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# REZ ABBASI

BY KEN MICALLEF

Guitarist Rez Abbasi is one of jazz' more restless spirits. His tenth and previous album, *Intents & Purposes*, tackled '70s-era classics of the fusion genre. In Abbasi's skilled hands, however, this was no nostalgia trip into odd-metered fuzak, rather a complete reimagining of the works of Corea, McLaughlin, Zawinul and Shorter through an all-acoustic vision, which recontextualized the music's sometimes bombastic textures with a supple, singular approach, creating new wine from old wine skins, as it were. With his latest release, *Rez Abbasi & Junction's Behind the Vibration (Cuneiform)*, he continues a path of growth that began on 1995's *Third Ear (Ozone)*, staked a serious claim on his landmark 2009 recording *Things to Come (Sunnyside)* and now culminates (for the moment) with the new album. Abbasi's journey is the journey of jazz itself—a perpetual merging of influences, sounds and styles in service to the artist's broader vision of the world around him. Rez Abbasi's world is rich, indeed.

**The New York City Jazz Record:** With your two prior recordings and the new one, you seem to have really found your thing.

**Rez Abbasi:** I don't agree. What I look for in any worthy music is character and that's been a big ingredient in all my albums. Has my playing improved over the years? I would hope so. Also, 'finding' one's thing implies that he or she was lost at a point. I view it more as growth. What I did 20 years ago was the same as what I do now—play who I am. I wasn't searching for my thing any more than today. I wasn't searching at all because I am always in my own skin, whether past, present or future. People view growth as change but that's more perceived than real. My music doesn't change; it grows and in that sense, I have shifting preferences rather than a directive to an end result.

**TNYCJR:** Your last record revisited '70s fusion acoustically. This record sounds nothing like your last record and not only because it's electric. What was the source and direction of the new record? What inspired the tunes and trajectory?

**RA:** Firstly, I like to live my musical life from a call-and-response framework. *Intents & Purposes* was an album of all acoustic covers with my band RAAQ. *Behind the Vibration* on the other hand is fully original and uses a lot of electric instruments to find new territories within the compositions. Some of the tunes were already written prior to the acoustic album for an organ trio but as I researched a lot of '70s jazz-rock for the acoustic project, I came away with a desire to turn up the heat. Junction was formed with that in mind but the caveat was that it had to sound unique to today—everything from the technology, the compositions and the players. Each of us has lived inside and outside of the jazz universe so what we bring collectively is pretty unprecedented—current experiences from heavy

metal, electronica, pop, Carnatic and Hindustani classical, to name a few.

**TNYCJR:** You have exceptional players on the new record: saxophonist Mark Shim, keyboardist Ben Stivers and drummer Kenny Grohowski.

**RA:** I consider Mark to be one of the more cutting-edge yet highly grounded soloists on any instrument today. It's the balance of emotions he has that's captivating—angular and in your face but very approachable for various types of listeners. I discovered Kenny recently through hearing Andy Milne's band and liked him immediately. He's versatile with a downtown paradigm and a fat groove to boot—very cool. Ben first played with me as a sub for Gary Versace in my organ quartet. That music was all mixed-meter using independence with both hands and Ben nailed it. Because he's also worked with people like Barry Gibbs, Matchbox 20 and Chris Botti, he understands newer keyboard technology.

**TNYCJR:** Why is the band called Junction?

**RA:** It's where everything meets and is joined—all my influences are successfully captured in this statement and presented as one.

**TNYCJR:** This album is very open ended improvisationally. How do you compose to free your improvisers?

**RA:** The source for improvisation is always inherent in any written music. The source for written music is always inherent in improvisation. So the key is to get the two elements to work in conjunction and if you're successful, the music takes on a flow of its own. The players benefit from strong composition because they have a character to build from. If you play on someone's original tune the same as you would when freely improvising or playing on your favorite standard, you're not doing justice to the composer. The truly great musicians are composers and improvisers who are able to orbit around both simultaneously.

**TNYCJR:** How do you write new material? Pen and paper? Sibelius?

**RA:** All the above. Sometimes I play an idea on the guitar and then input it into Finale. From there it becomes technically easier to manipulate. I can let my imagination do the work rather than be burdened by the limitations of the guitar. But sometimes creativity comes from limitation and so I sometimes stay with the guitar until the end of a piece.

**TNYCJR:** "Holy Butter"! The first track says it all. Catchy melody, blazing solos, lots of space. What is this song based on, if anything in particular?

**RA:** This is the only track that actually carries a true story with it. I was waiting for my luggage and the airline was taking much too long to deliver. 30 minutes later every bag came out drenched in melted butter. An Indian woman had checked a suitcase full of "holy" butter and because it was summer, it melted. My apartment smelled like buttered popcorn for a week. The tune itself was written during a time when I was performing with a Bharatanatyam [South Indian] dance troupe. The melody reflects the dancers' rhythmic bounce but the grease comes from the butter!

**TNYCJR:** What do you practice now?

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New York City CD Release Party: Sunday, July 10, 4:30 PM  
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**RA:** I practice expression. Scales, technique, etc. are all subservient to expression so even when I need to do them, it's from a place of expression. I am, however, writing a guitar book for Hal Leonard that gets into some complex ideas that I'll need to learn fluidly and record for the CD insert.

**TNYCJR:** Can you detail your rig as heard on the new record? Guitar, amps, pedals, software?

**RA:** Rather not because it's the end result that matters. I'll save that answer for *Guitar Player* magazine.

**TNYCJR:** What advice can you give to jazz composers trying to break free of constraints or their own history?

**RA:** I think if someone really wants to grow they should try to be as objective as possible and aware of being objective. This means not letting the ego do the steering. If you're always right, how can you grow? More technically, maybe get away from your instrument as being the only source of expression. Obviously, listen to music that's outside of your wheelhouse.

**TNYCJR:** Backwards guitar in "Uncommon Sense"? Pedal used or what? How was this created?

**RA:** It's a delay pedal that I use usually to enhance my Indian phrasing. I never had the desire to sound like a sitar or sarod player but did want to reflect the subtlety of that phrasing. Effects allow me to phrase a little like them while still sounding unique.

**TNYCJR:** "And I You" sounds like an outtake from a horror movie with the Hammond and the brushed drums. Spooky. What's the message?

**RA:** That's interesting you hear it that way. People hear darkness differently. I think that is one of the most beautiful pieces I've written. One day long after I wrote it I started hearing the melody not knowing whose tune it was but also thinking what a deep feeling it carried. I was stoked when I realized it was one of mine!

**TNYCJR:** With essentially three melodic instruments up front, are we hearing triple-played melodies?

**RA:** Sometimes yes and sometimes it's counterpoint with all three. I do like the feeling of a unison melody because, like in Qawwali music, it captures a spiritual strength that just can't be found in a singular voice.

**TNYCJR:** Why no bass player?

**RA:** Why bass? But really, I have bass: it's keyboard bass. The keyboard creates a wider sonic range plus it allows Mark to play occasional bass parts on his MIDI instrument. Keyboard bass and the MIDI instrument contributed in making this project unique, I believe.

**TNYCJR:** What's next as far as touring, recording, commissions, etc.?

**RA:** We'll tour more in October and November. I also have another album in the mixing stage. It's a commissioned work by Chamber Music America for my Invocation group with Rudresh Mahanthappa, Vijay Iyer, Johannes Weidenmueller, Dan Weiss and Elizabeth Means. It concludes a trilogy I set out to do based on three types of South Asian musics: Hindustani, Qawwali and now Carnatic. That'll hit in late 2017 and from what I've listened back to it's pretty magical. I have two other projects in mind but what's the rush, right? ❖

For more information, visit [reztone.com](http://reztone.com). Abbasi's Junction is at

Greenwich House Music School Jun. 11th and Urban Meadow Jun. 12th as part of Red Hook Jazz Festival. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Rez Abbasi—*Modern Memory* (Cathexis, 1996)
- Rez Abbasi—*Snake Charmer* (Earth Sounds, 2003)
- Rudresh Mahanthappa's Indo-Pak Coalition—*Apti* (Innova, 2008)
- Rez Abbasi—*Things to Come* (Sunnyside, 2008-09)
- Rez Abbasi's Invocation—*Suno Suno* (Enja, 2010)
- Rez Abbasi & Junction—*Behind the Vibration* (Cuneiform, 2015)

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Charles Gayle to our festival a few years ago because I believed he would be great to perform with Barcella. Now they've already toured and will release an album before summer. Other musicians send a mail when they have a project. For example Feecho [pianist Kaja Draksler and drummer Onno Govaert] were touring and asked if I wanted to bring out something for the tour. In the end, time became too short, so we released the concert in La Resistenza because it was a good one. Naked Wolf was the first band I had no relationship with except that [Amsterdam drummer] Gerri [Jäger] played at my festival. Naked Wolf was a hard nut to crack even though the group came highly recommended. So I took it mostly with the vision of seeing what this would mean for the label. We just brought out a duo with [saxophonist] Yedo Gibson of Naked Wolf, so the story continues."

"All my projects were established organically," notes Gebruers. "Ifa y Xango started as a bunch of friends jamming in the garage. Antiduo arose from improvisation sessions at piano lessons and *Bambi Pang Pang* featuring Andrew Cyrille was recorded after a concert at Jazz Middelheim where Ifa y Xango got carte blanche and invited [drummer] Cyrille. Rogé and I brainstorm a lot about what the label could be and also about my personal steps. He gives me his opinion about how I could better take care of my musical career without making artistic compromises."

Rogé is EN's only employee. "Subsidy-wise our organization is too organic to get proper funding," he reveals. "We're perceived as a guerrilla music movement. Plus, if you want to write [grant applications] you need somebody to do that and there's no possibility to pay somebody else a proper wage." Referring to the Ancient Roman patron, he jokes, "I always say I'm a Maecenas without any money. The café works well, so EN and Citadelic surf on that wave." Among the EN projects to be released in 2016 are a disc featuring five double bass players called Basssss; a trumpet-piano duo with Maris; and a double CD celebrating the 80th birthday of Belgian free jazz pioneering bassist Paul Van Gysegem.

"My biggest motivation to work with Rogé is his vision of the Ghent community of alternative and young improvisers," says Maris. "He creates opportunities for them to meet the established players and this really makes young musicians believe in what they're doing and to look for their own voices. For most other labels the work we produce is too alternative."

Because of his organic business plan and links to ever-changing street-wise music, Rogé feels the musical situation will only get better in the future. "Time is on our side, like a steam train getting nearer and nearer." ❖

For more information, visit [elnegocitorecords.com](http://elnegocitorecords.com). Artists performing this month include Andrew Cyrille at Judson Church Jun. 7th with Henry Grimes as part of Vision Festival; Hamid Drake at Judson Church Jun. 7th, 9th and 11th as part of Vision Festival; and Simon Jermyn at Rye Jun. 15th with Curtis Hasselbring. See Calendar.

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hanging onto the windows overlooking the Hudson and centering his movements on slow revolutions as head and arms, stretched upward, accentuated the slowness of time and the somewhat reserved, narrower sound world Taylor chose to occupy. After an initial flurry, Oxley mostly sat out, observing the interactions between body and space, body and sound and body and room. There was gleeful drama in Tanaka's movement—he's like the Fred Astaire of Butoh—and at one point, he crept behind Taylor, wrapped his arms around the maestro, miming caress and embrace while resting his head on the pianist's shoulder. Meanwhile, Taylor played elegant, dusky overlaps and quietly gnarled, small masses, eyes mostly locked on Tanaka.

But there was a second set and it seemed like the Whitney staff were caught off-guard by the pianist showing up with several musicians in tow—drummer Jackson Krall, saxophonists Harri Sjöström, Elliott Levin and Bobby Zankel, cellist Tristan Honsinger, bassist Albey Balgochian and vocalist Jane Balgochian, billed as the Cecil Taylor New Unit. Whereas the first set was a gentle, floral unfolding, this was an old-fashioned blowout, to the extent that piano was almost inaudible under the mass. Balgochian's vocal entreaties and raps (I'd hesitate to call them poetic) were doubly perplexing, as Taylor is an accomplished poet and text is a significant part of his aesthetic worldview—if it's there, it should be done right. Clearly unrehearsed, it was a strange cap tacked onto a sublime evening.

The 15th brought back Sjöström and Honsinger in trio with cellist Okkyung Lee; the Finnish soprano saxophonist has been one of Taylor's right-hand men since the early '90s and this trio had him in fine form, curling and popping with a present dance amid the grind and skirl of the two cellos. Honsinger's ever-present vocal soundings and caricatures of parlor tradition brushed up against Lee's straight-edged grapple. A different aggregate of onetime collaborators followed—Grimes, dancer Cheryl Banks-Smith and poet Thulani Davis. The concentrated openness of dance was sometimes challenged by isolationist contrabass rumble, though Davis' poetry seemed unencumbered (she also read one of Grimes' pieces). On the 16th, longtime Taylor Unit drummer Cyrille presented a lengthy, gorgeous solo recital, ritual motifs drawing from AfroCaribbean and Central African traditions, coaxing micro-patterns out of his kit and building them into percussive chorales, gradually modulating forms into recognizable jazz elements that recalled Kenny Clarke, Max Roach and Art Blakey in a true master class on the drums in Black music.

The closing performance on the 23rd was hotly anticipated—the band that emerged consisted of Taylor, Oxley, Lee, Sjöström and Krall in an explosive performance primed to blow the roof off the Whitney. Electronic palimpsests were fairly difficult to hear under the constant, churning dialogue of piano and percussion, Taylor spitting out furious runs as Krall stitched together a swinging wall with occasional J.C. Moses-like breaks and backbeats while cello and soprano barked and trilled over and around hurtling bricks and swiped fields. They stuck to one long set divided into piano-led and poetic-textual portions, the latter featuring a lengthy and somewhat William Burroughs-esque delivery on a thesis of systems, biology, botany, evolution, gender and ancient cultures. Brushy, delicate ensemble work limned this reading, which closed with Taylor's speech accompanied only by ghostly electronics and cello filaments, the phrase "gives amplitude to the leaf" ringing out in the hall.

If this is the last time we get to see Taylor perform in public, we know that he gave us everything we need to move forward as a creative species. ❖

For more information, visit [whitney.org/Exhibitions/OpenPlanCecilTaylor](http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/OpenPlanCecilTaylor)