

[Review Pete Robbins]

NEW YORK - When he was about 12 years old, Pete Robbins knew he wanted to learn a wind instrument so he could play in his school band. And he worried that his original choice, the clarinet, simply wasn't cool.

more stories like this So his father - a nonmusician but an avid jazz listener - sat him down on the living room couch in their suburban Andover, Mass., home and served him a sampler platter of musical dishes to help him make his choice.

"He put on a couple of CDs," says Robbins, recalling the moment as a key point on his path toward becoming a critically noticed musician and composer on the jazz scene here. "And he said, 'All right, there's saxophone and trumpet, and two kinds of saxophones, tenor and alto. Ready? Here we go.' "

The exemplars of their instruments that Robbins heard that day were Miles Davis, Dexter Gordon, and Charlie Parker. In Robbins's ears there was no contest: Parker carried the day. He picked up the alto sax and never looked back.

Now Robbins, who makes a home-region visit tonight at the Cambridge YMCA Theatre, is carving out an identity with a modern jazz that steers clear of both the exigencies of swing and the abstraction of the avant-garde.

His new album, "Do the Hate Laugh Shimmy," offers soundscapes with a wide-open feel, sometimes electronically enhanced, featuring a shifting cast of top New York musicians who play with a lot of sympathy and no sense of regimentation.

In the Brooklyn apartment he shares with his fiancée, Robbins, who moved here in 2002 after graduating from the New England Conservatory, says the standard structure of successive solos articulating a theme doesn't suit his creative temperament.

"I see myself as much as a composer as a sax player," he says. "And sometimes I find it a little hard to relate to jazz when it seems to be about how well people can play their instruments and less about the sounds, the form of the song, the flow of the record."

"To me there's a lot [in the music], but if a listener could just let it in and hear that it's detailed, but not have to process every detail, and let the larger picture wash over them, then that would please me."

Both Robbins's generosity as a leader and the room he makes for the establishment of texture are apparent in the opening song, "Fairmount." Only after about two minutes of a brooding, melancholy development by Ben Monder on guitar and Craig Taborn on Fender Rhodes keyboard do Robbins and the rest - a sextet, in this case - come in.

Others sharing time on the record include tenor saxman Sam Sadigursky, guitarist Mike Gamble, trumpeter Jesse Neuman, and two of the most in-demand young drummers of the moment, Dan Weiss and Tyshawn Sorey.

Robbins assembled "Shimmy," which takes its title from a poem by e.e. cummings, like a painter working with a broad palette of sonic possibilities. "The compositions were the focus," he says. "I'd hear them and decide which was in need of a clarinet or in need of some guitar loops. . ."

more stories like this One piece, "Mid-September and the Five Weeks After," is heavily laced with electronic effects, in a zone that Robbins calls "post-rock, post-jazz with no melody." Robbins says when he shopped the record around to labels, ending up on the progressive Barcelona-based Fresh Sound New Talent, some suggested he get rid of the track or move it to the end.

Resistance to the norms is nothing new for Robbins. He recalls a time during his studies at NEC when he became alienated from the jazz canon.

"I was getting disillusioned with the idea of needing to learn jazz standards," he says, "and having to be fluent in this particular - in my view, semi-dated - language in order to get my diploma and be a legitimate jazz artist in the eyes of the pedagogy."

He credits several of his teachers, particularly guitarist Joe Morris, with opening his ears at that point to the great "out" players like Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor, showing him that alternate routes were available and that his rebellion was nothing new.

At the same time, Robbins was studying toward a philosophy degree at Tufts and getting into the likes of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Their ideas didn't directly translate into his music, he says, but they helped shape his creative outlook nonetheless.

"I think when I was reading this stuff, it opened up my thinking to different possibilities," he says, "to different ways of thinking about my own life and my own place in the world. You have to find a moral framework that suits your conscience and you live your life that way. I feel like musically I came to that same conclusion at the same time, and I'm still trying to pursue that."

Recognition from different circles is coming. On tonight's program are three pieces that result from a commission, by Chamber Music America, to rearrange works by an Italian Renaissance composer, Carlo Gesualdo.

It goes to show that just because Robbins still doesn't much care for jazz standards, it doesn't make him afraid to mine musical history.

"I just want to play with great musicians," he says simply, "and play music that feels genuine to me."

Sax man likes to go with the flow

By Siddhartha Mitter
Globe Correspondent / May 16, 2008