



JOE HERNSTEIN

REMEDY, RESILIENCE & RHYTHM

BY JOHN SHARPE

German drummer Joe Hertenstein has made his home in New York for longer than anywhere else and still regularly visits the city from his current base in Berlin. But how did this son of the Black Forest, born in 1977 in the small town of Lahr, Germany, get to rub shoulders with some of the scene's finest talents, such as Greg Cohen, Jon Irabagon, Darius Jones, Matthew Shipp, Anthony Coleman, Ray Anderson, Butch Morris, Karl Berger, Ravi Coltrane, Tim Hagans and James Brandon Lewis? It was the result of a very particular mixture of determination and good fortune, the one perhaps stemming from the other.

As a child, Hertenstein showed precocious talent on pots and pans, and soon enough, orchestral percussion. As a teenager, he played in punk, doomcore and cover bands, until a revelatory encounter with a Charlie Parker recording at age 19, which made him realize that jazz offered the broadest vehicle for self-expression. The young Hertenstein embarked on learning, both academically and on the bandstand, in Munich, Rotterdam, Berlin and eventually Cologne. In the last he found his mentor in Keith Copeland—drummer with the likes of George Russell, Bill Evans and Stevie Wonder—and studied with him for five years until 2006 (Copeland died in 2015). He then enjoyed another slice of luck, applying successfully for a much sought-after educational grant, which financed a master's degree in the US at NYC's Queens College, where he studied with drummers Gene Jackson and Sam Ulano. As Hertenstein reflects: "Life-changing stuff."

Although the course was very much a means-to-the-end of pursuing the jazz life in New York, Hertenstein pushed the boundaries to perform his graduation recital in the campus recording studio rather than a sparsely-attended auditorium. He recruited fellow German expats—trumpeter Thomas Heberer and bassist Pascal Niggenkemper—and the output ultimately became *HNH*, issued by Clean Feed in 2010. It's a group that embeds American sass within European improv sensibilities. Heberer explains the attraction: "His enthusiasm for the music has no limits. [He's] a really good, all-around player—he's a good reader, has very good timing, has no ego issues whatsoever when it comes to playing...what's not to like?" Even so, it proved hard to become established. As the drummer wryly notes: "New York is so tough. Most of the legends and heroes live there. So you get to see them and you walk the same streets. But who would ever call you for a gig? Why should they? They have 280 incredible drummers to call before they think of you."

Salvation came from private jam sessions in people's homes, where he met significant future collaborators, including keyboardist Anthony Coleman and saxophonist Jon Irabagon. In addition, he found himself an apartment where he could play during the day. "I could invite people to make coffee, cook pasta and just meet and jam and rehearse and create music together. My focus was on the creative scene: to find

musicians to try out your own compositions with and see what clicks, who's interested to read what you're putting on paper and try those things out. Whoever it clicks with best is a potential candidate to put a new band together."

Gradually the relationships solidified as the drummer's fluent amalgam of crisp execution and savvy tonal organization became more widely appreciated. Hertenstein's membership in Butch Morris' Nublu Orchestra proved an especially fertile meeting ground. Along the way he worked with Matthew Shipp, who guested with The Core Trio (led by bassist Thomas Helton, with Hertenstein and saxophonist Seth Paynter). Shipp recalls: "What I remember is an intense sonic imagination for particular textures and timbre, plus a unique placement of things coupled with an elastic ability to go from abstraction to some type of groove. I must say, I really enjoyed playing with The Core Trio and Joe was one of the reasons."

Another notable ensemble bloomed just after the COVID-19 pandemic. Hertenstein reunited with Heberer at bassist Joe Fonda's house, and recounts: "We started playing and it felt really great. And it was Fonda who said, 'Finally, I get to play with musicians again. It feels like a remedy.' We made it the band name and started to record." *Remedy* has endured and now has five albums to its name. Though there are only three members, they all think orchestrally, and the inventive arrangements further advance the overall cohesion. For Heberer there's a benefit to the age range within the band: "I'm very much interested in [Hertenstein's] approach to improvised music from a generational point of view—he's of a different generation with a different musical background and different influences." The musicians' synergies are well represented on the group's handful of albums to date, including their last two (both released on the Polish label Fundacja Sluchaj): *Hipp Hipp Hooray*, which celebrates the centenary of pioneering German pianist Jutta Hipp, and *Remedy + Aki Takase*, expanding the trio through adding the lauded, now-78-year-old Berlin-based, Japanese pianist.

But as much as he loved living and working in NYC, by the end of 2020, the cumulative effects of the pandemic, the political situation and the infirmity of his parents led Hertenstein and his American wife to relocate to Berlin. Though he's carved out a niche for himself there, he still returns on a regular basis to visit family and set up numerous performance opportunities. Among his concerts when he hits town this month are three dates with the latest incarnation of *FUTURE DRONE*, an organ trio with a twist, documented on the just-released *Live at Porgy & Bess* (Hat Hut), featuring Coleman on Hammond B3 alongside Irabagon. For the first time, Hertenstein introduced compositions to the band, widening the trio's scope yet further. As Irabagon enthuses: "He's familiar with many different genres and the subworlds within those, and he isn't afraid to draw inspiration from all those directions all

at once."

Indeed, Hertenstein's trajectory ultimately says less about changing addresses than about the continuity of a musical imagination, one sustained by curiosity, cooperation and an instinct for finding fresh conversations wherever the music leads.

For more info visit joehertenstein.com. Hertenstein is at Downtown Music Gallery Sep. 1 (with Harvey Valdes) and Sep. 12 (with Stephen Gauci), The Keep Sep. 6 (with Welf Dorr), New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Sep. 11 (with the Chicago Tap Theatre for American Tap Dance Foundation's "Tap City Awards"), Main Drag Sep. 15 (with David Watson) and Sep. 20 (with The Spirit of Billy Cobham's Spectrum, as part of the Miles in the Sky 5 Festival), The Stone at The New School Sep. 19 (with Sana Nagano), Handbell Studio at The Shirt Factory (Kingston, NY) Sep. 27 (with CMS Improvising Orchestra) and Sisters Brooklyn Sep. 30 (with Dave Watson). Hertenstein's *FUTURE DRONE* (with Anthony Coleman and Jon Irabagon) is at Nublu Sep. 23, plus National Jazz Museum in Harlem and at Jazz at The Lodge (Ossining, NY) Sep. 24. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Joe Hertenstein, Pascal Niggenkemper, Thomas Heberer—*HNH* (Clean Feed, 2008)
- The Core Trio—*Live Featuring Matthew Shipp* (Evil Rabbit, 2014)
- Sana Nagano—*Smashing Humans* (577 Records, 2019)
- *Remedy* (Thomas Heberer, Joe Fonda, Joe Hertenstein)—*Remedy* (Fundacja Sluchaj, 2020)
- Joe Hertenstein *FUTURE DRONE*—*Live at Porgy & Bess* (Hat Hut, 2022)
- Joe Hertenstein/Ray Anderson—*The 7th Dinner Live* (Fundacja Sluchaj, 2024)

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