

MARTIN COHEN

BILLY MINTZ

IN THE MOMENT OF THE MUSIC

BY EMILY STEINHILBER

Billy Mintz has spent more than six decades navigating jazz traditions and the expanding possibilities of improvised music with a wide range of collaborators, from Lee Konitz, Eddie Daniels, Charles Lloyd, Vinny Golia and Tony Malaby, to Harold Danko, Mose Allison, Hal Galper, Alan Broadbent, Russ Lossing, Samuel Blaser and wife, pianist Roberta Piket. The Queens, NY-born drummer has built a career around listening over an allegiance to any particular style, and he remains remarkably resistant to defining himself. Asked who influenced him, he answers, "Everybody and nobody." Mintz' solo performances explore the drum kit's melodic and textural possibilities, while his ensemble work depends upon something he calls "agreement." As to whether he hears music differently after decades of fruitful collaborations, he says no, then concedes he may have become more giving. There's an almost existential Samuel Beckett-like economy to his answers: the smallest possible response opening onto a much larger question and deeper curiosity. Mintz explores the curious and ongoing relationship between musical agreement and freedom. Evidently, there's still plenty left unresolved for the drummer, who turns 79 this month.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: What makes another musician particularly rewarding to play with?

BILLY MINTZ: When you ask any musician, they'll always say it's great to play with somebody much better than themselves. I've had that experience, where I've played with people better than me, and it's an amazing experience. It's definitely fun to play with someone on the same or a higher level. And also, what makes it fun is the agreement. And when I say "agreement," it means you're unconsciously agreeing with the type of music, the type of sound, the type of harmony and rhythm and melody that you want to create. When you play with somebody a long time, there is trust. There are levels of trust.

NYCJR: You've worked across a considerable range of musical styles. Do you hear or approach the music differently now than you did, say, 20 years ago?

MINTZ: No. I would say that I'm the same person, and I approach the whole thing the same way. The only difference between decades ago and now is hopefully I'm a better musician. And more giving, much more giving. I've never pigeonholed myself into being any one particular thing. It could be more traditional jazz, or it could be very modern, like in the trio Triple Dip with Samuel Blaser and Russ Lossing. But if I go into these different situations, it's not that I'm playing in the style of something, I'm just hopefully in the moment of the music. That's who I think I am.

NYCJR: Who were the musicians you studied most closely with when you were first coming up?

MINTZ: Probably for another person this might be an easy, quick answer. But it seems like I could say everybody and nobody. A lot of people will ask me, "Who are your influences?" I used to list about twenty-five musicians and drummers. Now I just say kind of everybody. And I'm not limited to just jazz. I love all kinds of music.

NYCJR: You've spent much of your career moving between different musical situations. How do you approach playing with musicians whose ideas or expectations might differ from your own?

MINTZ: With Lee Konitz' Nonet in the mid '70s, he didn't say anything to me. I just went into that situation. For Charles Lloyd, his drummer couldn't make a rehearsal, so my friend, Tad Weed, who was playing piano, recommended me. After the rehearsal, Charles asked if I could do a bunch of gigs. He was also very specific about what he needed.

Pianist Mike Garson is a great musician I played with for years, and he helped me with my tune "Beautiful You". I've also been playing with pianist Alan Broadbent since the late '80s, and we're still playing together. We play regularly at Mezzrow.

NYCJR: Anything that's currently fascinating you musically?

MINTZ: OK, this sounds egotistical, but the music I've been playing.

NYCJR: You've been composing since you were young. What are the origins of your composition "Flight" [Mintz has recorded this composition at least ten times in various contexts: *Mintz Quartet*, *Ugly Beautiful*, *The 2 Bass Band…Live*, as well as on albums by Karl Berger, Roberta Piket, Dave Scott/Tony Malaby and Adam Kolker/Russ Lossing]?

MINTZ: I've been composing music since I was a teenager. I actually remember composing stuff when I was taking piano lessons. Some people do it every day, like Duke Ellington. I'm not like that and don't label myself as a composer. With the tune "Flight", it came to me in my head. This was maybe 25 or more years ago. I heard this thing in my head, and after a few days it was still in my head. I went to a friend and asked him to write down chord changes for it. The funny part of the story is, before I went to him, I went to another friend and he went into his room where there was a piano, came back a few minutes later and played it for me. It was completely not the right thing at all. But the second guy nailed it. So that's "Flight": it just came to me in my head, and then I had a friend write the chord changes.

NYCJR: Your wife, Roberta Piket, is also a pianist and composer. How does that relationship enter your creative process?

MINTZ: Roberta is a great pianist and composer. Often she will help me find the right chord changes for a tune I'm working on. Sometimes if she's working on something, she will ask me to play drums, which also helps her. Our composing, though, isn't influenced by each other. As far as improvising, it depends on the situation.

NYCJR: Your solo performances interest me because you're asking the drums to do something far beyond keeping time. When you're playing alone, are you listening for anything in particular?

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colors and glow to the trio's set. Smith's deep arco and muscular pizzicato provided a solid foundation, though the bassist also comfortably played troublemaker, using various objects to unleash sudden crashes or rubbing them against his strings. He maintained a continuous level of surprise by reverting on occasion to the more traditional role of the walking bass. If Mitchell is no longer able to perform the heroics of yore—his *tours de force* of circular breathing immediately come to mind—he clearly still enjoys performing in spite of his stoic demeanor. Indeed, the trio played for over an hour and a half, and the undeterred leader kept blowing his sopranino even after the house lights went on.

At the festival's conclusion, Mitchell collaborated with a number of Detroit-area artists, most of whom had performed with him in the past, notably as part of the Creative Arts Collective. Only young trombonist Zekkereya El-magharbel was a newcomer. Mitchell again focused mainly on the bass saxophone, but this time taking a much more melodic approach. Bassist Jaribu Shahid and drummer Tani Tabbal (both of whose 1981 recording debut was Roscoe Mitchell and the Sound Ensemble's *3 X 4 Eye* on Black Saint) seemed to be most comfortable providing a solid backdrop, the stickman being particularly attentive to what Mitchell had to say and the path he was following. Other players, however, seemed to walk on eggshells.

The dynamic changed when pianist **Craig Taborn**, who had played a lively and forceful solo set prior to this last act, took the stage. He joined in the middle of the performance and injected salutary energy. His contribution liberated several musicians, including saxophonist Tony Holland, whose participation had been minimal until that point, but who now launched into a soaring soprano solo. Guitarist Spencer Barefield (whose very first recording was Mitchell's *Roscoe Mitchell Quartet* on Sackville, recorded in 1975) provided more elaborate lines that opened opportunities. A look of disappointment again was noticeable on Mitchell's face when he recognized the music had come to an end.

Local bass player **Christian Bush** had opened the festival with a set entitled "For Roscoe." His septet included Stephen Paul (trombone), Benjamin Green (trumpet), Mara Meyer (clarinets), Oliver Bishop (woodwinds), Max Welterlen (drums) and John Tatara (percussion, piano). The band performed five distinctive compositions by Bush, which offered an insight into his breadth as a composer, including "Dedicated to Roscoe Mitchell – Part I", which started with a hair-raising bass solo, and "Expedited Removal", underlining the leader's social conscience. The latter was a slow dirge that gradually led to a final chaos, featuring the whistles used to signal the presence of ICE agents. "Burning Bush" was a pulsating, rambunctious romp. The set ended with "Dedicated to Roscoe Mitchell – Part II", with Tatara moving to the piano. A free improvisation segment led to a cacophonous and uplifting finale, proving Mitchell's legacy is in good hands.

Michael Malis, an underrated local pianist and composer, unveiled a new work, *Sketches and Interludes*, another giving-him-his-flowers tribute to Mitchell, performed by the Creative Arts Orchestra under the direction of Marcus Elliot, at Ann Arbor's Community High School. As the title suggests, this piece was a succession of vignettes, designed "to help musicians discover their own creative impulses." Reminiscent of Mitchell's sound collages, the first half was a fabric woven with sparse sounds, notes and occasional bits of melody. This was followed by an impressive orchestral passage evoking a sea surge and built around repetitive patterns before dissolving into thunderous chaos, the relentless banging of a music stand being the attention-grabber. The piece concluded with an off-kilter march that reached another dimension when all the horns joined in. Its joyfulness was a fitting way to conclude another special homage to the living legacy of Edgefest 2026's guest of honor, Roscoe Mitchell.

For more info visit kerrytownconcerthouse.com

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MINTZ: Whether I'm playing solo or with other musicians, it's always the individual and overall sound.

NYCJR: Do you still practice things you can't play?

MINTZ: Always. Every day. Every day I sit at the drums.

For more info visit billymintz.com. Mintz is at Five Spot Jazz Dec. 5 (with David Haney), Mezzrow Dec. 14 (with Alan Broadbent), Bar Bayeux Dec. 17 (with Roberta Piket and Adam Kolker), Smalls Dec. 18-19 (with Roberta Piket) and Mezzrow Dec. 28 (with Alan Broadbent). He is also at Maureen's Jazz Cellar (Nyack, NY) Dec. 12 (with Cameron Brown Legacy Quintet). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:
- Eddie Daniels—*Brief Encounter* (Muse, 1977)
- Vinny Golia Trio—*Puff of Smoke* (Altitude, 1989)
- Jeff Johnson Trio—*Free* (OriginArts, 1998)
- John Gross/Billy Mintz—*Beautiful You* (Origin, 2003)
- Billy Mintz—*Ugly Beautiful* (Thirteenth Note, 2015)
- Roberta Piket, Harvie S, Billy Mintz—*You've Been Warned* (Sunnyside, 2021)



