

JD Allen

The Matador

By Allen Morrison Photo by Adam McCullough

Here's how a performance by the JD Allen Trio starts: Two very serious young men in white shirts, dark ties and jackets take their places behind the drums and double bass. The leader and tenor saxophonist, similarly attired and as unsmiling as a toreador about to do battle in the bullring, steps up to the mic. He blows a brief, simple, bracingly modern melody—announcing his arrival, in effect. As he steps away from the mic, all hell breaks loose—a disciplined explosion of drums and arco bass that begins at a fever pitch and grows from there. By the time JD Allen comes back into the spotlight to repeat the opening statement, there is a drama and ferocity to this music that has spread from the stage to the audience. He holds the crowd as if in his fist.

The JD Allen Trio, with Gregg August on bass and Rudy Royston on drums, has one of the most urgent, furious, muscular sounds in jazz today. Something of a high-wire act—like that of Phillippe Petit, about whom Allen wrote a song on a recent album—the trio plays Allen's open compositions almost exclusively. Most of them leave large amounts of unscripted space for August and Royston, both classically trained composers in their own right, to improvise.

In performance and on its four albums, the trio is inventive and telepathic. As DownBeat's Frank Alkyer said in his review of the trio's recent album, *The Matador And The Bull* (Savant), Allen and company make music that's "searching, searing and personal."

Outside the context of his trio, Allen displayed flexibility and deep understanding of older jazz idioms at two unusual gigs in New York recently. The first was "Jazz & Colors," an outdoor event in Central Park at which 30 jazz groups, dispersed at various locations around the massive park, played the same two sets

of standards with New York and autumnal themes. Hearing this committed modernist have his way with tunes like "Manhattan" and "Autumn In New York" revealed an easy mastery of more traditional song forms—lyrical, melodic and sweet-toned. It sounded almost too easy for him.

Allen's soloing gifts were even more evident at shows he played the following weekend as a guest artist during the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra's "The Best of Blue Note Records" tribute concert. There, trombonist/arranger Vincent Gardner remarked on Allen's beautiful timbre and called him "a pleasure to play with."

Born and raised in Detroit, the 39-year-old Allen knew early on that he wanted to be a jazz musician, studying with fellow Motor City resident James Carter and gigging with his friend, drummer Ali Jackson. He started college at Hampton University on a marching-band scholarship, coming to New York to attend Betty Carter's "Jazz Ahead" program for promising jazz students. Later he left

school altogether when Carter hired him to play tenor with her band. After moving to New York in the 1990s, he spent two decades developing his own sound.

"JD always had a very commanding sound," says bassist Eric Revis, a longtime friend since their apprenticeship with Carter. "He was and still is one of the few guys who can truly play a ballad. He embodies what a tenor saxophone is supposed to be in jazz. He is also a true conceptualist, with a very wide command of jazz lineage and its trajectory."

If Allen's sound is easily identifiable today, it's due in part to his unique voice as a composer. For JD Allen, composition is king. He favors short-form jazz, tunes of 3–5 minutes, as illustrated by the 12 tracks of all-original material on *The Matador And The Bull*.

DownBeat caught up with Allen on the Sunday after those concerts, over lunch at the Brooklyn Museum, near his home. Despite the fierce demeanor he adopts in some of his publicity photos, he is open and friendly, laughing often and heartily.



JD Allen performing at the "Jazz & Colors" event in New York's Central Park on Nov. 10

What did it mean to you to be asked to be a guest soloist at Jazz at Lincoln Center?

That was a shock. When I got the call, I couldn't believe it. Although I kinda know the guys in the band, being in New York; and I grew up with Ali Jackson, the drummer, but I was so far removed from that [scene]. Even when I was in the dressing room, I kept saying to myself, "Man, what the hell am I doing here?" They really took care of me, and I felt very at home. But to be invited there was strange. I always thought of myself as a "wild" player, in a sense.

In what way?

Well, [The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra] is such a well-oiled machine. It's very precise. And I'm so very un-precise [laughs]. I kinda like not knowing what's gonna happen. I normally don't go for this type of [repertory] stuff, and I tend to shy away from saxophone tunes. That situation is great. I admire it, and I know how important it is for them to hold up the banner. But that is not my objective at all, to do tributes to anyone other than trying to be honest to JD Allen and try to find what the hell I've got to say.

Before the JLCO show, you said it would be a challenge to play this gig and not sound like you were imitating great Blue Note tenors like Joe Henderson and Sonny Rollins.

You gotta listen to the music. If it comes naturally, if I feel like I could hear Dexter Gordon on this, then, OK, he's gonna come out. But that's not my objective. I think that's why Betty Carter was so adamant about us writing our own music—we had to really get into composing. It was her belief that was the way to get to yourself.

I love the audience, and I appreciate anybody who comes out to hear me. But at a certain point, [an artist] has to say, you know, I don't give a damn about who's hearing me—I have to be honest. I'm not gonna flash and dazzle people—although I could—for the sake of doing acrobatics, and people will say, "Wow, he was all over the horn." People like that, they love glitter. But can you walk away remembering what was played? Did it touch you in some way? You know, stories are not usually told very fast.

At the Lincoln Center concert, Sherman Irby's solo on Lou Donaldson's "Blues Walk"—talk about not trying to dazzle with flash or acrobatics. He had the audience eating out of the palm of his hand.

Yes, that was complete mastery. I was backstage checking it out. Hey, contortionists have a heart also; they love somebody, they hate somebody. And there's beauty in that. But a ballerina—there's grace in the move of an arm or a leg. They're both beautiful. Art is beautiful—the sun is not better than the moon. I'll tell you, when you write your own love letters, and people understand it, they dig that shit. I mean, you can recite Shakespeare, and people dig that, too, and maybe they'll say, "Wow, you seem like a learned man." But when it comes from the self—there's a little

more. I really like to be in charge of this shit, personally [laughs]. I love to be the director.

What music did you hear growing up, and what influenced you?

In my household, we weren't allowed to play hip-hop. My father didn't want us listening to that.

Did that make it more attractive to you?

No! I didn't know what the hell was going on—I totally missed out on it. I was listening to Sly Stone and maybe a little Prince, Marvin Gaye. That was some great stuff! But [my father] didn't like the content of rap. He was like, "Don't play that shit in my house." He didn't see the art in it. Now that I'm older, I see the art in it. Taking the King's language and swinging it is hip. How direct can you get? You can't get any more direct than talking to a person.

I first got really into jazz through Albert

Ayler—I kinda came in backwards. I had started at 9 with clarinet, then alto saxophone, then tenor. I started listening to [jazz] when I was about 14. I guess the first guy I heard was Sonny Rollins, but by the time I met James [Carter], I was listening to Frank Lowe, Albert Ayler.

Avant-garde stuff.

But the thing was, the guys who were teaching me said, "We want the feeling. Don't worry so much about the notes." And at that time for me, that was great. I could put all this energy and anger I had into this horn. I finally felt like I could speak. And then I got a recording of Ornette Coleman's *The Shape Of Jazz To Come*. I had read about him and how "out" he was. And when I listened to it, I said, "Man, this isn't 'out,' this doesn't sound like Albert Ayler!" I couldn't figure it out—that he could do it with actual notes.

Good Chemistry

In 2006, the Juilliard-trained bassist Gregg August was playing a regular Thursday gig at Fat Cat—a New York jazz club, pool hall and hangout that encourages jazz musicians to try out new material. August had recently become acquainted with an up-and-coming tenor saxophonist named JD Allen who lived near him in Brooklyn and often showed up at the same sessions. He invited Allen to join his experimental Thursday-night jam.

"We started playing and realized that we had good chemistry together," August recalled. "He mentioned he had trio music that he wanted to try out, but he was looking for a drummer. Around the same time, I had met [drummer] Rudy Royston at Fat Cat. He came up to me at the break and said, 'I like your music and would love to play with you.' Usually that means a guy can't really play. But I kept seeing him everywhere, at jam sessions at Smoke and other clubs, and I saw that, man, this guy can really play." August recommended him to Allen, and the trio formed: "Rudy and JD came over to my house and we jammed, and it was great—like we had always played together."

August is a multi-dimensional musician and composer who has established himself as a classical bassist with the Brooklyn Philharmonic as well as in Latin jazz, playing regularly with Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra. August's latest album as a leader is the quartet/sextet project *Four By Six* (Iacocca), which includes Allen and Royston on the sextet tunes.

Over the years, August has played with some saxophone titans, including Ornette Coleman and James Moody.



JD Allen (left) and Gregg August of the JD Allen Trio

What's special to him about Allen?

"JD has a personal, beautiful sound, and he knows how to use it," the bassist explained. "He doesn't always have to play a lot of notes. You fall in love with the color that he produces on the horn."

August is equally pleased to be working with Royston: "Rudy tunes the snare drum really high, which allows the bass sound to come through. His entire sound, from the highs to the lows—the way he hits the drums and tunes them—allows my bass sound to emerge. He leaves sonic room for me. I've played with other drummers with JD, but it's not the same."

Plus, August appreciates the saxophone/bass/drums trio format. "A lot of it is the freedom you get," he said. "If you bring in a piano player, then you're kind of locked into what the piano player's laying down. In a lot of our music, even though there's a specific chord structure, JD still has the freedom to go outside it." —Allen Morrison

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Did Ornette sound conservative to you?

He sounded very conservative. He sounded “in” as hell to me [laughs]. Which he is, when you really look at him. He plays forms that are very intelligent. Then Wynton’s *Black Codes* album came out. And I saw these young guys playing jazz. And that made me want to investigate a little deeper. So I progressed from Albert Ayler to Coleman Hawkins.

It’s hard for me to imagine a 14-year-old kid digging Albert Ayler.

Yeah, that was the thing in Detroit at that time. It

was a time when we would have jam sessions with the avant garde and bebop all in one. I met [drummer] Ali Jackson around this time. Ali had a brother who played trumpet. He comes from a musical family. We formed a group called Legacy—we were playing music and started working at around 15 years old. And I met Wynton and Branford around this time, too.

Where did you meet Wynton Marsalis?

He would come to Detroit all the time and give clinics and concerts. He would come over to Ali’s house and play basketball. We were these

little scruffy kids and would gather around him. I was always the quiet one. He would give master classes and tell us what we should be listening to. [He and Branford] were young jazz musicians doing what we wanted to do, so we looked up to that. And it was a cool thing to be a musician.

You’ve said that Dexter Gordon was a big influence. What did you like about Gordon’s playing?

Well, first of all, his sound. His tone and his precise ideas—no fluff. His playing is very logical, intelligent. And nothing to hide. Very direct.

The same’s been said of you.

Oh, I hope so. That is my goal. I imagine that, if I was a saxophone being played by Dexter Gordon, I would think, “I have nothing to hide, I have a beautiful sound and I’m gonna use it.” Kinda like Muhammad Ali when he got older: He couldn’t move as fast, but you really got to see the intelligence of his boxing. He was a master of the mental part. That’s Dexter Gordon for me.

Tell me about Betty Carter.

Betty Carter was my school. She took me on the road; I was about 20. We couldn’t even listen to other [music]. She didn’t want that. We couldn’t play standards. We had to write our own stuff. She didn’t want to hear anybody she knew. She was looking for original compositions. When I was in the band, we would play originals, but she wanted you to know the standards also.

Did you feel you had made the big time?

Not really. I used to feel so bad after the job. I always thought I was gonna get fired any minute.

Why?

Because I wasn’t ready. I probably knew two scales. I probably played her whole book by ear.

What types of music, other than jazz, do you listen to? Do you learn anything useful from them?

I do. I listen to Charles Ives, Shostakovich, Prokofiev. Sometimes I check out rap, see what’s going on on the radio—Lupe Fiasco, Kanye West. What I learned from other music is that jazz recordings have a tendency to be too long. That’s probably why people won’t take the time to listen. If you go to the gig, that’s one thing. But to sit down and listen [to a record]—people don’t do that anymore. So you have to get this shit [done] in 4 minutes, 5 tops.

In the jazz world, who are your current favorites?

Bill McHenry—his music is very poetic. Marcus Strickland. Chris Potter, because I know that he’s a big influence for a lot of young musicians. But if everybody’s going in that direction, then I gotta figure out how to go left. Grant Stewart, Stacy Dillard. I listen to Robert Glasper’s music. I’m not one to jump on the bandwagon, but if you don’t know what the bandwagon looks like,

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how are you gonna know what kind of car you're gonna drive so you can be a little different?

The titles of your albums—*In Search Of JD Allen*, *I Am I Am*, and *Victory!*—suggest a kind of mission to stake out your unique identity. Do you feel that you're there yet?

I feel like I'm closer. I don't think I'm "there." I'm healthier mentally and more together. I think I'm at the point where I'm being honest with myself.

Your music has a serious, spiritual element to it. Is that your intention?

I think that's my gift. I play my best when I'm playing about something [that] has a personal meaning to me. I'm not a technician; I won't lay claim to being a great musician. These are personal stories for me. "Victory" was about overcoming some very difficult situations, against all odds, with the help of God. It is a spiritual tune.

How do you create a new tune for the trio? You bring a tune to them ...

... and I don't tell 'em what to do. I give it to them, and I might say, "Here's what I'm thinking." But in this last recording, we did not do, like, tunes. We played a gig in the studio. Set one, straight through. Set two, straight through. I just played all damn day, the same tunes, until they found what they could add.

On *Matador* and your other CDs, I hear Middle Eastern motifs, a hint of Arabic or Hebraic scales. Where does that come from?

It's deliberate, but I don't understand why I'm fascinated with it. It's like playing a blues scale, but not a blues scale—I hear that as another brother's blues.

Why the interest in bullfighting? What made you want to do an album with that theme?

Sometimes when I play, I think of myself as a matador, honestly. I was thinking about mortality, man. I got into watching bullfights on YouTube. And I felt bad about it—I'm not into the blood sport of it. But I'm into it—it's kind of like man against himself. I think that's what that album is about. It's like you have a direction that you can go in that's a good direction; then you have your wild side. And I think every man should come to a point where he doesn't do the things he used to do. Because they aren't good for him and aren't taking him to a better life and better direction. So he has to destroy that.

So you see it as a metaphor for your life?

I do. And I no longer want to be in this matador and bull situation. I guess because I'm 39 now, there comes this stage when you look back and you look ahead—that was the matador and the bull for me.

You said in a radio interview three years ago that you were planning a quartet album of standards with a piano.

I never did it, because these damn trio songs

would not stop coming to me. Now I want the piano. I have an idea of how I want to use it. I want something shocking, more along the lines of contemporary classical. But I also want the urban, gritty side of the trio, and I want to marry these two together. I've been listening to [composer Arnold] Schoenberg and those guys. The destruction of triadic music—I want to investigate that in a small group.

What role would the piano play?

The piano is the only thing that can help me do that. It's great for creating dissonance. So that's

my goal with the next album—to get to that kind of harmony in a small group setting—and it swings. I'm excited about this, and afraid at the same time. And I think that if I have this harmony with a conflict in it, and I have a beautiful melody on top of it—beautiful and strong and simple—it probably can work.

Do you know who the pianist will be?

Eldar [Djanguirov]. He's so bad, he's got one name [laughs]. He has a classical sensibility, and he can swing, too. I recorded with him on Ali Jackson's record, and we felt a connection. He's the guy. **DB**

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