

ENCORE

Joel Press

by Katie Bull



"So the feeling I had at Smalls - it reminded me of the 52nd Street clubs: The Onyx, The Yacht Club, Jimmy Ryan's, The Downbeat, The Three Deuces - they were in brownstones, you walked downstairs. And when you go to Smalls you walk downstairs: it's a basement club, a small, intimate, relaxed club. Not a hustling place. Smalls wasn't exactly like 52nd Street, but it's the way it's laid out. And at Smalls people hang out." Thus reminisces saxophonist/clarinetist Joel Press, the creatively insatiable jazz octogenarian who recently returned to New York City. During his decades in Boston, where he relocated to in the '70s, Press conducted jam sessions that became the talk of the New England jazz community, garnering his home in Newton the title of "The Institute". Press is infusing the New York scene with a richly layered sound rooted in tradition. No wonder the next generation of players is lining up for his sets at Smalls: the "Institute" is here!

While in Boston Press led several enduring projects recorded on Cadence Jazz: his quartet, featuring the flinty guitarist Gray Sargent (*Mainstream Extensions*), developed the sonic body of a fine Rioja during their 25-year collaboration (Sargent was scouted and plucked up by Tony Bennett). And a duo and quartet with piano player Kyle Aho (*Untying the Standards* and *How's The Horn Treating You?*) kept firm footing in the canon while exploring nuanced crevices of the standard form's 'out' side. Impetus for the recent move back to Manhattan can be found in the desire to record here and the experience of playing with high-caliber New York City musicians. "The greats are here, people I look up to, people whose records I've purchased. There is seriousness. I want to be stretched," says Press who landed a residency at Smalls through the support of pianist Mike Kanan, longtime friend and collaborator.

Kanan introduced him to pianist Spike Wilner, the club's owner. After sitting in with Wilner, Press received an invitation for the "Masters" set and a residency. Kanan was also instrumental in encouraging Press to move back to New York and compliments Joel, saying that "(he) embodies the qualities that I look for in jazz as a player and a listener: a deep sense of swing, lyricism, adventurousness, love and a beautiful sound. The audiences go crazy for his playing."

Early classical training in clarinet and a Masters in Music from Manhattan School of Music led Press to an appreciation of classical forms and configurations. On a recent Sunday afternoon he was off to hear a string quartet, recognizing its influence on his architectural sense of the 'build' within an improvised melody, phrasing and dynamics. His many decades in jazz put him in the front seats and on the performing stages of the swing, bop, postbop and free jazz eras; right now he is exploring jazz standards that are informed by this formidable legacy. Press' prescient '70s dance compositions for choreographers, including Elizabeth Keen and Erin Martin, were sculpted from recordings that were hand-spliced (playing all instruments and recording overdubs). In the '60s he was married to renowned sculptor and painter June Leaf (he owns 75 of her works). Press credits her patient and meticulous chiseling as inspiration for the pioneer sound-collage techniques that can be heard on *Music from a Passionate Time* (Cadence Jazz, 1969-73). His apartment walls are hung with a fine art collection dominated by abstract expressionism and abstract realism. Art photos by his daughter Maya, whom he raised as a single father, and mixed-media works by his current wife, professional visual artist Louise Farrell, are literally in every corner.

As a teen Press attended afternoon jam sessions at Jimmy Ryan's while underage, nursing a \$1 drink at the bar for hours. He remembers when Lincoln Center was Dewey Square - there he heard Charlie Parker. "On 52nd Street they had all these clubs and all these musicians. It was really incredible, I mean, 52nd Street you had Ben Webster, Art Tatum, Dizzy, Don Byas, Coleman Hawkins, Lester, Stan Getz - everybody. And not just established musicians," Press fondly recalls.

Hangs with the young vocalist Sheila Jordan led to free jazz explorations for them with cellist/vocalist Gwendolyn Watson. He loved "the '60s scene... In one night at the Vanguard you could hear Miles Davis, Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones - with [Lee] Konitz and [Lennie] Tristano in the audience!" His friends then included artists Claes Oldenburg, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko, poet Alan Ginsberg and art critic Lucy R. Lippard. In the early '70s he played in numerous free jazz settings, most notably with trumpeter Bill Dixon. It's clear that what is nearest and dearest to his heart is the spirit of community.

Press names Hawkins as his strongest influence with a quick nod to Webster, both of whom he speaks of with reverence. And as for what he calls "the last chapter" of his life: "I've been moved by all the acceptance, the encouragement. I just want to play with great musicians and I want to get better. I want to play a melody that I've never played. I don't want to play what I know. I'm interested in phrasing, time and feel. Especially dynamics. I don't want to play it safe. I want to take chances." Word is getting around that the music and the hang with Press at Smalls is vibrantly fresh. And it is. His robust and burnished tone is as warm as the man. Consummate listening manifests itself in the synchronous ease Press shares with his current quartet: they are, simply, one of the meanest tickets in town. ❖

For more information, visit joelpress.com. Press is at Smalls Dec. 20th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Joel Press - *Music from a Passionate Time* (Cadence Jazz, 1969-73)
- Joel Press/Harvey Diamond - *Duo Concert at Harvard University* (Lulu, 1998)
- Joel Press Quartet (feat. Gray Sargent) - *Mainstream Extensions* (Cadence Jazz, 2000)
- Joel Press Quartet - *How's the Horn Treating You?* (Cadence Jazz, 2004)
- Joel Press/Kyle Aho - *Untying the Standard* (Cadence Jazz, 2005-6)
- Joel Press - *The Polish Connection* (Lulu, 2010)