

NWCR2003

John Hollenbeck

Quartet Lucy



1. Vanishing Lucy (2:52)
2. ethel (3:13)
3. Foreva (6:47)
4. materna (5:08)
5. dreams for tomorrow (3:32)
6. Constant Conversation (8:29)
7. Chapel Flies (5:58)
8. jazz envy (4:17)
9. Vira-folha (4:24)
10. The Music of Life (4:15)

Quartet Lucy: John Hollenbeck, drums, percussion, piano, composition, berimbau (on “dreams for tomorrow”); Theo Bleckmann, voice, piano (on “dreams for tomorrow”); Dan Willis, English horn, tenor sax, soprano sax, flute; Skuli Sverrison, electric bass, banjo sexto (on “dreams for tomorrow”); Jonas Tauber, cello (on “Chapel Flies” and “Vira-folha”)

Total playing time: 49:34

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Notes

The Music of Life

Besides the beauty of music, there is the tenderness, which brings life to the heart. For a person of fine feelings, of kindly thought, life in the world is very trying. It is jarring, and it sometimes has a freezing effect. It makes the heart so to speak frozen. In that condition one experiences depression, and the whole of life becomes distasteful; the very life that is meant to be heaven becomes a place of suffering. If one can focus one’s heart on music, it is just like warming something that was frozen. The heart returns to its natural condition, and the rhythm regulates the beating of the heart which helps to restore health of body, mind, and soul, and bring them to their proper tuning. The joy of life depends upon the perfect tuning of the mind and body.

Excerpt from *The Music of Life* by Hazrat Inayat Khan, copyright Omega Publications, New Lebanon, NY (omegapub.com) Used by permission.

The first time I ever actually spoke to drummer and composer **John Hollenbeck** took place immediately following the first set I heard by his Claudia Quintet. The music I’d heard combined the highly organized structural formality of chamber music with the earthy groove of post-’60s jazz and the irreverence of free improvisation—in some of the same ways that the artists who recorded for a certain well-known progressive jazz label had pioneered in the ’70s and ’80s.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that you’ve listened to a lot of ECM records,” I hesitantly ventured. Hollenbeck responded that this had indeed been the case. A few days later, he informed me that—having checked—he owned more discs on ECM than on any other single jazz label.

This came as no surprise. We had both come of age musically at the height of ECM’s popularity and influence, when the label boasted the impressionistic note-spinning fantasies of pianist

Keith Jarrett, the icy Nordic stoicism of Jan Garbarek, the multicultural eclecticism of Oregon, the avant-traditionalism of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Old and New Dreams, and the unabashedly joyful lyricism of the Pat Metheny Group. ECM was one of the few labels in jazz history to establish an identity so strong that its very name was sometimes used as a descriptive adjective. Virtually no other label offered so great a conceptual range, nor such a high level of excellence.

Having established the Claudia Quintet as his primary compositional vehicle, Hollenbeck found that he was writing some more song-oriented pieces that called out for a different voice—a human voice, in fact. “I needed an outlet for the world music that I loved and the spiritual paths that I had been exploring,” Hollenbeck recalls. Once again, an impetus was provided by an ECM artist—the cool, yet passionate vocalist Sidsel Endresen.

Unlike the Claudia Quartet—named after a specific woman who visited an early Hollenbeck performance—Quartet Lucy takes its name from a composite of female characters. “It’s a pet name for my college girlfriend, who was very interested in a good song,” Hollenbeck explains. “It’s also the name of a girl I loved from afar in my high school days, who epitomized certain aspects of Americana that I loved. Finally, Lucy also refers to *luz*, the Spanish word meaning ‘light’ or ‘enlightenment.’” Hollenbeck knew immediately that the new group would feature a vocalist—not as a soloist in the spotlight, but as an equal member, like Pedro Aznar in the Pat Metheny Group. “I had recently started playing with vocalist Theo Bleckmann,” Hollenbeck recalls, “and I was overwhelmed by his versatility, his love of music, and his eager response to my new concept.”

Equally at home with the conceptions of jazz singer Sheila Jordan and new music vocalist Meredith Monk—both of whom he has performed with—Bleckmann’s fearlessness and vocal range prove decisive in his execution of Hollenbeck’s moody tone poems. From the conventional vocalism of “dreams for tomorrow” (in which he backs himself on piano) to the free glossolalia of “jazz envy” and overtone singing in “The Music of Life,” the music of Quartet Lucy proves an unparalleled showcase for this exceptional vocalist.

Hollenbeck wanted an English horn—quite possibly the least used instrument in creative music (even bassoons and bagpipes have commanded more time on stage)—to complement Bleckmann’s voice. Happily, he already knew an improvising English horn player: His college roommate Dan Willis, a versatile multi-reed player and an impressive jazz improviser, whose main instrument simply happened to be oboe. The way Willis’s tenor caresses Bleckmann’s voice in “ethel” illustrates the instantaneous chemistry achieved in this group.

To complete the group, Hollenbeck turned to the exceptional Icelandic electric bassist Skuli Sverrison, who gave the quartet a firm rhythmic and harmonic grounding as well as an unusually broad palette of tonal colors employed by the bassist. More than simply supplying bottom lines, Sverrison’s rich chords fill the harmonic spaces in the band’s austere instrumentation. One of New York’s most in-demand musicians, Sverrison became

available less frequently, necessitating a second version of the group. Hollenbeck adjusted his conception, adding cellist Jonas Tauber to lend a more overt chamber music sensibility to Hollenbeck’s “Chapel Flies” and an arrangement of the Brazilian Bandas de Pifano’s “Vira-folha.” Hollenbeck felt it vital to include both versions on the first disc documenting his Quartet Lucy.

Hollenbeck’s percussion within Quartet Lucy is less conventionally jazz-oriented and more in tune with the rhythms of other cultures. He backs Sverrison’s busy melodic lead and Bleckmann’s percussive vocals with a percolating hand drum-inspired rhythm on “Foreva,” and plays Brazilian berimbau in tandem with Sverrison’s bajo sexto and Willis’s English horn on “dreams for tomorrow,” the tune most reminiscent of pioneering world music group Oregon. On “Constant Conversation,” he backs Willis’s plangent horn with a traditional North African rhythm pattern. One further instrumental voice bears mention—aside from his deft percussion, Hollenbeck supplies graceful piano throughout Quartet Lucy. His richly voiced chords set the emotional tone of many of the compositions, including the wistful “ethel,” the poignant “maternal” and the radiant “Chapel Flies.” The piano, of course, is in most respects a percussion instrument—part of the same family as the drum. Percussionist Hollenbeck, whether at the keyboard or behind the drum set, demonstrates an equal measure of sensitivity. No doubt that’s why the music of his Quartet Lucy conveys the intimacy of a small group and the weight of an orchestra.

—Steve Smith

Dedications:

“Foreva” is dedicated to Eva Atsalis

“materna” is dedicated to my mother and yours

“ethel” is dedicated to two of my wonderful teachers: Bob Brookmeyer and the late Russell W. Black

“Chapel Flies” is dedicated to the community of the Kripalu Yoga Center

“Vira-folha” is dedicated to all of my Brazilian friends, thank you for the inspiration and love

Production Notes

Produced by John Hollenbeck

Recorded and mixed by Aya Takemura at Avatar Studios

Mastered by Todd Whitelock at SONY Music Studios

For further information about John Hollenbeck, go to www.johnhollenbeck.com

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Lyrics:

John Hollenbeck – “dreams for tomorrow”

Hazrat Inayat Khan – “The Music of Life”

“Constant Conversation” is inspired by the poem by Jelaluddin Rumi

All Compositions by John Hollenbeck © 2001 Grand Blvd. Music (ASCAP/GEMA) except “Vira-folha,” which is from the repertoire of the Bandas de Pifanos.