

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger



DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

biography

In a jazz climate that rewards neo-conservative tributes and far-flung exercises in deconstruction, David Weiss has distinguished himself another way: through finding flexibility and innovation in music that has its roots in the mainstream. The trumpeter, composer, and arranger has had the opportunity to learn from some of the music's quintessential figures by touring and/or

recording with the likes of Freddie Hubbard, Charles Tolliver, Billy Harper, Bobby Hutcherson, Slide Hampton, James Moody, Tom Harrell, Louis Hayes, Muhal Richard Abrams, and Billy Hart, among many others. Weiss was born in New York City, but began his musical studies in earnest by attending North Texas State University. He graduated in 1986 and returned to New York. He soon found work with Jaki Byard, Frank Foster, and Jimmy Heath and began to study with fellow trumpeters Tommy Turrentine and Bill Hardman. He also attended Barry Harris' weekly workshops, a valuable learning experience for Weiss and an opportunity for him to play with

Mr. Harris and Walter Davis Jr. Weiss also began leading the "After Hours" jam session at the Blue Note with many of the up and coming musicians of the day including Stephen Scott, Winard Harper, Leon Parker, Sam Newsome, Justin Robinson, and Rodney Kendrick. Among the musicians he performed with during his tenure were Roy Hargrove, Clifford Jordan, Mulgrew Miller, Jeff Watts, Terence Blanchard, Benny Green, and Billy Hart.

In 1990, Weiss formed a band with tenor saxophonist Craig Handy and began performing in various clubs around New York. The band's various personnel included Benny Green, Stephen Scott, or Dave Kikoski on piano, Christian McBride on bass, and Billy Hart or Jeff Watts on drums. Weiss also assisted Handy with music to the NBC series "The Cosby Mysteries" and arranged the main theme for the show. Weiss began getting more calls for his arranging and transcribing skills. His arrangements/transcriptions have appeared

on over 80 CDs. Highlights include CDs by Abbey Lincoln, Freddie Hubbard, and Rodney Kendrick, Alto Legacy with Phil Woods, Vincent Herring, and Antonio Hart, and a Rahsaan Roland Kirk tribute CD entitled *Haunted Melodies* featuring Joe Lovano, Donald Harrison, James Spaulding, and many others. Weiss also arranged the music and performed on a series of tribute concerts to trumpet

greats Freddie Hubbard, Booker Little, Clifford Brown, and Lee Morgan at Birdland, Dizzy's Club Coca Cola, and Iridium in New York City. The personnel included fellow trumpeters Tom Harrell, Nicholas Payton, Roy Hargrove, Randy Brecker, Terell Stafford, Brian Lynch, Eddie Henderson, and Claudio Roditi and rhythm section greats Pete LaRoca, Jimmy Cobb, and Idris Muhammad.

In 1996, recognizing a lack of serious new jazz writing, Weiss recruited some young, first-call New York musicians and composers to form the **New Jazz Composers Octet**. With their passionate rendering of thoughtful arrangements and firm rooting in tradition, the collective

quickly established itself as the "sound of the new jazz mainstream" (Ben Ratliff, *NYTimes*) and was praised for their ability to "stretch hard bops kind-of-unstretchable formula" (Jim Macnie, *Village Voice*). Of Weiss' contribution to the Octet's 1999 recording debut, *First Steps Into Reality* (Fresh Sound Records), Willard Jenkins commented, "a skilled arranger, transcriber and all-round coordinator, Weiss also brings righteous trumpet chops to this potent mix." (*Jazz Times*). The CD was also lauded as a "gem" and received a Critic's Pick as one of the Top 5 Albums of the Year in *Jazz Times*.

Weiss first developed an interest in writing for octet while arranging a couple of Freddie Hubbard compositions for the Hubbard album *M.M.T.C.* Both Weiss and Hubbard liked the miniature big band sound and decided to collaborate on another album of arrangements of several of Hubbard's more distinctive pieces from throughout his great career. In 2001, Hubbard recorded



DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

these selections with the New Jazz Composers Octet on *New Colors* (Hip Bop). The London Observer praised the Octet's "fine, surging ensemble sound" on the recording, as well as the group's "canny mixture of youth and experience," and finally observed, "Trumpeter-arranger David Weiss is definitely a name to watch."

The Octet released their second CD *Walkin' the Line* (Fresh Sound Records) in 2003 to great critical acclaim which included being voted one of the critic's top ten picks of the year in JazzWise magazine. Weiss used his compositions from this CD to win the prestigious Chamber Music America Doris Duke Jazz Ensembles Project: New Works Creation and Presentation grant, which provides funds to a composer to create a new work for his ensemble. The octet recently released their third CD *The Turning Gate* on Motema Music and Weiss has already used his compositions from this album to win a grant from the American Composers Forum's Jerome Composers Commissioning Program.

In 2000, Weiss formed a second group, the **David Weiss Sextet** to explore new compositional concepts and styles he was developing that did not fit the sound of the octet. The group also introduced to the jazz world two extraordinary new young talents, twin brothers Marcus and E.J. Strickland, who were still in college when they the group was formed. The group released their first album — and Weiss' first as a leader — *Breathing Room* (Fresh Sound Records) in 2002. The CD also featured Craig Handy, Xavier Davis, and Dwayne Burno. The CD received great critical acclaim from JazzWise (4 stars, recommended, their highest rating), Down Beat (4 stars), and 52nd Street (4 1/2 stars), among many others. He followed his debut with the recently released CD entitled *The Mirror* (Fresh Sound Records) which has already been hailed as a masterpiece by AllAboutJazz and was voted the # 2 CD of the year (2004) by Tony Hall in JazzWise Magazine.

In the past few years, Weiss has formed three new ensembles, all quite different and with their own unique sound. He formed **David Weiss and the Point of Departure Quintet** in 2006. As with his earlier bands, he formed this new group around some of the finest up-and-coming musicians in jazz. This group draws its inspiration and approach to music from the late 1960s, a period in jazz that has not yet been clearly defined, a turbulent but exciting time when music seemed to simultaneously get more complex and simpler as a variety of influences infused the music. Some were experimenting with soul, rock, and exotic rhythms from India and the Far East, while



Freddie Hubbard and David Weiss

others were carrying on the innovations of the second great Miles Davis quintet, using the group's ever-shifting rhythms and harmonic complexities as a springboard to new compositional ideas. Some combined both to create new, exciting music. The Point of Departure Quintet is re-examining some of the most innovative music of the period, some of it neglected, some, perhaps, never quite as developed as it could have been as things seemed to move at a pace during that period that left some music from being fully realized as they quickly moved on to the next new thing.

Weiss also took one of his occasional special projects, **The Cookers**, and solidified the personnel to form a real band featuring some of the most important still-living musicians in jazz that are still living but in his opinion a bit unsung or neglected, giving them another showcase for their amazing compositional skills and outstanding improvisational prowess. The group features Billy Harper, Eddie Henderson, Azar Lawrence, George Cables, Cecil McBee, and Billy Hart, and features compositions by Harper, Cables, and McBee, rearranged for the group by Weiss.

The third ensemble is **Endangered Species: The Music of Wayne Shorter**, a 12-piece mini big band devoted to reimagining the music of jazz' greatest living composer and approaching his work as he would, as an ever-changing, always-evolving body of work. The group performs music from all eras of Mr. Shorter's great career from the Blakey era ("Mr. Jin"), through music from "The All Seeing Eye", up to his latest compositions from "Alegria" and "High Life."

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

what the critics are saying:

"Weiss emerges as one of the finest artists to mine the post bop arena. Not since Dave Douglas has a trumpet player come along with such a perfect combination of technical prowess, unerring instinct for captivating melody, harmony and counterpoint, and sheer emotional force."

- John Kelman, **All About Jazz**

"His writing is totally contemporary in its expansion of [the mid-'60s] unfinished business. Watch for Weiss. He's a major new talent."

- Tony Hall, **JazzWise Magazine**

"Weiss writes tunes with evocative melodic ambivalence and veering surprises and hovering pedal points and metrical asymmetry, all qualities associated with the sensibility that Wayne Shorter brought to jazz. But Weiss does not repeat it, he expands upon it."

- Thomas Conrad, **Downbeat Magazine**

"Weiss' craftsmanship and individuality lift his music out of retrograde movement. Weiss' writing suggests that a major composer/arranger may be developing."

- Doug Ramsey, **Jazz Times Magazine**

"Solid is key term here. Not in any 'pedestrian' sense but in a more architectural one. Strong foundations, historically and structurally, and plenty of freedom and imagination in the design that goes on top, that is how Weiss operates. And, believe me, the operation is wholly successful."

- Maurice Bottomley, **Pop Matters**

"Weiss has everything that makes a jazz trumpeter great: a full-bodied sound, a complete command of the instrument, a thorough knowledge of the tradition and an intelligent application of those talents."

- Eugene Holley Jr., **JazzUSA**

"The influence of Wayne Shorter looms large in composition and execution. Weiss borrows from the Shorter muse with haunting themes, deceptive intros and tough playing, but he is far too restless an artist to settle for imitation. His own compositions like "Breathing Room" and "Dark Forces" deliver intelligently paced, emotionally charged hard bop that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Shorter gems like "Armageddon" and "Those Who Sit And Wait."

- Ken Hohman, **All About Jazz**

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

"The sound of the new jazz mainstream."

- Ben Ratliff, **The New York Times**

"The New Jazz Composers Octet's book is stuffed with new music by some of the idiom's most passionate, forward-thinking writers. The NJCO adheres unabashedly to a 1960s Blue Note esthetic, but its compositional palette is strikingly broad and contemporary, it's soloists sophisticated and brash in equal measure."

-David Adler, **DownBeat Magazine**

"This think tank of young guys stretches hard bop's kind-of-unstretchable formula-an achievement right there."

-Jim Macnie, **Village Voice**

"An intelligent post-modern gem that swings effortlessly as it incites with smart compositions, thoughtful arrangements and dazzling solos."

-Bill Milkowski, **The Absolute Sound**

"The acutely intelligent charts, in their harmonic sophistication and meaningful melodic content, reflect an internalized awareness of the great acoustic mainstream as defined by seminal figures such as Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock. But they also refresh this tradition with post-modern, open, asymmetrical structures. Solos grow organically out of the carefully detailed designs, but then they find the freedom to fly, in phraseologies that acknowledge all the jagged history that has transpired since 1960. These guys invent with a zeal made relevant by musicianship and the passionate focus of players who have found their format."

-Thomas Conrad, **JazzTimes Magazine**

"This is some bad ass modern hard bop that swings hard and unrepentantly. It's loaded with the delightfully mad kind of jazz that shows the form is alive and well, looking forward with all deliberate speed. Hot stuff."

- **Midwest Record Recap**

"The arrangements — some broody, minor modes alternating with kicking, up-tempos tracks, all with shifting chords, rhythmically exciting accents and thoroughly satisfying, challenging, colourful voicings — and solos of equal caliber make this essential listening. Unreservedly recommended."

- Tony Hall, **JazzWise Magazine**

"Music by people with passion and individuality as well as chops, it offers rich pickings and is strongly recommended."

- Fred Grand, **Jazz Review**

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

"The melodically beautiful and harmonically complex music contained herein demonstrates that jazz isn't history, but alive and well in the talented hands of these young players."

- Bret Primack, **Jazz Online**

"Like all the truly great jazz bands of the past, the New Jazz Composers Octet can turn on a dime from the sound of a roaring big band, breathtaking in its super-train precision, to a profusion of satisfying smaller units.

Let one of NJCO's reedmen stand up behind the mic and the room is suddenly edgy, savage and wild ...

Bandleader-trumpeter David Weiss shepherds the overall chemistry brilliantly and is one of the cooler voices counterbalancing the thrilling cacophony."

- Perry Tannenbaum, **JazzTimes**

"The New Jazz Composers Octet roots their music in 1960s jazz with updated harmonic/melodic concepts. The result is incredible. The band plays with intensity and with a deep passion for the music".

- Thomas Erdmann, **ITG Journal**

"The New Jazz Composers Octet is aptly named. These guys play original music and make the most of the palette available to them. Harmonically, rhythmically and melodically, this doesn't really remind you of anything you've heard before. This is original music in every sense of the word".

-Jan Klinecicz, **Jazz Improv Magazine**

"The five horns sound more like fifteen at times, with an astonishing breadth and depth and warmth.

Weiss' 10 minute title piece is brilliantly orchestrated ...

The NJCO breaks quite a few boundaries and isn't afraid to move the musical goalposts.

An important contribution to progress."

-Tony Hall, **Jazzwise Magazine**

"The harmonic shadings in the music are beautiful and David Weiss contributes some trumpet soloing that could melt your heart ... A program of great compositional integrity and artistry."

- Dan Bilawsky, **Jazz Improv Magazine**

"The sheer number of hours spent writing, arranging, and playing material has strengthened this fresh ensemble into a superior example of jazz excellence ... It marks a high point in 21st century acoustic jazz. The NJCO's soulful artistry and memorable compositions reveal subtle yet significant shifts in the ongoing evolution of the tradition."

-Greg Camphire, **All About Jazz**

DOWNBEAT

DAVID WEISS TRANSITIONS TO CENTER STAGE,
COMBINING NEW MUSIC WITH INNOVATIVE TRIBUTES

By David French
Photo by Bill Douthart

Straddling GENERATIONS

I want to be a trumpet player now," David Weiss said. "I moved here to play trumpet and other things happened. All this stuff comes your way, and it sounds interesting. But then it mushrooms and you are doing that all the time."

Weiss, 44, has been playing trumpet and leading bands around New York for more than 20 years. And yet, his natural abilities as an arranger, composer, producer and organizer have often kept him behind the scenes. With a new band and a new focus on playing, Weiss is making up for lost time.

Weiss is probably best known for his work with Freddie Hubbard. For most of the last decade of the trumpeter's life, Weiss led the octet with which Hubbard toured and recorded

two albums, guiding the ensemble by playing, writing arrangements and producing recordings.

"Freddie had a great impact on me," Weiss said. "But the influences he had are more about his approach to music and what he was able to do, not anything tangible trumpet-wise. I said this at the memorial service, because everybody was talking about what a character he was. Well, underneath all that he was a dead serious musician. He took his music seriously. He was open-minded, always curious, worked harder than anybody and had a clearer vision. Those are the things you want to strive for and those are the lessons learned from him."

The band Weiss led to back Hubbard was the New Jazz Composers Octet (NJCO), which Weiss founded in 1996. The octet was inspired by some arrangements Weiss did for one of the first record dates Hubbard did after his lip troubles began. Weiss wrote eight-part arrangements to give Hubbard plenty of support. Though he had no plans to work further with Hubbard, he liked the small big band sound and recruited some other up-and-comers for a band designed to highlight new jazz writing.

The NJCO—Weiss, Myron Walden, Jimmy Greene, Steve Davis, Norbert Stachel, Xavier Davis, Dwayne Burno and Nasheet Waits—released its first album in 1999 and

has earned respect over the years with great players and ambitious writing that push the envelope of straightahead jazz. In November, the group released its third album, *The Turning Gate* (Motéma).

Weiss wrote the new album's title track, a catchy, loping and twisting tune that was funded by a grant from Chamber Music America. For Weiss, the irony of the octet is that while it has been a vehicle to write and explore ideas, it has never been a context for him to play. He rarely soloed on stage with Hubbard, and with the NJCO Weiss typically stays busy leading the ensemble. He jokes that his own writing is better suited for saxophonists to solo over, and on *The Turning Gate* he takes just one short solo.

"I don't need to solo on every tune and show everybody who I am and what I can do if it's not going to give me the strength to do all the things that the group requires," he said. "The physical demands of the instrument can put your ego on hold. A lot of the time I focus on getting the tunes to sound the way they should. With five horns you play hard; it's forceful music and you want to play it a certain way."

In recent years, Weiss has recorded two albums with a sextet that includes Marcus and E.J. Strickland on Fresh Sound/New Talent. But again, his relationship with the label often

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

pulled him away from his horn, as he acted for years as talent scout and producer, supervising recordings of artists like Jeremy Pelt, Robert Glasper and Marcus Strickland before they were well known.

Groups like his sextet and the NJCO show Weiss looking forward, writing and arranging new vehicles for improvisation. But the trumpeter also finds himself looking to the past for inspiration. He continues to organize and lead a series of ambitious tribute bands filled with rising stars and jazz legends. These include *Endangered Species*, a big band that performs the music of Wayne Shorter; *Charisma*, dedicated to the music of Lee Morgan; and *The Cookers*, inspired by the classic Hubbard/Lee Morgan trumpet battle album, *Night Of The Cookers*. Weiss was also the guy who nudged trumpeter Charles Tolliver to dust off his big band charts a few years ago.

Weiss plays with all of these projects, but writing and arranging for his own groups and artists like Phil Woods, Abbey Lincoln, Rodney Kendrick, Tim Hagans and Marcus Printup often kept him busier than he thought was good for his playing.

"A big writing thing would come up and I wouldn't touch the horn for two weeks," he said. "I'd get called for stuff to play trumpet and after being in headphones writing all week I wasn't at my best. I'm just trying to get the focus back."

To that end, Weiss's new horn-on-the-lips band is a quintet called *Point of Departure*, after the 1964 Andrew Hill album, and includes tenor saxophonist J.D. Allen, guitarist Nir Felder, bassist Luques Curtis and drummer Jamire Williams. Weiss intends to release a live recording of the group this year (he does not have a label set to release the recording).

"As a trumpet player, I'm trying to figure out a new sound, a different harmony that isn't based on diatonic scales," he said. "I'm creating my own scales. It wasn't just about finding a new group, but finding a new approach to music, a new way to go up and down the horn. This group has given me the freedom to develop my voice."

The group sounds nothing like the NCJO. It plays repertoire from the mid-to-late 1960s, some of it fairly obscure, by artists like Hill, Shorter, Tolliver and Herbie Hancock.

"It's all from that two- or three-year period," Weiss said. "I'll blame it on the Miles Davis Quintet with Herbie, Wayne, Ron and Tony. They took the harmonic thing as far as you can go. The music of that period had an openness, and it's still ripe for exploration. A lot of that stuff was recorded once and put away. Wayne Shorter didn't record *Speak No Evil*, hire a publicist and do a world tour. He went back to playing with Miles. Ninety percent of the Blue Note stuff was recorded once and put away, so a lot of



"My focus will be the octet for writing. *Point of Departure* is for playing, and *The Cookers* is for getting my ass kicked."

the music from that period didn't get explored like it could have."

Three of the tunes in the band's book are by trumpeter Charles Moore, who recorded two albums for Blue Note in the '60s with a Detroit collective called Kenny Cox and the Contemporary Jazz Quartet.

"They were the first band that heard the Miles Davis Quintet and said, 'We like that kind of flexibility, so we're going to write tunes that put that into a form,'" Weiss said. "They created this format to solo over that is wide open. They would write tunes with open sections. All the Charles Moore tunes have the same device where he goes to three. You contrast four against three and the downbeats create this interesting rhythmic thing. They also created cueing systems. The horn player cues the next section by playing a line. But we took it further by saying we can do anything."

The band plays free, but with a driving in-the-pocket feel that builds on the originals. In particular, Felder's dreamy and angular electric

guitar and Williams' cymbal-heavy drumming keep the band rooted in the present, and only the heads sometimes betray their vintage after the lengthy solo sections. Weiss is not afraid to let the solos spin out. Many of the tunes on the unreleased album clock in at more than 10 minutes, while some, like Moore's "Number 4" and Shorter's "Paraphernalia," double that.

Reviving ambitious 1960s repertoire seems an unlikely avenue to success in today's jazz world, but Weiss is happy to follow his vision, playing smaller rooms so that he can do his own thing. Although a lot of the music was first recorded around the time he was born, he is confident that what he is creating with *Point of Departure* is contemporary.

"If you approach it like they did—that it's open and can go anywhere—it's as timely," he said. "It's about the musicians you choose, as long as they look at it fresh every day."

The other project Weiss focuses on these days, one that also keeps him playing at the top of his game, is *The Cookers*, an all-out hard-bop blowing band.

"That band started in 2002 or 2003 when I was asked to do a *Night Of The Cookers* thing for a club in Brooklyn, to get all the guys from the record," he said. "I got James Spaulding, Pete La Rocca and Larry Ridley. Harold Mabern couldn't do it so we made it a Freddie Hubbard alumni thing and got Ronnie Mathews and Kiane Zawadi."

"I love that kind of music, and if I play it I don't want to play it with guys my age or younger," he continued. "If I'm going to embrace that stuff, I want to do it with those guys because they've got the passion and the energy, and they were there."

The current *Cookers* lineup includes Billy Harper, Eddie Henderson, George Cables, Cecil McBee and Billy Hart, with younger players like Craig Handy or Burno along for some dates. Weiss hopes to record soon to catch some of the fun he has on stage with players that were influences on him when he was young.

"Those are the guys I grew up on," he said. "I keep telling Eddie that the first record I heard with trumpet was a record of his called *Sunburst*. When I put Harper's *Capra Black* on in college—damn! So, yeah, it's fun."

"Those guys, most of them are 65, at least, but when I finish a gig, I feel like the old man. I'm so exhausted after those gigs and Eddie Henderson's like, 'All right, let's go to a jam session.'"

Weiss stands at a transition point in his career in which he hopes to free himself as much as possible from the paying gigs that keep him away from the horn and his own musical vision. "My focus will be the octet for writing," he said. "*Point of Departure* is for playing and *The Cookers* is for getting my ass kicked." **DB**

OPENING CHORUS Hearsay



David Weiss

By Bill Milkowski

For the past 18 years, trumpeter-arranger David Weiss has been flying under the radar, quietly going about the daily struggle of being a working jazz musician in New York City while performing at a consistently high level on the bandstand and amassing a bunch of impressive credits along the way. Although the New York native had been

on the scene since 1986 — when he graduated from North Texas State, returned home and began working in everything from Latin and Haitian bands to sideman gigs with jazz veterans like Frank Foster, Jaki Byard and Jimmy Heath — it wasn't until 1995, when he made some key contributions to Freddie Hubbard's Music Masters recording, Monk, Miles, Trane & Cannon, that Weiss began gaining attention for his arranging skills.

Since then, he has done numerous arrangements on a host of recordings by such artists as Abbey Lincoln, Phil Woods, Vincent Herring and Antonio Hart. But his best work to date as a composer and arranger has been in the service of his own sextet and for the New Jazz Composers Octet, the boundary-stretching cooperative group he founded in 1996. Since then, the NJCO has made two excellent recordings on Spain's Fresh Sound New Talent label: 1999's *First Steps Into Reality* and 2003's *Walkin' the Line*, which saw the group make an incremental leap in its development. Comprised of such advanced young composers and players as pianist Xavier Davis, alto saxophonist Myron Walden, tenor saxophonist Jimmy Greene, baritone saxophonist Chris Karlic, trombonist Steve Davis, bassist Dwayne Burno and drummer Nasheet Waits, the NJCO also backed Freddie Hubbard on his ambitious 2001 recording, *New Colors* (Hip Bop), performing Weiss' fresh arrangements of familiar Hubbard pieces. "*New Colors* had its moments," Weiss maintains, "but I'd like to make a grander statement with Freddie. It would be nice to get a second crack at things because we do have a lot of material, and

it's definitely better material than the first one. Plus, it would be nice for him to go out in better style."

In 2002, Fresh Sound New Talent put out *Breathing Room*, Weiss' highly acclaimed recording as a leader. His follow-up for the label, *The Mirror*, is a showcase for the composer's writing and arranging for his tightly knit sextet, including the propulsive modal tune "Stalker" and a dynamic new take of Kevin Hays' jaunty stop-time swinger "Our Trip." Both of those pieces are highlighted by some authoritative blowing from the sextet's frontline of Weiss on trumpet, Myron Walden on alto sax and Marcus Strickland on tenor sax alongside a crack rhythm section featuring NJCO bandmates Davis and Burno, with E.J. Strickland on drums. Two ambitious octet pieces that complete *The Mirror*—a darkly beautiful ballad "Love Letter to One Not Yet Met" and a stirring new arrangement of Wayne Shorter's swinging Jazz Messengers anthem "Mr. Jin"—showcase Weiss' knack for rich chordal voicings and contrapuntal embroidery.

"I do think there is a difference between my writing for the sextet and the octet," he says. "The sextet is moodier, more straight-eighth; more of the melodies are in the bass while the horn stuff is more static. It's just a different kind of mood than the octet, which is more of a go-for-the-jugu-

lar, knock-you-over-the-head, take-no-prisoners kind of approach."

The ongoing dilemma Weiss faces with the NJCO is that it lies somewhere in the no man's land between hard bop and the avant-garde, while perceptions of the group vary depending on which camp the listener is in. "Straightahead people think the octet is really out while out-people hear ding-ding-a-ding and think it's straightahead, so they dismiss it as old hat," he says. But right in between is where Weiss wants to be because, he says, "the best music that I know of—the records from the mid-'60s that pretty much define everything that we do now—encompassed elements of both worlds. They were based on harmony, but those guys didn't approach it that way—they were just pushing the envelope all the time."

"And that line between both worlds has always intrigued me, which is why I called the second octet record *Walkin' the Line*. But the lines were a lot more blurry at some point in the mid-'60s, when you had the Miles Davis quintet with Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter and Tony Williams, and you had Freddie Hubbard and Lee Morgan, John Coltrane and other players like James Spaulding and Charles Tolliver. Those guys played hard. They played this music with a passion and a conviction. And I think the music was much better off for it."

Two ambitious octet pieces that complete *The Mirror*—a darkly beautiful ballad "Love Letter to One Not Yet Met" and a stirring new arrangement of Wayne Shorter's swinging Jazz Messengers anthem "Mr. Jin"—showcase Weiss' knack for rich chordal voicings and contrapuntal embroidery.

The New York Times

MUSIC REVIEW | DAVID WEISS

Ripe for Rediscovery: An Obscure 1960s Jazz Album Gets Its Groove Back

By NATE CHINEN

Jazz repertoire has a reputation for bigness. The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra is an institutionally supported big band, as were some other noble past endeavors. But there's another, leaner tier of jazz repertoire, the product of musicians consumed by a labor of love, or maybe a love of labor. Either way, David Weiss is one of those.

Mr. Weiss, a trumpeter, arranger and composer, leads a handful of groups that explore overlapping areas of interest: chiefly 1950s hard bop and 1960s post-bop, much of it touched by the hand and mind of Wayne Shorter. (Mr. Weiss also runs the New Composers Octet, which plays original music in the same lineage.) Every now and then his focus further narrows to a single point on the jazz continuum, like the early-'60s Colpix album "Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers Play Selections From the New Musical Golden Boy," the subject of his run at the Iridium that ended Sunday.

"Golden Boy" is a relative obscurity in Blakey's oceanic catalog, and a rarity: never re-issued on CD, never available on iTunes, it was recently listed on eBay for \$39.99. It features an imposing 11-piece band with arrangements by a few of the group's sidemen, including Mr. Shorter, the pianist Cedar Walton and the trombonist Curtis Fuller. It was ripe for rediscovery, in other words, and Mr. Weiss has thrown himself into the task, transcribing charts and enlisting top players like Mr. Fuller.

The first set on Thursday could have gone better. There were missed cues, and issues with



group intonation. There were also problems with the mix: the bassist Vicente Archer sounded rubbery, while the pianist Mulgrew Miller sounded tinny. And though Louis Hayes, the drummer, came with unimpeachable pedigree — a younger contemporary of Blakey, he has his own small repertoire group, the Cannonball Legacy Band — he often didn't push as far forward as the music seemed to demand. (If Blakey was a steam locomotive, Mr. Hayes is a vintage Buick.)

But there was big potential: richly hued voicings in the arrangements by Mr. Shorter, especially "There's a Party," a tumbling waltz; Mr. Walton's crisp chart for "Lorna's Here," with a prelude for tuba and French horn; Mr. Fuller's modal "Arabia," the only nonalbum selection.

Mr. Weiss conducted, playing just a few blaring choruses. His lead trumpeter, Jeremy Pelt, was impeccable, easy to picture in Blakey's finishing school; the other star soloist was the alto saxophonist Donald Harrison, who graduated from that academy with honors.

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

Detroit Free Press
www.freep.com



The Cookers' front line, from left: tenor saxophonist Billy Harper, trumpeter David Weiss, trumpeter Eddie Henderson and alto saxophonist Craig Handy. Bassist Cecil McBee is behind them.

Experience and Youth Make A Noteworthy Combo in the Cookers

By MARK STRYKER

Talk about truth in advertising: The Cookers, an eye-popping septet led by the accomplished trumpeter, composer and arranger David Weiss, offers the promise of broiling intensity when it appears this weekend at the Jazz Café at Music Hall.

The Cookers pairs Weiss, 45, and alto saxophonist Craig Handy with five stalwarts from an older generation still at the top of their games: tenor saxophonist Billy Harper, trumpeter Eddie Henderson, pianist George Cables, bass-

ist Cecil McBee and drummer Billy Hart. The band, whose name descends from a pair of celebrated mid-'60s Blue Note LPs by trumpeters Freddie Hubbard and Lee Morgan, lives at the mainstream intersection of hard bop and post-bop. The music is swinging, in touch with the blues and girded by sturdy structures and sophisticated harmony but also willing to explore looser forms and freer rhythmic and harmonic conceptions.

The blend of experience and youth, the rich orchestration possibilities offered by four

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

horns and especially the distinctive collection of personalities gives the band a unique complexion. The veterans are insider favorites known for their fierce energy and individual character. Hart in particular is among the most majestic drummers in contemporary jazz, and the band is stocked with imaginative composers.

“I wanted to put a band together of all these veterans I admired and wanted to work with and feature their music in the best possible light,” says Weiss. “No one of my generation or younger plays with the intensity and passion and freshness of these guys, so I would be foolish not to want to get a piece of that.”

Best known for the gleaming authority and professionalism he brings to all his endeavors, as well as his entrepreneurial spirit, Weiss has carved out his own niche on the New York scene. He’s always got something intriguing up his sleeve — from the Cookers to ensembles of his peers like the New Jazz Composers Octet, to thoughtful tribute projects dedicated to Lee Morgan and Wayne Shorter, to his Point of Departure Quintet that explores landmark but overlooked music from the ‘60s, including gems by the late Detroit pianist Kenn Cox and the Contemporary Jazz Quintet.

Weiss has contributed arrangements and transcriptions to some 80 recordings, including those by Freddie Hubbard, Phil Woods and Abbey Lincoln. He also developed a particularly significant working relationship with Hub-

bard, helping the innovative trumpeter find a comfortable creative outlet for his music as he struggled with embouchure trouble in the last years of his life.

Mostly, Weiss’ varied career illustrates one man’s answer to the central dilemma facing contemporary jazz musicians (actually, all artists in our post-modern age): How does one develop a healthy relationship with the past? It’s an especially tricky riddle for well-schooled musicians assimilating their love for the pantheon and the talisman-like pull of classic recordings while still searching for their own voice. Weiss’ approach has been to develop something of a split personality, on the one hand leading bands of his peers to fulfill his passions as a composer, trumpeter and bandleader and on the other pursuing repertory projects and bands with personnel best-suited to the specific material and conception.

When it comes to the Cookers, whose personnel Weiss solidified about three years ago, the point was to engage his elders on their terrain.

“I don’t think I would have any interest in playing this music with my peers or anyone younger,” he says. “It just doesn’t make any sense to me. That would really be looking back as opposed to playing this sort of music with the guys who are part of it. They don’t look back. They play this music fresh and with passion and intensity every day, and I feel I am part of something that is moving the music forward — or striving to all the time.”

Best known
for the gleaming
professionalism he brings
to all his endeavors,
as well as his
entrepreneurial spirit,
Weiss has carved out
his own niche
on the New York
scene.

stereophile



A JAZZ JOURNEY BY THOMAS CONRAD

Ideas gathering: Tenor saxophonist JD Allen waiting to take the stage at New York's Jazz Standard.

On a recent morning, the front-page headline in the *Los Angeles Times* is "A WAY OF LIFE DRYING UP." It is about the *zanjeros* in Southern California, traditional overseers of irrigation systems who are losing their jobs to automation. I wonder if jazz audiophiles are becoming as irrelevant as the *zanjeros*. I wonder if, for people who regard music as a destination rather than an accessory, a way of life is drying up, like certain drought-ravaged regions of Southern California.

The signs are everywhere. In any city or town in America, stop someone on the street and ask for directions. If they're under 35, they can't hear you—little white wires are running into their ears. The iPod is taking over the world. Almost everyone thinks MP3s are what music sounds like. CD sales are plummeting because everybody downloads. Record stores, even cultural institutions such as Tower Records, are dying hideous deaths. (Another recent headline in the *L.A. Times*: "TOP MUSIC SELLER'S STORE HAS NO DOOR." Apple's iTunes is now America's No.1 music retailer.) One of the great ene-

mies of CD sales—and of recording artists—is so obvious that nobody talks about it: the CD burner. Back in the day, if you wanted an album, you had to buy the LP. (Don't talk to me about cassette recordings.) Today you can have your friend burn you a copy. A *perfect* copy. Great recording studios—Cello in Los Angeles, the Hit Factory in New York, to name only two—are closing. In a world where sound matters less, recordings made with Pro Tools in small project studios, or even at home, are good enough.

As for the specialty hi-fi business, it's the Great Depression. Stores that carry the good stuff are imploding in Chapter 11 all over America. The company where I worked, Magnolia Hi-Fi, once the most successful retail hi-fi chain in the US, has closed nine of its 22 stores.

As for jazz, it now constitutes less than 3% of all record sales. Major labels such as Columbia and Verve have slashed their jazz divisions.

As for jazz audiophiles, we doomed *zanjeros* watch helplessly as MP3 rages on and independent jazz labels look to sales of downloads to save themselves.

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

LOST IN NEW YORK

Recently, with such cheerful thoughts in my head, I made a trip to New York City, capital of the jazz world. I was not there to study any of the ominous trends listed above. I was just on one of my semi-annual Manhattan jazz prowls. My first night in town, a Thursday, I hit three clubs and got on a roll. I saw Alvin Queen at the Jazz Standard on 27th Street. Good room, excellent sound, and the best jazz food in New York, brought down from the Blue Smoke barbecue upstairs. On a Thursday night, there was a nice turnout for Queen, an expatriate drummer in from France. He has hard-bop street cred because he once played with Horace Silver. Proven veterans of the jazz trenches, such as trumpeter Joe Magnarelli and alto saxophonist Jesse Davis, were in Queen's band, and the music was tough and smart.

From there, a \$12 cab ride to Lincoln Center. Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola is not quite real. It's like a jazz club in Camelot. You take the elevator to the fifth floor of the Time Warner Center. You get off and everything you see is new and beautiful: The carpet. The long, wide corridors. The red and gold walls. The people. Especially the people. They are all immaculately dressed and smiling blissfully, waiting patiently in a long line to get into Dizzy's. When you finally get in, the room softly glows. It has huge windows and a breathtaking view of nighttime Manhattan.

Phil Woods was at Dizzy's. He used to be a bebop fire-breather. He is now 76 and has emphysema. Between hits on his inhaler, he played his alto saxophone quietly, picking his spots. The capacity crowd loved it, and why not—to be in that room, in the presence of Phil Woods, the infinite lights of the Manhattan skyline behind him.

I got to Birdland late for the 11 o'clock set. The Gary Peacock Trio, with Marc Copland on piano and Bill Stewart on drums, created impressionist mood paintings. Peacock's bass solos were poems, flickering in light and shadow. Nobody was there.

I spent the next day, Friday, at Systems Two, a recording studio in Brooklyn owned by two brothers, Joe and Mike Marciano, who are also the resident engineers.

I have been known to brag that, without looking at the credits, I can spot a Systems Two recording in the first minute of listening. It is probably not true. What is true is that everything recorded at Systems Two jumps at you from your speakers, alive and kicking, vivid and clear. So many jazz labels are now using this studio that you wonder whether there's a danger that too many jazz albums will sound alike. It would be a high-class problem.

I was there to watch David Weiss lay down some tracks. He is one of the best trumpet players in a town with lots of trumpet players, but he is more important as a bandleader, arranger, talent scout, producer, composer, and *agent provocateur*. He calls his new band the Point of Departure Quintet. Weiss is in his 40s, the rest of the band in their 20s. Weiss is really good at finding the hot young players in town—like tenor saxophonist Marcus Strickland, guitarist Nir Felder, bassist Matt Clohesy, and drummer Rudy Royston. One of the missions of Point of Departure is to revisit the music of a long-forgotten Detroit band from the 1960s, the Kenny Cox Contemporary Jazz Quintet. It's a typical Weiss project: quixotic, but worth doing because Cox's tunes are dynamite.

To sit beside Joe Marciano at his Otari Concept One console while he tracks a session is like a front-row seat at a private concert. The musicians are on the other side of the glass, but the music roars into the control room through Joe's Tannoy monitors. Joe is into the moment. When the horns of Weiss and Strickland jackhammer the four-note refrain of "Snuck In," Joe grins and hollers, "They're smokin'!" When Nir Felder solos on

"Gravity Point," and departs the late 1960s to travel to the brink of madness in post-Hendrix distortion, Joe, even as his hands tweak a knob or nuance a slider, shouts "Yeah!"

I sat down with Joe and David after the session. I asked Joe why System Two recordings sound so good. He said, "It's about going in the room and listening to the musicians first, and then coming out and trying to get their sound through the console. Of course, it's learning how to place mikes and equalize some things. But it's really just your ears, your sensibility of space."

I mention to Joe that many studios are going out of business. He says, "One reason is the advent of computerized recording, with musicians able to have a setup in their home. But we specialize. You can't record this stuff everywhere. We've actually gotten busier. It used to be that you came into our studio, you did your session, you did your fixes, your overdubs, and your mixing. That requires a budget, a long time in the studio. But now we get people who never could have afforded to come here. Now they can take advantage of our room and our ears, and get a wonderful sound onto their hard disk. They can take it home and mix it themselves, with Pro Tools. They can edit. So people who don't have a budget can come in for a day."

When I asked Joe whether his creative control is compromised in these situations, he looked resigned. "What's on the hard drive

Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola is not quite real. It's like a jazz club in Camelot. You take the elevator to the fifth floor of the Time Warner Center. You get off and everything you see is new and beautiful. Especially the people.

is my sound on the individual tracks. But my balance isn't there."

Weiss, too, sounded resigned when I asked him how he felt about the likelihood that high-quality recordings of his music will reach many listeners as MP3s. "We're not doing it for the person who's going to download it. But we still have a responsibility to make it sound the best we can. I know what I need it to sound like."

That night I went to Sweet Rhythm, on Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village, for a CD release party by the Pete Mallinverni Quintet. The CD was *Invisible Cities*, on Reservoir. I had written the liner notes to the album, but I'd never heard the music in person. Rich Perry, not well known but one of the greatest tenor saxophone players in jazz, took a classic Rich Perry solo on "Lonely Town"—subtle, oblique, understated, and heartbreaking. Sweet Rhythm was almost empty.

I heard another monster tenor player the next night, Saturday, and there weren't many people there, either, but it felt very different because the room was at full capacity. The tenor was Grant Stewart and the club was The Bar Next Door, a tiny bar attached to La Lanterna restaurant, on MacDougal, near Café Wha in the Village.

Stewart was set up in a few square feet with his trio. There were perhaps eight tables, all full, and people standing. Stewart rested his drink on my table. Critics always talk about his huge, powerful tone. From three feet away, he almost blew me over backward in my chair. In a town with too many tenor players and not enough space for anything, it was a New York experience.

On Monday I went to Bennett Studios, across the Hudson River in Englewood, New Jersey. The president and chief engineer is Dae Bennett, Tony's youngest son. He has his father's lean, handsome face, and some of his cool self-possession. David Weiss was there with an alternate version of the Point of Departure Quintet (J.D. Allen on tenor, Luques Curtis on bass, Jamire Williams on drums) to take some new runs at Kenny

DAVID WEISS

trumpeter • composer • arranger

LOST IN NEW YORK

Cox's music. Dae Bennett sat at the vast Neve VR60 console. If the session at Systems Two was like a party, the Bennett session was like a laboratory. Dae Bennett kept the volume of his Genelec monitors so low that I couldn't hear enough to tell how the session was going. After the first take, Weiss was critical: "the horns played everything right and took great solos and the rhythm section played like shit." After the second take, he was critical: "the rhythm section played great and the horns messed up." But Weiss is always critical.

The musicians left after the session, but Weiss stayed on to finish work on a different project: mixing an album recorded earlier at Bennett by Freddie Hubbard with another Weiss band, the New Jazz Composers Octet. Weiss sat at the Neve console with Bennett staff engineer Dave Kowalski. For five hours, they repeated passages from the record over and over and made minuscule adjustments that were inaudible to me. "This is taking a long time," I told Weiss.

"This is a Freddie Hubbard record," he said. It's called *On the Real Side*, on the Times Square label.

While I was in New York, Weiss took a third shot at recording the Point of Departure Quintet—this time live, at the Jazz

for several years with Broadway shows that toured the US and Europe. For eight years he was on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts. When I talked to Kolker, he had just taken a gig in the 27-piece orchestra of the Broadway revival of *Gypsy*, starring Patti LuPone, playing alto saxophone in a tuxedo, eight shows a week. (The Sunday performance of *Gypsy* is a matinee, which is why Kolker is free on Sunday nights.)

But Kolker knows his true calling. He recorded his new album, *Flag Day*, at his own expense at Systems Two. (*Flag Day* was recently released on the Sunnyside label and was reviewed in the June 2008 issue of *Stereophile*.) It is a brilliant, loose, inspired album, with world-class sidemen (John Abercrombie, Paul Motian), but Kolker has no illusions that it will enable him to quit gigs like *Gypsy*.

In fact, in order to be able to "hang and play," Kolker takes gigs like the one at the Grassroots, which would have to be remodeled before you could call it a dive. The wood tables in the booths are fully carved with initials and graffiti. The barstools are missing some of their cracked vinyl, exposing filthy yellow padding. The shaven-headed bartender looks hostile. He is hostile. The men's restroom is right out of the Third World. Kolker, drummer Rodney Green (who has recorded with Greg Osby and Christian McBride, and who also apparently wants to "hang and play"), and bassist Jeremy Stratton are in a row on a short wall opposite the bar.

The Grassroots is crowded, though not for the music. Those standing two deep at the bar have their backs to the band. In the booth next to mine, five or six people—all of whom look as if they've slept in their clothes—argue loudly in an unidentifiable language, perhaps Romanian or Ukrainian.

Kolker, his eyes closed, plays the Selmer Mark VI tenor saxophone that he has owned for 37 years, since he was 13. He plays "Someday My Prince Will Come" and "I Hear a Rhapsody" in liquid silver streams of notes. I remember something he said in our interview that afternoon: "If I don't get lost in a solo, I've failed. To lose yourself in the moment, to get beyond... that's what matters."

Jazz will always be a minority music. Even in New York, the nerve center of the jazz universe, great artists often play to empty or inattentive houses. But passion keeps the music alive. The keepers of the flame persevere. Joe Marciano obsesses about getting the true sound of the musicians through his console, no matter what happens to it down the road. David Weiss would have kept mixing all night if necessary because "This is a Freddie Hubbard record." (Weiss now says that the material recorded by the Point of Departure Quintet at Systems Two and Bennett Studios is "usable"—high praise from him. There will be at least one CD released, also including live material from the Jazz Standard. Watch for it.)

Adam Kolker played "Body and Soul," and his lines, breathy and beautifully broken, were sometimes drowned out by the clatter and babble in the Grassroots. But the truth of what he had said about getting lost still applied. To get lost is why people play this music, and why people listen. It is why I, child that I was, had no choice but to follow the Pied Piper, Paul Desmond. When, in the Grassroots, I followed Adam Kolker into the maze of implications that he derived from "Body and Soul," I lost myself. For a few moments, I was released from the bondage of self.

Watching the concentration on Kolker's face, his eyes closed, I knew that, like me, he did not hear the noise of the crowd anymore. We were both lost, lost in the music. ■

Critics always talk about Grant Stewart's huge, powerful tone. **From three feet away he almost blew me over backward in my chair.** In a town with too many tenor players and not enough space for anything, it was a New York experience.

Standard, on Tuesday, my last night in town. The engineer was Paul Cox. After hearing "Snuck In" and "Gravity Point" in two studios, it was a kick to hear Weiss's band play them for real, with a live audience. It was like the difference between seeing animals in a zoo and encountering them in the wild.

From the Jazz Standard, I took a cab to the Village Vanguard. Every time I come to New York, something happens around the fifth day. The rush of being in the most electric, most exciting city on earth tapers off, and I'm suddenly able to perceive New York's monumental grubbiness: the trash bags on the curbs, the ugly store fronts (hidden at night behind steel grids, also ugly), all the people on the mean streets (in this most glamorous of cities) who look as if they've slept in their clothes.

Perhaps it was this fifth-day perspective that allowed me to see that the Village Vanguard is a dump. Of course, its threadbare shabbiness doesn't change the fact that it is a holy place with celestial acoustics, haunted by the ghosts of all the saints who recorded masterpieces there, such as John Coltrane and Bill Evans.

When you're in New York, it almost doesn't matter who's playing the Vanguard. You just go. On this night, it was Teddy Charles, an octogenarian vibraphonist, accompanied by some hot young downtown cats: tenor saxophonist Chris Byars, bassist Ari Roland, and pianist Sacha Perry. It was perhaps the least-famous band that will play the Vanguard all year. The place was full. People like me just wanted to be there.

I skipped Sunday, when I interviewed Adam Kolker for a piece in another magazine. I then accompanied him to a gig he sometimes plays on Sunday nights at the Grassroots Tavern, on St. Marks Place in the East Village.

Kolker has a bachelor's degree from the University of Miami, a master's from the New England Conservatory, and is proficient on every reed instrument "except the double reeds." His first horn is the tenor saxophone, on which he improvises with deft, light, fresh melodicism. Yet in the last 25 years he has spent as much time outside jazz as in it. He was on the road

all-about-jazz

DAVID WEISS | Fresh Sound New Talent (2004)

The Mirror

By John Kelman

The ability to create music that is intellectually provocative and eminently approachable is a challenge to which many artists aspire but relatively few manage to succeed. Trumpeter Davis Weiss has certainly had the opportunity to explore both sides of the equation. In high demand over the past decade, he has worked with artists including Bob Belden, Freddie Hubbard and Tom Harrell in capacities involving performance, arrangement and transcription. But it has only been since his '01 debut as a leader, *Breathing Room*, that he has emerged as a composer and bandleader of significance.

Now with *The Mirror*, he demonstrates that *Breathing Room* was no fluke as he serves up a programme marking him as one of the more cerebral yet visceral writers to arise in recent years. With an album that is heady in both senses of the word—intelligent and exhilarating—Weiss emerges as one of the finest artists to mine the post bop arena, with an ability to develop longer-form composition that is clearly indebted to Wayne Shorter. Not since Dave Douglas rose to prominence in the mid-'90s has a trumpet player come along with such a perfect combination of technical prowess, unerring instinct for captivating melody, harmony and counterpoint, and sheer emotional force. A masterpiece by any definition, *The Mirror* deserves a place high in most listeners' top ten lists for '04 for its ability to engage more than just the ears; Weiss' compositions are remarkably visual as well.

This is no surprise, given that Weiss has

worked heavily as a freelance artist for stage and screen, citing Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky as having a profound influence on his work. Like a good filmmaker, Weiss views his compositions and his record as having a larger underlying arc. "The Stalker" may alternate between an odd-metered tempestuous vamp and a hard-swinging middle section, but it is when placed beside the more relaxed and harmonically rich title track, that a musical story begins to come forward. Weiss' themes may be deep and complicated, but they unravel at a pace that ensures they remain fresh in the mind long after their time has passed.

Utilizing two ensembles—a sextet for the first five pieces and an octet for the remaining two, Weiss has chosen his players well. Especially notable are alto saxophonist Myron Walden, still in his early 30s and already well-established with a robust tone and boldly lyrical style; and pianist Xavier Davis, who provides rich accompaniment, especially to Weiss, who never lets technical concerns get in the way of structural and evocative integrity in his solos.

Along with five original compositions, Weiss features a piece by pianist Kevin Hays and, more importantly, closes the album with an octet version of Wayne Shorter's "Mr. Jin," bringing a deeper sense of counterpoint to the tune without losing its innate swing. A fitting homage that shows just how far he has come, Weiss draws a strong line between the past and present, *The Mirror* being the perfect analogy for self-examination without self-absorption.

SPECIAL ISSUE
THE 60 BEST PRODUCTS OF 2005

stereophile

www.stereophile.com

DECEMBER 2005

DAVID WEISS *The Mirror*

David Weiss, trumpet; Myron Walden, alto sax; Marcus Strickland, Craig Handy, tenor sax; Norbert Stachel, baritone sax, bass clarinet; Steve Davis, trombone; Xavier Davis, piano; Dwayne Burno, bass; E.J. Strickland, Nasheet Waits, drums
Fresh Sound New Talent FSNT 204 (CD). 2005. David Weiss, prod.; Joe Ferla, Joseph Marciano, engs. AAD/DAD. TT: 62:27

Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★

The *Mirror* features some of the strongest young players in New York: Myron Walden, Xavier Davis, Craig Handy, and the Strickland brothers, Marcus and E.J. All of them are better known than the leader, David Weiss. But Weiss is a quietly influential presence on the current New York scene as trumpeter, composer, arranger, bandleader, and record producer. His sophisticated, meticulous writing provides contexts that allow the talent he has gathered here to shine.

There are five sextet and two octet tracks. Even when writing for six instruments, Weiss thinks orchestrally, in triads and polychords and complexities of counterpoint and recurrent unifying details. Both groups function as little big bands.

The opening "Stalker" is representative. Like many Weiss compositions, it carries the melody in the bass line, doubled in this case on bass and piano. All solos start or end or ride on an internal off-center vamp on "two" with no "one." The vamp is the tense, unstable force that holds the piece together. It also suggests a stalker's ominous footfalls.

Again and again, the primary soloists respond persuasively to the provocation of Weiss's charts. Walden is an exhilarating improviser on alto sax who shapes his creative volatility into complete statements. He catapults straight up from the vamp on "Stalker" in splintered keening flurries, and it is a rush when he hurtles forward into time. Strickland's solos, such as his gradually intensifying reaction to "The Sacrifice," are also passionate yet thoughtful. Weiss himself is the most orderly of trumpet players, and builds elaborate structures on top of his own thematic exposition. If some of this sounds intellectual, Weiss's music still swings with sensuous fluidity.

The two octet pieces are very different, both deep. "Love Letter to One Not Yet Met" is Weiss's yearning, fervent, neoromantic trumpet feature. The dark "Mr. Jin," by Wayne Shorter, sends up Craig Handy's only solo, a fierce and articulate ascent that bounces hard off the ensemble's kicking riffs.

Fresh Sound New Talent is an independent label with the taste to use excellent engineers and studios. The sound quality of both sessions, sextet (Joe Ferla, Avatar) and octet (Joseph Marciano, Systems Two), is first-rate.

The Mirror is evidence that, whatever the challenges of economics and exposure now facing jazz, the art form itself is thriving.

—Thomas Conrad