



GERRY HEMINGWAY

# Pluralistic Attitude

By Ted Panken

**G**erry Hemingway is a collector with purpose. In addition to teaching percussion, improvisation and composition in the music department of Hochschule Luzern in Switzerland since 2009, the acclaimed drummer is also an obsessive collector and archivist. Which is why, in early January, near the end of a two-week stateside visit undertaken with the intention of selling his New Jersey home and 1913 Steinway B piano, he expressed relief that, after a year's separation, he would soon reunite with his holdings.

"When the job was offered, I told them that moving would be difficult because I've accumulated so much stuff," Hemingway said over dinner in Brooklyn. "It's my resource, and I can't really work without it."

With teaching chops honed from two decades of leading ad hoc master classes and workshops, Hemingway codified a pedagogy during his 2004-'09 tenure at the New School, where he inherited a class called Sound in Time from bassist Mark Dresser. There, Hemingway became an adept lecturer, adding Contemporary Jazz History and World Music History to his teaching portfolio. "These are large lecture classes, and I had to engage the students," he said. "To find out about the Art Ensemble of Chicago or Ayler, or Coltrane, they need to see them, get a real feeling for what went on in the '60s. I got as much footage as possible, did tons of research and accumulated a strong body of work."

Hemingway has spent decades collecting a wide array of sounds and experiences. He explained the circumstances by which he joined the faculty of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, the differences in maturity and purpose between European and American students, and the complexities of connecting his charges to the diverse flavors of the jazz timeline. He observed that, although teaching now occupies

about half his time—after a 30-year stretch devoted almost exclusively to playing—he is currently experiencing an extraordinarily prolific period of performance, composition and recording.

Hemingway sat alongside a bulging knapsack and cymbal case, which he would later lug on the subway to the East Village apartment where he was spending the night. In the morning, he would reconvene with violinist Mark Feldman, pianist Sylvie Courvoisier and bassist Thomas Morgan, with whom he had rehearsed for the previous six hours, to record *Hôtel Du Nord* (released in April by Intakt), a followup to last year's *To Fly To Steal*. He betrayed no signs of fatigue.

"All of us are sensitive to a notion of transparency in music, where all the elements can speak," Hemingway observed. "Mark thinks acoustically, with many leanings—as Sylvie also has—to the nuance of chamber music dynamics or control, which I have a lot of experience with. Sylvie and I have a compatible concept of what I call 'negative space'—how you organize the space between the notes—that forms an interesting tapestry of rhythmic tension. That way of thinking has roots in the traditions of modern classical music, serialized rhythms and things of that nature."

Tropes of abstraction are less prominent on two 2009 studio recordings. On the nine episodic

originals that constitute *Riptide* (Clean Feed)—performed by his current quintet (Ellery Eskelin, tenor saxophone; Oscar Noriega, alto sax and clarinet; Terrence McManus, guitars; Kermit Driscoll, electric bass)—he distills a boutique homebrew from a congeries of stylistic ingredients: postbop, Aylerian freedom, Stockhausenish sound and space rubatos, electronica, pastorales, the blues, reggae, funk. He seasons them with a metrically modulated, global array of beats (there are hints, more implied than in-your-face, of West Africa, Indonesia and New Orleans), much polyphony and constant melodic development. That the feel is suite-like may stem from Hemingway's intention to "weave each musician's sound, their idea, their way of playing not just into the improvising, but into the material itself."

On both *Riptide* and *The Other Parade* (Clean Feed), an earthy recording by BassDrumBone—a collective trio with trombonist Ray Anderson and bassist Mark Helias that has operated, off and on, since 1977—Hemingway propels the flow with an idiosyncratic pulse and precisely executed attack. He tends to eschew a drums-as-orchestra approach, instead favoring minimalist strategies, by which he elaborates rhythmic designs on the drum kit's discrete components.

Released on Auricle (Hemingway's own imprint) is a series of scratch-improvised duos with Eskelin, McManus, *komungo* virtuoso Jin Hi Kim, extended-techniques saxophonist John Butcher and synthesizer player Thomas Lehn. Sometimes augmenting his drums with vibraphone or electronics, Hemingway unfailingly addresses and dialogues with his partners' postulations, extracting maximum juice from core motifs.

He follows more expansive paths on *Affinities* (Intakt), culled from 2010 concerts with pianist Marilyn Crispell. But in Hemingway's view, his summational recording of recent years is *Old Dogs* (2007) (Avant/Mode), on which he and Anthony Braxton, who employed Hemingway and Crispell from 1983 to 1994, engage in four separate, no-roadmap, timed-to-the-hourglass musical conversations.

"It's a heavy piece of listening," said Hemingway, who utilized his "full orchestra"—drums, mallets, vibraphone, marimba, two versions of an electronic setup, percussion odds and ends—for the epic event. "But if you get through the four hours, the experience might give you the largest insight into who I am. We go through a very broad world, and the depth of interaction is profound—we seem to know where the other is going in every nanosecond.

"It also amazes me how things move harmonically between us. Of course I hear rhythm and melodies, but I'm really listening to the pitches and frequencies that everybody is playing, and connecting and interrelating my instrument primarily from that perspective. It seems crazy, because the drums are limited in their pitch production, but I don't see it that way. I'm able to propose and initiate a huge host of pitches by using my hands, or tubes and other devices, or different sticks and pressures. This was always my orientation, but I only recently noticed that I think this way."

There is a geography-is-destiny quality to Hemingway's backstory. It begins in New Haven, Conn., where his family—his father is a banker who, earlier in life, studied composition with Paul Hindemith—had laid firm roots. There, Hemingway, as a self-described "wild and woolly hippie," developed 360-degree interests spanning electronic music and the timeline of jazz drums. In the fall of 1972, Hemingway ran an ad for "a Chick Corea-Keith Jarrett style piano trio." It was answered by pianist Anthony Davis, then a Yale undergraduate, four years his senior.

"I was raving about Leo Smith, Coltrane's *Expression*. Eric Dolphy's *Last Date*," Hemingway recalled. "Anthony was like, 'How did you get on to all this stuff?' That was my way. I was always exploring. I was way ahead of the curve, and I seem to remain there even now."

Davis informed Hemingway that Smith was, in fact, living in New Haven, and made introductions. An unlikely friendship ensued. "I hung out at Leo's house, and we listened to everything together—the Peking Opera, the Burundi beat, Cage and King Oliver, who he was deeply into then,"

Hemingway said. "He was tremendously generous in sharing his thinking. He was experimenting with ideas, and I was helping him experiment."

Parallel influences entered the mix. Hemingway played in Davis' group, Advent, with bassist Wes Brown and trombonist George Lewis of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). Yale faculty member Willie Ruff brought Papa Jo Jones, Willie "The Lion" Smith and Duke Ellington to campus for concerts. Reedmen Dwight Andrews and Oliver Lake and bassists Helias and Dresser were in town. Meanwhile, Hemingway, who attended Berklee College of Music for the fall 1973 semester before opting for the autodidactic path, studied privately in Boston with drum master Alan Dawson, and with members of Wesleyan University's ethnomusicology department, including—on an informal basis—Ed Blackwell.

Hemingway moved to New York in 1977. By then he had thoroughly assimilated the AACM precept that the most efficacious paths to self-definition are composition and solo performance.

"Many things shape you, and one of them is the pure serendipity of the people you meet," Hemingway said. "Until I met Anthony, this badass piano player who also composed, I never really thought about writing music. Then it made perfect sense, even though I didn't know a damn thing about it. Leo was thinking globally, about the relationship and communication between the different traditions. We weren't scholars of the things we were listening to, but we transcribed them, analyzed them, digested them, and found salient points to incorporate into 'your sound,' this somewhat nebulous term. It opened up another option, another way of thinking. My whole life, I've dealt with all kinds of different cultures, and hung out many different ways in many different places. So in the end, yes, I have a pluralistic attitude."

The AACM's example helped Hemingway devise ways to build a viable career within the creative music subculture. "I think that more than almost anywhere else in my life, I can really channel what I feel through what I play," he explained. "When I realized that life is not worth living unless you're engaged in some direct way with what you care most about, I started to ask myself: 'If I want to do this great, how do I make a living? How do I pay the rent?' I took the question seriously. That's partly why pretty immediately I shunned going to schools. I fought to be able to make a living as a musician. It takes tenacity. The AACM guys have tenacity forever."

Other conceptual options emerged during his decade with Braxton, who required band members to sight-read complexly notated scores and develop their improvisations upon the ideas contained therein. Hemingway refined his ideas through the '90s and '00s, writing increasingly ambitious quintet and quartet music for several configurations. Some included Americans (his personnel has included Anderson or Robin Eubanks on trombone, Herb Robertson on trumpet, Don Byron on clarinet, Eskelin on tenor sax-

ophone and Dresser on bass), but Hemingway drew particular inspiration during most of the '90s from an Amsterdam-centric group built around Michael Moore on alto saxophone and clarinet, trombonist Wolter Wierbos and cellist Ernst Reijseger.

"I was attracted by the elastic capability of these musicians," he said. "They tended to bring in the European classical 20th century tradition a bit more than showed up in other places, but with the visceral strain of Ayler and Coltrane, too. We could talk about Wagner and Bechet at the same time. It was all relevant. That broadness of thinking is the mentality that's emerged. When a drum student comes to me, we're going to talk about Xenakis as much as Baby Dodds. We're going to integrate the whole story."

Hemingway moved to Switzerland with the intention of staying. "I stipulated that it needs to be a permanent job," he said in April in New York, where he performed at The Cornelia Street Café with his quintet, and in trios with McManus and Eskelin. Over the foreseeable future, he'll try to maintain equipoise between teaching and breathing new life into various projects, including European units such as the WHO Trio (with pianist Michel Wintsch and bassist Baenz Oester) and bands led by saxophonist Frank Gratkowski and pianist Georg Graewe, as well as his American ensembles.

"I can take the train to do one gig and come back," Hemingway said. "I'm trying to get to New York to perform as much as I can, even though it's almost impossible to earn enough to pay for the plane ticket. But I'm comfortable in European culture, and I feel as at home there as I would here. It works well for me."

Admired by associates for his comprehensive logistical competence and single-minded determination to realize projects, the 56-year-old artist seems unlikely to slacken the pace of his musical production. "Moving through time, you let go of the filigree and begin to get closer to these basic essences that are the most important materials," Hemingway said. "You tend not to be frivolous. You learn how to save. You learn how to finish a story. I guess the cliché is that there's not a whole lot of time left. You want to make sure you get your idea out there."

"I always had to do it myself. This is important work, and the only way it's going to happen is if somebody like me steps up to the plate. It's stressful and exhausting, and sometimes I work a little too hard. But it comes down to the bottom line. I often ask all my students: 'What did you run into recently that blew your mind?' If you don't know, then you're not yet in touch with being in the arts. That's your guide to sift through this mountain of information and get some sense of how to navigate it and eventually formulate who you are within it. That was key for me when I did it alone. Not that I didn't get help from institutions, but I initiated the relationships and did it more or less on a one-on-one basis. That was my way, which really can't be duplicated anymore."

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