



Dan Tepfer

by Ken Dryden

Though he only turned 30 earlier this year, Dan Tepfer already has an impressive résumé. The pianist has played duo gigs with Lee Konitz, Paul Motian and Gary Peacock, recorded acclaimed CDs in duo, trio and solo settings and won several jazz piano competitions. He has a fascinating background: an American raised in Paris. "My mom is an opera singer, so music was always around the house. My granddad, Chuck Ruff, was a jazz pianist in Eugene, Oregon. My dad's a biologist, which probably explains why I got into science, too. I started reading books about astrophysics when I was a teenager. I still find the subject fascinating."

Music came first, Tepfer recalled, "I started studying classical piano at six. I went through the Paris conservatory system, but also started improvising and never really thought of myself as a classical pianist. I played a lot of boogie-woogie - I was into James P. Johnson and Jerry Lee Lewis. I taught myself jazz: I put together a trio in high school and played with local French guys in my teens."

Tepfer studied astrophysics at the University of Edinburgh, though his interest in music remained. "I was genuinely passionate about astrophysics: it's the science that deals with the biggest things we can possibly imagine, the origin of the universe, the nature of time. But I was playing gigs on the jazz scene there two or three times a week and I realized that music was where my heart really was."

After graduating, Tepfer switched to a Masters in Music at the New England Conservatory (NEC). "Danilo Perez, Bob Brookmeyer, Charlie Banacos, Jerry Bergonzi, Bob Moses were all there. I found that they had an open-minded curriculum that allowed you to check out other forms of music and integrate them into your work. I studied composition with Brookmeyer - it was almost like a meta-deconstruction of what composing is. He would break things down to their bare essentials."

Tepfer credits additional artists with helping his development. "Fred Hersch has been a great mentor to me, starting when I was at NEC and I would take the bus down to New York to take lessons with him. He helped me get a foothold in the city by referring me for some great gigs when I first moved here." In Paris, Tepfer also got to know French piano icon Martial Solal. "I only took a few lessons with him; he's been more of a mentor than a teacher. I still go to his house to play for him and talk about music." One of his greatest learning experiences has been working with the demanding Lee Konitz. "I was listening to Lee's duo CD with Martial (*Star Eyes, Hamburg 1983, hatOLOGY*) right after I moved to New York and had a sudden urge to play with him. I asked Martial for an introduction. I went over to Lee's house; we played and hit it off right away. He invited me to sit in with him at The Jazz Gallery, then we did a few duo gigs. We've ended up playing quite a bit over the last five years around the world. Every gig with him is

absolutely different. Every time we're feeling our way, because we want to be precisely connected at that exact moment and not just recreating some memory of where the music might have been last time."

Asked about his composing method, Tepfer explained, "I've gotten a lot of perspective on writing in the last few years. I wrote and orchestrated a piano concerto in 2010, which is a very labor-intensive process, since you're writing out so many notes for the orchestra. I sometimes used to overwrite my jazz compositions; I was confusing jazz writing with classical writing. Jazz writing is a very minimalist framework, like the difference between writing a novel and a poem. There's no point in playing with master improvisers if you're going to micromanage them: the goal is to guide them into a vibe and let them work their magic. Nowadays, my jazz writing process is pretty quick."

The pianist has several recordings in the works or recently completed. A duo led by bassist Gary Peacock is scheduled for tracking in December. There are two Sunnyside releases due next year. "I just made a new trio record [after three previous trio albums: *Five Pedals Deep*, with Thomas Morgan and Ted Poor, and *OXYGEN and Before the Storm*, both with Jorge Roeder and Richie Barshay], which will be out in January. And I have an ongoing collaboration with [saxist] Ben Wendel; we're excited about the duo record we made this summer. It's coming out in March."

Tepfer's latest recording is *Goldberg Variations / Variations*, also on Sunnyside. "I discovered the 'Goldberg Variations' in junior high school; I thought it was some of the most beautiful music I'd heard. I played a lot of Bach growing up, but I only bought a score of the Goldbergs after I got to NEC in 2003. I realized I could learn the first few variations, so I kept moving on. As I learned them, it felt natural for me to grab ideas and improvise with them. It was just something I did for fun until I was on a solo tour of the Czech Republic about four years ago, doing free improvisations along the line of my record *Twelve Improvisations in Twelve Keys*. I decided to play a few of the 'Goldberg Variations' one night and improvise on them. The audience reacted to it and I realized it would be a fun thing to keep doing."

Over the last four years I've gotten more serious about playing the Goldbergs better and the project has evolved into a more rigorous framework where I play all 30 variations and improvise off of each one." Tepfer's solo performance this month at Greenwich House will be somewhat of a milestone for him: "This will be my first performance of the Goldberg Variations where I do all 30 of them, with improvisations, live. It'll be around 80 minutes of playing. I'm excited about the challenge." ❖

For more information, visit dantepfer.com. Tepfer plays solo at Greenwich House Music School Sep. 14th, ShapeShifter Lab Sep. 17th, Smalls Sep. 24th with Alexis Cuadrado and

Birdland Sep. 25th-29th as part of a Bud Powell Tribute. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- George Schuller - *Life's Little Dramas* (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2008)
- Lee Konitz/Dan Tepfer - *Duos with Lee* (Sunnyside, 2008-09)
- Rob Garcia 4 - *Perennial* (Brooklyn Jazz Underground Records, 2009)
- Billy Hart - *Sixty-Eight* (SteepleChase, 2009)
- Dan Tepfer - *Five Pedals Deep* (Sunnyside, 2010)
- Dan Tepfer - *Goldberg Variations / Variations* (Sunnyside, 2011)

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