

Tomas Fujiwara

by Sean Fitzell



With subtle assurance, drummer Tomas Fujiwara led his group The Hook Up in a performance at Cornelia Street Cafe early last month. His energy prodded the momentum, allowing space for the musicians to explore rather than relying on him to conduct. During the episodic "Postcards" from his forthcoming CD (*The Air is Different*, 482 Music), the group smoothly navigated its tight unison passage, from which his solo emanated. He laid down elegantly controlled breaks between the drums and hi-hat while maintaining the feel with an insistent ride, until his building intensity ushered the band's return for a rousing finish.

Though this is the first group he's led and been the sole composer for, Fujiwara was poised and confident. The band has forged a sonic cohesion over the last three and a half years after initially being drawn from disparate scenes. Fujiwara chose musicians that were familiar to him, but not to each other: guitarist Mary Halvorson, trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson, saxophonist Brian Settles and bassist Trevor Dunn (who replaced Danton Boller). "That wasn't a conscious strategy, but I am interested in unique combinations of musicians."

Fujiwara has quietly emerged as an engaging improviser in the next wave of creative musicians. He comes from a jazz background and frequently incorporates other influences, from AfroCuban and Brazilian to rock and hip-hop, not for iconoclastic shock, but to deepen his reservoir of ideas. In addition to his group, he's part of the collective The Thirteenth Assembly with Halvorson, cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum and violist Jessica Pavone and has a longstanding duo with Bynum. Fujiwara also plays North Indian/New Orleans grooves in percussionist Sunny Jain's rollicking Red Baraat brass and percussion outfit and the music of Steve Lacy in reedist Josh Sinton's *Ideal Bread*.

"It's a lot of fun to interpret people's music and be a part of a group," says Fujiwara. Primarily known for his playing within his cohort, he also maintains an association with saxophonist Matana Roberts and has more recently been playing with other veterans, including composer Anthony Braxton and saxophonist Tim Berne. In January, a new collective trio with Halvorson and reedist Marty Ehrlich debuted, with all three contributing original music. Similarly, this month will see the premiere of *Thumbscrew*, with bassist Michael Formanek and Halvorson once again. "He chooses to build energy and shape music through nuance and through subtle and complex shifts," says Halvorson of Fujiwara. "With each new project, he'll make an effort to really get inside the music, understand the intention and find a unique approach."

Fujiwara grew up in Boston and mainly discovered jazz on his own. His first glimpse was a chance hearing of a classic Buddy Rich vs. Max Roach battle; later, he recalls a public school music teacher demonstrating a buzz roll. He cites Roach as his inspiration to play drums and his passion for Roach's music remains. After early drum lessons, Fujiwara studied with the legendary Alan Dawson for almost ten years. "The best

teacher in music and possibly in anything, I've ever had - someone with a real method," he says. Not just concerned with drum technique, Dawson stressed a complete view of how to serve the music, lessons that still inform Fujiwara. "For me, even if I'm playing a complete improvisation or I'm playing something that's more fully orchestrated without solos, I'm always thinking about it as a song," he says. "And to me, the range of what you can do in a song is infinite."

After relocating to New York, Fujiwara performed in the Off-Broadway hit *Stomp* for about five years, touring and locally. He also immersed himself in the creative music scene. "It's nice to be in situations where you have to stay on top of what you're trying to do creatively, because you're surrounded by that energy," he says of NYC.

He frequently works with Bynum, with whom he's played for more than 20 years. The trumpeter's ambitious *Apparent Distance* (Firehouse 12) was released at the end of 2011, with the drummer's contributions paramount to the music's success. But their duo is the most direct reflection of their connection. It's not a free improvisation project; instead, they compose together and separately and recently recorded their third CD for release later this year. The Thirteenth Assembly also provides Fujiwara with a compositional outlet, particularly as the group has grown together and developed their sound. The first release, *(un)sentimental* (Important), showed their potential while *Station Direct* (Important) illustrates their development. "All of the pieces were written specifically for the group and specifically at a time when we all had a sense of what the sound was," Fujiwara says.

He composes with musicians' personalities in mind and will write from piano, computer, drumset or away from instruments. "I would like to throw a little more volatility in there and a potential to get out of your comfort zone," he says. "Talented and creative musicians really make something beautiful out of that." For his new CD, he tried to challenge the players, leaving ambiguity for the band to decipher together. Citing a diversity of influences - family, numerology, saxophonist Henry Threadgill, rapper Talib Kweli and Björk - the music's sophistication signals his maturation as a composer. It will be released May 1st, after a celebratory concert at Cornelia Street Cafe Apr. 27th.

Touring with Red Baraat and Roberts, as well as work with Bynum and The Hook Up, has made 2012 a busy year for Fujiwara thus far. Besides the new group *Thumbscrew*, he'll also record his first completely improvised project with cellist Tomeka Reid and electronic artist Nick Butcher later this spring. "I always feel like I'm just getting started," he says, "in a great way." ❖

For more information, visit tomasfujiwara.com. Fujiwara is at *Le Poisson Rouge* Mar. 10th with Red Baraat, *Cornelia*

Street Café Mar. 11th as part of *Thumbscrew* and *Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center* Mar. 26th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Taylor Ho Bynum/Tomas Fujiwara - *True Events* (482 Music, 2006)
- Tomas Fujiwara & Hook Up - *Actionspeak* (482 Music, 2009)
- Ideal Bread - *Transmit: Vol. 2 of the Music of Steve Lacy* (Cuneiform, 2009)
- Red Baraat - *Chaal Baby* (Sinj, 2010)
- The Thirteenth Assembly - *Station Direct* (Important, 2010)
- Taylor Ho Bynum - *Apparent Distance* (Firehouse 12, 2011)



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