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'Go Inside the Sound'

BY KEN MICALLEF

Craig Taborn's ever-evolving music is no less intense than the man who conceived it. Interviewing the keyboardist and composer is like viewing an equation from every possible angle, with his rich imagination dictating the sequences, designs and outcomes. But Taborn's keen intellect doesn't get in the way of his quest for beauty—one of the defining characteristics of his latest album, *Daylight Ghosts*.



Christine Jensen (right) conducts l'Orchestre national de jazz de Montréal, with trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, at the 2015 Montreal Jazz Festival.

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Cover photo of Craig Taborn shot by Jimmy and Dena Katz at The Jazz Gallery in New York City on Dec. 8. Info for this venue is at jazzgallery.nyc.

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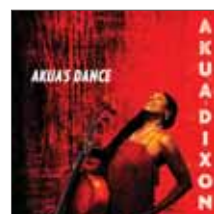
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CRAIG TABORN

'GO INSIDE THE SOUND'

BY KEN MICALLEF | PHOTO BY JIMMY & DENA KATZ

Does concept equal content? Does theory predict end results or only allude to endless possibilities? When asked what sparked the musical ideas behind his luminous new album, *Daylight Ghosts* (ECM), Craig Taborn replied in typical fashion for the 46-year-old keyboardist and composer.

If you lack ideas, you don't have to go too far outside the sound of the note to find them," Taborn said within the cozy confines of his Brooklyn apartment. "There's so much going on with one note. My students might say, 'It's just a C.' Well, you're not listening closely at all. What instrument is playing it and what does it sound like? For instance, every trumpet sounds different playing that C. Go inside that sound. When you get in there, there's overtones vibrating that create frequency ratios. There's all sorts of micro-rhythms.

And when played in a room, there are reverberations. If you go inside a sound there's a lot in there. Just start there."

Taborn's ever-evolving music is no less intense than the man who conceived it. Interviewing Craig Taborn is like viewing an equation from every possible angle, with his rich imagination dictating the sequences, designs and outcomes. Taborn examines questions from multiple positions, his answers starting and stopping mid-sentence as new thoughts and fresh information come to the surface.



Craig Taborn at The Jazz Gallery in New York City, Dec. 8



Taborn's new album is the quartet project *Daylight Ghosts*.

But that intellect doesn't get in the way of beauty. For if there is one defining characteristic to *Daylight Ghosts*, as well as Taborn's previous ECM albums—*Chants* and *Avenging Angel*—and the earlier album *Junk Magic* (Thirsty Ear), it's sheer beauty.

On the solo piano album *Avenging Angel*, its 14 tracks are deeply informed by energy, each selection a world unto itself. *Daylight Ghosts* is equally elegiac and graceful, pointed, daring and powerful, with a group concept based as much on composition as individual improvisation.

"Craig seems very much interested in group improvising and improvising freely, or over highly intricate structures, and you can adhere to these systems or not," said Bad Plus drummer Dave King, who, along with saxophonist Chris Speed and bassist Chris Lightcap, collaborated with Taborn on *Daylight Ghosts*. "Craig is unique in that you can see the grids and the academics behind what he's doing, but the spirit of what he wants to achieve is always the Number 1 goal. He wants musicians who can deal with the complicated things, but [who can] also disregard them and make some music happen. It's magical what he does."

Daylight Ghosts is, indeed, permeated by a certain magic, a tangible force equally present on his previous ECM releases. As this writer noted in a 4½-star review of *Chants* in the July 2013 issue of *DownBeat*, Taborn's music is stunning for its lack of borders, ordinary struc-

tures or typical narrative flow: "The songs are positively shimmering, immaculately detailed, prismatic and very improvisational. ... They flutter and spiral, bend and float, and constantly surprise."

Whereas *Chants* offered a swirling flow of ideas connected by a cerebral thread, *Daylight Ghosts* expands on its theme of inclusion with broader rhythms, a larger palette of melodic information and, at times, a surreal electronic/acoustic approach. A veteran of bands led by enigmatic techno producer Carl Craig, and an early proponent of the original Detroit techno school as personified by Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson, Taborn slyly mixes electronic music currency with unique jazz compositions, a natural progression given that his childhood piano lessons coincided with the purchase of a portable synthesizer.

"It's like retro-fitting," Taborn said. "I'm not interested in laptop electronica or that kind of programming. It's really about electric playing. Like my album *Junk Magic*, which is more full blown [electronic]. It's integrated, but with a lot more manipulated computer stuff. *Daylight Ghosts* is about exploring with guys who have rock as well as jazz backgrounds. I was into blending those edges and getting into electric sound but less from a fusion or jazz blowing perspective. My live *Junk Magic* band includes Dave King and Chris Speed, but that is such a different vibe. The bands have some things in common but the music is pretty different."

As teenagers roaming the streets, record stores, and shared homes of Minneapolis with future The Bad Plus members Dave King and Reid Anderson, the Taborn posse ("He was always the gatekeeper," said King) was as likely to bang heads with punk and metal kids as attend frequent performances by former Weather Report drummer Eric Gravatt, one musical passion among many for these quick-witted musical changelings. Jazz and electronic music held particular fascination for Taborn.

"I've been doing electronic music since before I could play piano," Taborn explained. "When I was 11, I started piano lessons. That same year my parents got me a Moog Minimog synthesizer for Christmas, back when they were cheap. It was 1981, so everyone was giving them away. They found one in the paper for \$100. I was a beginner pianist and I began turning knobs on the Moog. It wasn't one or the other. As I was learning scales, I was figuring out what 'oscillator' meant. 'What's this do?' I was always doing electronic music, and my friends and I were also into jazz, punk rock and metal."

For *Daylight Ghosts*, Taborn's quartet went into the studio with longstanding producer/ECM label head Manfred Eicher. Taborn explained his goal as infusing a "chamber-like palette with some of that [rock] energy." Indeed, the album's first notes are the resounding pummel of King's floor tom.

"The band as I conceptualized it—versus

how we realized the music going into the studio with Manfred—are related, but separate,” Taborn said. “The rock stuff comes out more aggressively live because Manfred is not really a rock guy. The rock energy is less about sound or playing but about choosing a more minimal or more simplified approach to things. Where the jazz perspective is ‘Let’s do more,’ this band often does less. Maybe using the same kind of information, but we dial it back.”

So how would Taborn compare the new album to its predecessor?

“*Daylight Ghosts* is really different from *Chants*,” Taborn replied. “The group concept is touched on in the recorded album, but live there’s a lot more electronics. Chris Lightcap plays acoustic and Fender Precision bass on the record and live. Dave’s playing a Roland electronic pad kit as well as his acoustic set. It’s all very integrated, which is part of the concept. We dialed up that integration and the acoustic-leaning integration in the ECM session, which blended with Manfred’s conception and the ECM sound. ‘Phantom Ratio’ is a good example. I play a little piano but it’s pretty electronic; we get into spaces like that live. Often on a dime we’re switching back and forth using Farfisa and Wurlitzer electric pianos, and a Prophet 6 analog synth, all through an amplifier. There’s nothing digital going on.”

Taborn’s approach to composition is another factor in the album’s kinetic, open-ended style.

“I’ve never seen Craig write out chord changes,” Lightcap said. “He was the first guy I met who would write songs that involved form, but it would be a system of melodies played on top of each other, contrapuntally. Even if we were dealing with a form, it would go through different harmonic areas but he wouldn’t spell them out as chord changes. He would leave it to the musicians to hear where the music wanted to go. Rather than limit note choices, you end up playing completely off the melody or off your part. The piece becomes the form. When you set up the music that way, the improvising blends organically into the composing, and vice versa.”

“The first piece he put in front of us for [the 2001 album] *Light Made Lighter* was ‘Bodies We Came Out Of,’” Lightcap recalled. “When I heard that, as much as I liked playing with him before, I had no idea that he had that a kind of crazy insight musically. He opened all these possibilities that I’d never considered before. He shaped me in a big way. When he composes, he really hears things in a very unique way. As creative and unusual and adventurous as his ideas are, they’re always very beautiful. He balances the creative part with incredible musicality and the music is always such a pleasure to play.”

“A system of melodies played on top of each other, contrapuntally,” has its precedents, of course, which Taborn is quick to point out.

“Part of that is coming from Ornette

Coleman or Miles Davis’ ’60s quintet; a lot of their later tunes were like that,” Taborn acknowledged. “Wayne Shorter’s tunes have chords, but other ones may be more open. When you play through a head with an implied sense of the harmonic shape, if you’re dealing with guys who are aware and attentive to that and have good ears ... the music is written with all of that in it, then you improvise on it. Writing out chord changes provides a platform for people who maybe don’t hear it, but it’s sort of self-evident. Ears are fast these days! Many musicians can hear what is going on, which

allows you to be freer and still get a harmonically moving result. I don’t write for changes to keep coming around because I don’t want to hear that. I want the music to keep evolving. I like more counterpoint.”

Born in Minneapolis, Taborn grew up in a musical family that included his dad’s boogie-woogie and jazz piano playing and his mother’s gregarious nature in the local jazz clubs (“She still knows more jazz musicians than I do,” Taborn chuckled). As a child, the budding pianist initially focused on classical piano, but eventually, electronic music, punk,

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Photo: Emra Islek

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metal and finally, jazz, took supremacy.

"Craig hasn't really changed that much from when we were kids," said King. "He was pretty advanced back then. Craig knew a lot about every kind of music. He liked metal and punk, Bad Brains; we were also diehards into Coltrane, Monk, Art Ensemble of Chicago, Last Exit, [Peter] Brötzmann. I remember watching Sonny Rollins on Craig's VCR in his basement. We didn't see walls. Craig's music now sounds similar to the things he was writing then, [but he has] evolved."

Taborn's single jazz piano instructor, Peter Murray, made him concentrate on note choice over technical proficiency.

"I studied with Peter once a week for three years, from age 14 to 17 and through college, but only to ask questions," Taborn said. "He wouldn't teach me technique. Peter taught restrictive exercises that focused on note choice and musicality. The idea of picking something and committing to it and real volitional playing, not letting technique become the focus. Peter could see that I was playing all these notes when improvising, but what did that mean? Why did you just play that? What was the musical intention? I really didn't have one. His exercises slowed me down to playing one note per bar. I had to pick the best notes and make something musical happen."

A chance Minneapolis concert further shaped Taborn's instrumental character and refined his compositional attitude.

"I saw Bill Frisell play solo at the Walker [Art Center]," Taborn said, his eyes lighting up. "He was a revelation. I got Paul Motian's [1985 album] *Jack Of Clubs* with Frisell, and other Motian records. Frisell was being deliberate in choosing notes, and that was relatable to what Peter was asking me to do. Wayne Shorter was doing that as well, and Frank Zappa—he was a big thing for me. The way he soloed, focusing on note choices and development. His playing is very compositional and he leaves a lot of space."

After a stint with Carl Craig's Innerzone Orchestra, Taborn enrolled at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. His intent wasn't to study jazz, but English literature.

"I did take the jazz combo class and a composition class," Taborn recalled. "But I wasn't a music major. I went with the intention of working up more of my compositions then eventually applying to New England Conservatory. I wasn't thinking of a jazz degree, but thought composition would be valuable. When I was a freshman, I met [drummer] Gerald Cleaver and through him started playing in Detroit at Baker's Keyboard Lounge, Bert's on Broadway and a little place, J.J.'s Liquor Lounge. I played with Rodney Whittaker, James Carter, Marcus Belgrave, and at a restaurant gig with James and Gerald. Playing in Detroit was school. I was getting an education in jazz. At the same time I was writing. It was a good place to develop."

Taborn eventually left Ann Arbor to tour with Carter; longer, significant periods with

Roscoe Mitchell and Tim Berne followed. Taborn appeared with Mitchell's ensembles for the albums *Nine To Get Ready*, *Composition/Improvisation Nos. 1, 2 & 3* and *Far Side*. Taborn has also appeared on David Torn's *Prezens*, Evan Parker's *Boustophedon* and Ches Smith's *The Bell*, as well as Michael Formanek's *Small Places* and *The Rub And Spare Change*.

"Playing with Roscoe was about being really focused and attentive to sound," Taborn said. "He can hear it if you're not. Even in that dense environment of his larger groups, it's about a clear, focused intention of ideas. Working with Tim, playing his music—which is avant-garde but also using electronics—that was a place where I could bring those things together."

Taborn's debut as a leader, *Craig Taborn Trio* (DIW), arrived in 1994, was recorded with bassist Jaribu Shahid and drummer Tani Tabbal. 2001's *Light Made Lighter* (Thirsty Ear) featured soon-to-be fast friends, Lightcap (bass) and Cleaver (drums). The 2004 album *Junk Magic* (Thirsty Ear)—with King (drums), Aaron Stewart (tenor saxophone) and Mat Maneri (viola)—remains a singular project in Taborn's discography. Equally electronic, jazz-bent and highly improvisational, the album's atypical textures and unidentifiable sources frame it as an outlier of jazz combustion, even today.

"*Junk Magic* was about engaging the studio sound aspect and not worrying about the jazz mix aesthetic," Taborn explained. "Whatever verité drum sound you're supposed to get,

that's often the downfall for those integrations because whatever you're trying to hold on to in terms of maintaining a live sound doesn't marry well with electronics, and usually you have to mitigate the electronics aspect sonically. You're dealing with this live stage thing against something that is totally animated. The drum sound on *Junk Magic* was never about preserving the sanctity of the kit sound: It's Dave, Dave's programmed drums, and further processing."

Twelve years later, the sense of sonic adventure is still there. The second track on *Daylight Ghosts*, "Abandoned Reminder," snakes through plaintive terrain, twilight tones plucked by Lightcap as King swirls brushes and Taborn and Speed trace a lonely melody. Eventually the performance free-for-all tumbles, destination unknown until a raspy swing pulse takes hold.

"That's one of the more scored things I've done on a record," Taborn said. "A lot is written, then there's a bass pattern, then we improvise over that. It's supposed to be static space."

"The Great Silence" features Speed's woody clarinet call, draped with what sounds like a pinging doorbell.

"The Prophet synth mixed with the piano creates those doorbell tones," Taborn explained. "Being a synth guy and a sound-design guy, and focused on orchestrations too, I'm not thinking, 'This is a piano and a synth'; I'm making composite sounds. It's almost Haas effect-related, where you can't tell where the sounds are coming from. If I hit the piano and the synth at the same time and the sounds are that different, they end up being perceived as one sound coming from one place. It's just additive elements in a larger sound that I'm trying to create. Because of intermodulation and the ways the overtones are interacting, you'll hear it as one complex, composite sound."

The album's final track, "Phantom Ratio," begins somberly, with Speed's tenor akin to a foghorn calling out of the mist. The song takes shape via chattering electronics, King's funky, New Orleans snare drum pulse and Lightcap's roving Fender Precision bass line.

"It was conceived with that vamp thing," Taborn said. "It sounds like two songs in one because of the way it was recorded. The electronic part starts abruptly. Manfred had us play the melody, then the electronic stuff starts. Where it starts is not how I would have done it! The sequence should have been more pronounced. Doing electronic stuff with Manfred is interesting."

Each Taborn release sets itself apart from his evolving discography, like new plants sprouting over yesterday's turned crops. He alluded to a possible Surround Sound installation project, writing for larger ensembles, and performing out with his as yet unrecorded solo electronic project to satisfy his inner

"synth sound designer electronic music guy." Taborn's teaching schedule is sparse, consisting of private lessons, an upcoming workshop of his material at the Paris Conservatory and a short round of lessons at Banff in the summer. Meanwhile, membership in groups led by Chris Potter and Dave Holland as well as piano duos with Vijay Iyer, Kris Davis and Cory Smythe will undoubtedly reap rewards when the next Taborn group project enters the studio.

Will a cerebral approach dictate the next record, or could flat-out blowing meet his inter-

nal focus?

"It's not all cognitive and intense design," Taborn said. "The note-choice thing is important but it really yields me paying attention to sound and then responding to that. When I improvise it's to let me focus on hearing everything that is going on right now as clearly and deeply as possible, to hear all the subtleties, which feeds the improvising and guides me to what can happen next. It's always an intense focus on being in the space. It's all about being in the moment."

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