

JOHN ROGERS



BEN MONDER

FINDING A BALANCE

BY TOM GREENLAND

NYC-born guitarist Ben Monder – whose distinctive sound can be heard on twenty albums as a leader or co-leader (at least eight of them on Sunnyside Records), as well as on numerous projects by Maria Schneider, Theo Bleckmann, Donny McCaslin, Guillermo Klein, Paul Motian, Frank Kimbrough, Bill McHenry, Tony Malaby, John Hollenbeck and a host of others (including David Bowie's final album) – is currently touring on the final phase of the year-long "Farewell Tour" of The Bad Plus. He speaks about his five-year stint with the quartet, his art and craft, composing and improvising, communication and immersion, and his overarching philosophy as a musician.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: Where did you learn to play?

BEN MONDER: I started at a music school that was not even accredited, it was just the local conservatory up in White Plains, New York, and was there for two years, studying and working part-time. I worked at a rental car place and a children's mental hospital.

NYCJR: If a musician spends a lot of time practicing and working their craft, does that over-attention to music leave them less to speak about as an artist? Is there a trade-off there?

MONDER: It's an interesting question. You definitely don't want the craft to show. You want to hide the technique, and you only need as much as serves what you envision for yourself, what you hear in your mind's ear, what your ideal is for what you want to bring into the world. And it could require a ton of technique, and it could require almost no technique. But technique is a funny word because it pertains to whatever is required to translate what you want to convey, and to make your instrument sound good. You could play the simplest thing in the world, but you still need the technique to make it sound great. I think that's often overlooked: just the way things sound. Attention to sound, and awareness that sound is the central issue to playing—because without sound, you're not going to hear anything! [laughs] The message is conveyed—I think—in the timbre, fundamentally.

NYCJR: Interesting. Someone else might say it's in the feel. You know, if it feels good, you can make other mistakes and nobody'll care.

MONDER: Feel is, of course, super important, but still, there's no feel without sound. There's nothing coming out. I'm going to bear down on that! [laughs] I think a great example of hiding the technique is John Coltrane. As much blazing technique as he has, I feel that—past the year of '62—you don't hear the technique as much as you hear this amazing energy. He even talked in interviews about finding the lyrical line through what he was conceiving, and I think he was really successful at that. Whereas a pitfall of analyzing him and codifying

what he's doing is sounding like you're not escaping the analytical side of it, and there's a danger you'll start to sound pattern-y. Ideally what happens is that you're breathing something out that's a result of all the work you've done, and how important music is to you, and your immersion in the sound world of what you're doing. I think that, ultimately, is a spiritual exercise.

NYCJR: What's your connection with people who come to hear you?

MONDER: I don't think about it consciously, but on an intuitive level I think you're feeling the energy of the audience, and it can affect how you feel about what you're doing, and the quality of what you're doing. Like, if I feel that I'm expending a lot of energy and I'm not getting anything back, it could start to sap my energy. It's hard to be completely detached from that. But I think, ideally, if I'm in a good zone improvising, I'm just watching things happen and enjoying the process. Also, it depends on what kind of music I'm playing, because if I'm doing a completely improvised gig, it's a really different feeling than if I'm reading somebody's chart and trying to navigate some difficult, tricky form that I'm not that familiar with. Then it's really hard to achieve a certain level of immersion. Which is why it's great to memorize things, if at all possible. That's of course really hard if you're doing a dozen different projects and you only have, like, one gig with each one every couple of months, if that. It's hard to memorize books for everything. I do recommend that though. With The Bad Plus, we were not reading charts from the very first gig we did. That was a conscious decision.

NYCJR: Do you work out little things on the gig and then put that into an arrangement?

MONDER: Yeah. If there's a significant amount of new stuff, we'll rehearse. For the last Bad Plus record [Complex Emotions], we'd already been playing a lot of material live before we recorded, so we were ready for it. On the first record we had only done, like, two gigs. I remember our first performance was at Yoshi's in Oakland and we'd done a ton of rehearsing for that.

NYCJR: I really like the way you and [tenor saxophonist] Chris Speed play melodies together in The Bad Plus.

MONDER: Well, I think we're just listening really hard to each other and we're very aware of how we phrase. I mean, I'm trying to enter into his phrasing, maybe he's trying to enter into my phrasing—we don't talk about it at all—but we arrive at a place where we're stopping and starting at the same time, our dynamics are sympathetic, and I think, timbrally, it just happens to work. Also, it definitely helps to have been playing night after night after night. There's no substitute for that. And I've known Chris since the early '90s, so we have a lot of personal history.

NYCJR: How did you and he get hired for The Bad Plus gig, after a slew of piano players?

MONDER: Well, "slew" being, like, [laughs] two? [referring to original Bad Plus pianist, band co-founder Ethan Iverson: 2000-2017, then Orrin Evans: 2018-2021]. I remember being at a rehearsal in the summer of 2021 and getting a call from Reid [Anderson, bassist]. I've known Reid for 30 years, but it's not every day that he randomly calls me—so I thought, "Oh, something's up!" That's when he'd decided, after Orrin left the band, that they [The Bad Plus' other co-founders Anderson

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NOV. 12
David Janeway Quintet
@Smalls (9, 10:30 pm)

NOV. 23
with Eliot Zigmund Quintet
@Smalls (6, 7:30 pm)

NOV. 8 / DEC. 13
David Janeway Trio
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STEINWAY & SONS

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

and drummer Dave King] were going to move in this different direction and was I interested? I was, like, yeah, of course! So that was pretty simple. They got Chris, and then we had this plan to do a bunch of rehearsing over the summer and had these gigs at Yoshi's at the end of September, and made sure we were prepared for that.

NYCJR: Does touring with a group like that, initially known for its covers of Nirvana, Blondie, Aphex Twin and Rush, expose you to a wider audience?

MONDER: It was definitely great for us [Speed and I] to just walk into this thing that was already set up to tour, a really popular scenario.

NYCJR: Who does most of the writing for the band?

MONDER: It's mostly Reid and Dave; Chris has a couple of things he's contributed, and I have one thing. I've tried to do more, but, as I've discovered, it's not that easy to write a Bad Plus tune, [at least one] that really works for that band. As much as I write, it's not always geared towards that configuration.

NYCJR: And what is a "Bad Plus tune," exactly?

MONDER: Well, I think there's a priority on the song, on relative simplicity.

NYCJR: Something accessible? Whistleable?

MONDER: Yeah, accessible, but in the best sense, you know?

NYCJR: So, what's accessible in the best sense? *[laughs]* Are you talking about preserving artistic integrity?

MONDER: Yes, but what does *that* even mean either? Like, what determines quality? Integrity? I don't know, because one person's corniness will be another person's profundity. What makes a great melody resonate? It could be an earworm, but it could also be trite.

NYCJR: It's a difficult topic: how to write a good melody.

MONDER: There are certain metrics that you can follow, techniques and general rules of tessitura and [having] a peak and a low point, and there's the form, of course. But what makes a resonant phrase? It's very intuitive for me, so I don't necessarily keep the first thing I hear, but it could be a starting point, sometimes it's the ending point. And maybe I'll determine that this is a melody that really works for me, and I feel good about this, and somebody else will think that this is maudlin crap, or whatever. So obviously it's really subjective. You can follow all the rules of how to write a good melody, and it could still not be inspired. Otherwise, AI could write all the greatest melodies on earth just by following rules.

NYCJR: How does The Bad Plus manage to be both popular and experimental?

MONDER: It gets back to the idea of what makes a good Bad Plus tune. It's being accessible, and yet interesting, and maybe a bit challenging. There's the balance between accessibility and challenge, and maybe some friction. If everything is frictionless, it's dubious that there's much substance there.

NYCJR: Do you apply this to your own work?

MONDER: I'm not really trying to do anything. I'm not trying to make it a statement. I put a high value on lyricism—and again, it's very subjective, because one person could hear lyricism where another can hear absolute dissonance and chaos—but I've always been

attracted to a great song and I—not with every piece—definitely try to put that concept into even the most complex compositions.

NYCJR: How do you communicate these ideas with your audience?

MONDER: For me, you have to get through any barriers that your audience might have. I feel the way that people do that successfully is by fully experiencing what they're doing on such a deep level that that experience is communicated to the listener, no matter what their level of experience is. I'm going to go back to Coltrane again: nobody had a more advanced intellectual understanding of harmony at that time as he did, but he was so popular because of the sheer spiritual power of what he was doing. And I think that he was able to overcome obstacles that people might have encountered through that. I think if your message is pure enough and deeply felt you can get away with more in terms of levels of complexity or dissonance or harmony.

NYCJR: Who comes to Bad Plus shows? What do you sense of the group's draw?

MONDER: The responses have been great. A lot of young aspiring musicians are coming out, and seem to be listening for all the right reasons, the right reasons being that they're showing attention, and that they've developed their attention to where it feels like they can understand a message. If there's a questionable trend going on it's that a lot of the ways music is consumed or apprehended is in short clips of various things. You're only going to get so deep. You're not going to develop a theme. What I value in an improvisation is I want to see where somebody's mind is taking me in real time, over time. A clip of forty seconds of some crazy impressive thing—that's a completely different animal. I think we're gearing our attention more towards that, and that's what people are valuing, and it's just a completely different way of consuming music than I'm used to.

I still make a point of listening to—at this point in my life—mostly classical music. I'll put on an entire symphony and listen to it from beginning to end. I won't open my eyes for an hour; I won't look at my phone—it's just a complete immersive experience. I feel that's almost a diametrically opposite experience of a lot of what's being presented as performance, especially online. But I feel like a lot of people are coming out with that ability to be attentive for that period of time. And that's encouraging.

For more info visit benmonder.com. Monder is at Le Poisson Rouge Nov. 12 and The Kimmel Center (Philadelphia, PA) Nov. 14 (both with The Bad Plus' "Farewell Tour"). He is also at Bar Bayeux Oct. 31 (with Tony Malaby) and Greenwich House Music School Nov. 5 (part of "Celebrating Frank Kimbrough"). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Marc Johnson—*Right Brain Control* (JMT, 1991)
- Ben Monder Trio—*flux* (Songlines, 1995)
- Ben Monder/Bill McHenry—*Bloom* (Sunnyside, 2000)
- Ben Monder—*Amorphae* (ECM, 2010)
- Ben Monder, Tony Malaby, Tom Rainey—*Live at the 55Bar* (Sunnyside, 2020)
- The Bad Plus—*Complex Emotions* (Mack Avenue, 2023)

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and Lewis Nash (drums). As part of their farewell tour, the last version of **The Bad Plus**—with founders in bassist Reid Anderson and drummer Dave King, plus guitarist Ben Monder and saxophonist Chris Speed—were heard during a late-night performance. Another farewell of sorts was heard from **Jazz at Lincoln Center**

Orchestra, led by Wynton Marsalis for one of his final times before he moves on at the end of the 2026-2027 season. Surprisingly, nothing was said about that onstage, and Marsalis took only one full-length solo. The band was in typically brilliant form on a versatile program that ranged from Jackie McLean to Jelly Roll Morton's "The Pearls" and included guest spots for Kortum and Cécile McLorin Salvant, the latter who sang surprising recreations of Swing Era classics "Sentimental Journey" and "Why Don't You Do Right?".

Three days after what would have been his father's 100th birthday, **Ravi Coltrane** was in outstanding form with his quartet, digging into "A Love Supreme", "Equinox", "Naima", the rarely-played "Expression", "Giant Steps" and a combination of "Dahomey Dance" and "India". Also outstanding was drummer **Sylvia Cuenca's** Bridging Generations, a sextet with Wallace Roney Jr. (trumpet), Rico Jones (tenor), David Kikoski (piano), Essiet Essiet (bass) and Will Martins (percussion). **Joey Alexander**, who first recorded when he was 11, has continued to evolve. Now 23, he played a stunning set that included a dazzlingly-rapid version of "Stella by Starlight", which displayed technique at an Oscar Peterson level. Drummer **Akira Tana** headed a fine hard bop/soul jazz trio of Atsuko Hashimoto (organ), Yutaka Hashimoto (guitar) and Jackie Ryan (vocals), and also featured on one song, the masterful Ali Ryerson (flute). Singer **Michael Mayo** made the case for being one of today's top male jazz vocalists. His scat singing, which incorporated both low notes and falsetto, was outstanding—and akin to a top-notch saxophonist, he was inventive in his choice of notes. Highlights included a funky version of "Just Friends", "Four" and unaccompanied (using electronic looping) on "I Didn't Know What Time It Was".

A much-ballyhooed duet meeting by **Herbie Hancock** and **Ron Carter** was on and off kilter, with Hancock frequently playing brilliant ideas and then abruptly stopping, giving the impression he was unsure about what was next. The duo unfortunately did not have the chemistry that one would have expected; Carter's unaccompanied variations on "You Are My Sunshine" took honors. Much better was **Cécile McLorin Salvant's** wide-ranging hour with Glenn Zaleski (piano), Yasushi Nakamura (bass) and Kyle Poole (drums), each of whom were at the top of their game. What other singer could credibly perform a set that included the folk song-inspired "Ghost Song" (the title track to her 2022 album), a witty and very theatrical version of Kurt Weill's "Barbara's Song", Bob Dorough's "Devil May Care", a dramatic "Is This Really the Way Men Live" (in French), Burt Bacharach's "Wives and Lovers", Arlen/Yarburg's "Over the Rainbow", Gregory Porter's "No Love Dying" and "Black Wing and Silver Hue", the Greek war song from 500 B.C.?

The highpoint of the weekend was provided by 88-year-old tenor saxophonist-flute player **Charles Lloyd**. Exactly 60 years ago, at the 1966 Monterey Jazz Festival, Lloyd performed "Forest Flower", with his legendary quartet of Keith Jarrett, Cecil McBee and Jack DeJohnette, which became a hit recording. His current quartet is Gerald Clayton (piano), Larry Grenadier (bass) and Brian Blade (drums), and while some of Lloyd's recent recordings might be considered fairly gentle in comparison, his tenor playing this night featured plenty of raw energy, forceful ideas and a consistently beautiful sound. From the start, he had each member of his group smiling at his ideas, and, as the set progressed, the leader himself looked extremely happy with the music's results. The joy was felt through a variety of grooves, folkish ballads, a complex but childlike calypso piece (with frequent and humorous tenor-piano unisons), plus a lengthy version of the highly-anticipated anniversary recreation of "Forest Flower". It was the perfect climax from a memorable weekend.

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