year layoff, rather than any of the classics), Evans took to the instrument straight away. Always drawn to the unusual, his eclectic taste took him to Oberlin College, where he played chamber pieces, in salsa bands, funk bands and avant garde jazz. In particular it was iconoclasts in this last category, such as pianist Cecil Taylor and saxophonists Parker and Anthony Braxton, who sparked his imagination. "I thought to myself, this is a direction I can see myself going, because it seems like what these people are all doing is really developing their own language and vocabulary. It's a synthesis of technical innovation and aesthetic innovation that really go together. And the solo repertoire for trumpet from the notated music world, it just wasn't as exciting to me as what I was hearing from these people."

At 21, Evans moved to NYC where he hustled to meet other players and gig, while continuing to progress in his own music. After a series of day jobs, he embraced freelance session playing, especially in the city's active new music scene. Then came one of the pivotal moments in his career. Having been pursuing solo trumpet recitals since Oberlin, he made a CDR demo, which he passed around to friends. Having exchanged contact details with Parker, when the British saxophonist came to New York for poet Paul Haines' memorial concert in early 2004, he sent Parker a copy. The response was dramatic. With Evans' agreement, Parker issued the set on his own psi imprint. Parker explains: "It was clear that I was hearing the work of a true virtuoso with outstanding musical creative genius." Indeed Evans conjures multiple voices from his trumpet: his extraordinary command of breath, lungs, embouchure and valves, allied to musical intellect, evokes drones, chirrups, guffaws, swooshes, whistles, even aircraft taking off. Favorable critical reception of the resultant album, the revelatory *More Is More*, raised Evans' profile and led to invites to pit himself against a widening swathe of European improvisers (and ultimately *More Is More* became the name of his own

record label). Subsequently, he often appeared with Parker, who enthuses: "Peter has a great sensibility to situation. I have played with him in many combinations, from duo to large ensemble. His awareness of what and when to play is always determined by the context and is always a delight."

At the same time, he was affectionately dismantling the jazz tradition with his own quartet and bassist Moppa Elliott's Mostly Other People Do the Killing (MOPDtK). The latter outfit, with its self-styled bebop terrorist tag, helped put him firmly on the map. Key to the unit's uninhibited subversion were the twin horns of Evans and saxophonist Jon Irabagon, both so outrageously talented and quick-witted that they could indulge in almost any fancy and still come up smelling of roses. Reflecting on their time together, Irabagon says "Peter's quest for learning and information—all of which goes into his trumpet playing, and his composition, and his overall attitudes on life—knows no bounds. Obviously his trumpet playing is unreal, but the thing that struck me even more was that he has solutions and directions out of every situation we were thrown in...and that was MANY in MOPDtK. It was always such a joy and so much FUN to play alongside him in that group. There was continually a sense of wonder and 'what if we try this,' which set the standard for where I want my own music to go."

Evans began helming his own bands. His astonishing quartet debut album (titled: !) was chock full of ideas, executed with both precision and panache, and heralded a string of adventurous ensemble dates under his name. Matters reached another level when he added the electronics of Sam Pluta. "That was for me one of my strongest outfits in terms of the material, the people...it was so easy to work with them; socially, we had a lot of fun and everyone musically had a very high level of awareness of the whole picture of music," says Evans. Simultaneously, he cemented his place as an exceptional interpreter and composer in contemporary concert music spheres, and as a sought-after partner for forward-looking ensembles worldwide, in the company of Wooley, Gustafsson and bassists Barry Guy and Petter Eldh, among others. Wooley offers a particularly valuable insight, saying "I think a lot of attention is paid to Peter's technical virtuosity and the complexity of his music. But I've always been attracted to how much humor there is in what he's doing. Some of it is obvious—quotes, broad stylistic gestures—but a lot of his wit is found in a sense of play and a willingness to be less than serious. I always thought that Peter was one of the quickest and most sensitive players I've improvised with. And I think he's one of the most joyous as well."

Since 2018, Evans' group Being & Becoming has become the trumpeter's main outlet, completed by acclaimed vibraphonist Joel Ross, fearsomely versatile bassist Nick Joz, and a succession of drummers, including Savannah Harris, Michael Shekwoaga Ode and, most recently, the esteemed Tyshawn Sorey. In a state of sustained evolution, the band has morphed from an acoustic, swinging kind of avant garde jazz group, to something much harder to pin down. Joz and Ross remain

key. Of the bassist, Evans enthuses that "Nick's got the classical chops as well as the jazz chops. He's amazing with the bow." Characteristic of the agency Evans bestows upon his players, it is also Joz who has helped precipitate the group's development. "Nick started to bring in the Moog Sub 37 synthesizer and he uses it for a lot of different functions in conjunction with the upright bass. A lot of times he's playing both at the same time. It started to give me ideas of where to take the music next." That has implications for others too. With regards to Ross, the trumpeter says that "the vibes and trumpet both can function in their own ways very spaciouly and very percussively. And that's a shared quality that I try to use quite a bit. I mean the music's changing really fast. So now with Joel, he's playing synthesizer; he's using bows; he's using extra percussion instruments, because the music needs that." Recent editions of the band have also augmented the line up, with the voices and instruments of vocalist Sofia Jernberg, violinist Mazz Swift and flute player Alice Teyssier, who also performs on one track on the band's recently-released, dazzling third album *Ars Ludicra*. While it will be the quartet version that appears in a two-night residency at Brooklyn's Public Records this month, it's likely that the innovation will be ongoing.

Even with a series of dates for the band, Evans remains curious, following diverse paths wherever they might lead. He's tackling commissions for a memorial piece for contemporary music saxophonist Ryan Muncy, as well as a brass quintet for Ensemble Schwerpunkt (to be premiered at the Wittenberg Musiktage next April). Having written an orchestral setting of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday" for Jernberg, he will be recording a starker setting of Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life" with just viola and bass accompaniment to vocals. He's also dabbling with Early Music, as well as maintaining his solo output. Never one to rest on his laurels, Evans continually assesses his moves: "I had a concert at Roulette a couple of weeks ago that I practiced a lot for. I'm happy with like one out of ten of these gigs. So I listen to it and was encouraged by what I heard. I'm going to keep up the critique and try to work on the things that I didn't like and then try to develop the things that I did like." With his amalgam of inspired impulse and cool evaluation, the astonishment at the trumpeter's prowess and reach shows no signs of peaking anytime soon.

For more info visit peterevanstrumpet.com. Evans' *Being & Becoming* is at Public Records Dec. 4-5, and also at Solar Myth (Philadelphia, PA) Dec. 6-7. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Mostly Other People Do the Killing — Shamokin!!! (Hot Cup, 2006)
- Evan Parker, Barry Guy, Paul Lytton + Peter Evans — *Scenes In the House of Music* (Clean Feed, 2009)
- Peter Evans Quintet — *Ghosts* (More Is More, 2010)
- Peter Evans/Barry Guy — *Syllogistic Moments* (Maya, 2016)
- Peter Evans — *Veil* (More Is More, 2018)
- Peter Evans Being & Becoming — *Ars Ludicra* (More Is More, 2024)