



CRAIG HANDY

Serious FUN

The masterful tenor player, a first-call sideman, steps into the spotlight with a new album that rediscovers the joys of “danceable jazz.”

“THIS HAS BEEN A TEST of my willpower,”

Craig Handy says, talking about the 40-day cleanse he recently finished. “I had been eating a lot of sweets. My joints were starting to hurt, and my energy level was spiking and fluctuating a lot.” He gave up refined sugar, refined flour and alcohol, and then meat. Afterward he decided to remain a vegetarian.

The fast is now history. He describes its rigors as he sips tamarind water and dips the occasional tortilla chip into a bowl of guacamole at his favorite Mexican restaurant, on the waterfront near his home in Weehawken, N.J. The restaurant overlooks a billion-dollar view of the Manhattan skyline, the city where Handy’s jazz dreams started to come true when he moved there in 1986 from his native Oakland, Calif., by way of the University of North Texas.

The 51-year-old Handy, lean and dashing with a close-cropped beard, has been weaning himself off a lot of things lately—both dietary and musical—“to get into the correct head space,” he says, the better to concentrate on touring and promoting what may be the most important musical statement of his career: *Craig Handy & 2nd Line Smith*, on Sony’s newly revived OKeh label. It is his first album as a leader in 13 years.

He’ll have to turn down some of his current gigs to do so: recording and touring with the all-star group The Cookers, of which he is a charter member; and playing with the Mingus Big Band, which he led for several years. He is now, finally, the main attraction, with a new group, new recording contract and plans for a spring/summer tour.

The album is a radical change of pace for Handy—a move from rigorous, straightahead post-bop to infectious, funky jazz with a New Orleans second-line beat. “I got tired of looking at guys with

these dour, sour looks on their faces and always very serious,” he says. “Introspective is OK, but people really do respond to somebody who’s having a good time. It comes down to something very simple for me: I want to share the joy that I’m having on the bandstand.”

A tenor saxophone prodigy and master technician with a confident, warm tone and a gift for melody, Handy has been a sought-after sideman almost since the day he arrived in New York, working with an impressive roster of jazz luminaries over the years, including Art Blakey, Roy Haynes, Betty Carter, Herbie Hancock, John Scofield, Conrad Herwig and Dee Dee Bridgewater (see sidebar on page 44). His passionate playing with the Mingus orchestra prompted Bill Cosby to hire him to score music and play for the TV series *The Cosby Show* in 1989 and, later, *The Cosby Mysteries*. He also appeared in Robert Altman’s 1996 film, *Kansas City*, playing the role of a young Coleman Hawkins and participating in a tenor duel with Joshua Redman, portraying Lester Young, in musical sequences that were more memorable than the film’s relatively thin plot.

Handy has issued ambitious, forward-leaning albums as a leader, debuting with 1992’s *Split Second Timing* with a quartet, and following up two years later with the mostly piano-less *Three For All + One*, both on the Arabesque label. Two more albums followed in the decade.

With that kind of resume, Handy should be better known. He acknowledges at least one career mistake: He turned down a cover story in *DownBeat* in the early ’90s. “I was playing at the Village Vanguard with Victor Lewis, Geoff Keezer and Ray Drummond, and *DownBeat* wanted to do a feature on me. And I said, ‘Let’s wait till we have a record out.’ I heard the word ‘cover’ and got scared. I felt like the soup wasn’t ready yet. This was pre-Redman, pre-James Carter. I might have been positioned in the

marketplace as the next ... whatever. I would gladly go back and say yes now.”

Handy was raised in Oakland to music-loving parents. “My father is the reason I’m playing music today,” he says. “He encouraged me to play. He had a very big music collection—not just jazz, but classical, Latin, popular music, soul, folk music. I was listening to Miles and Duke when I was in my mother’s womb. I could sing Miles’ solo on ‘So What’ when I was 2 years old. My father and I shared that. That was our bond.”

He took piano lessons at age 8, then he dabbled with the guitar and trombone. But his world changed when he discovered the sound of the saxophone. “I was riding in the car with my mother, and Dexter Gordon came on the radio. I don’t know what song he was playing, but it hit me deep in my chest, and I said to my mom, ‘That’s what I want.’” He was 11. On his next birthday, he came home from school and found a package waiting for him—an alto sax. “I went to my room, and they didn’t see me for two weeks. I pretty much figured it out on my own. Which brings up an interesting thought: I’m self-taught. I never think about that.”

Handy fell in love with the instrument and practiced on his own. “I transcribed a lot of solos—Dexter, Sonny, Joe Hen.” He attended the exceptional jazz program at Berkeley High School (other noted alumni include David Murray, Joshua Redman, Peter Apfelbaum and Benny Green). He won a Charlie Parker Scholarship to the University of North Texas, where he spent two-and-a-half years

By Allen Morrison
Photo by Vincent Soyez

and met trumpeter David Weiss, a lifelong friend and founder of The Cookers.

At North Texas, Handy majored in psychology. "I was 18 and thought I knew everything," he says. Still, he played in the school's top ensemble, the One O'Clock Lab Band, and practiced every day. Even though he had wanted to be a professional musician since he first heard Gordon, "I just didn't know you could make a living at it," he says. "At the time, I thought it was something that happened in a period before I was born and that it had stopped. I loved going to hear Dexter and Jimmy Smith at [the San Francisco venue] Keystone Corner. ... But I thought that those guys were *it*, and that after they died there wouldn't be any more."

He decided he needed to move to New York. When Weiss offered him a place to live in Queens, he jumped. For a couple of weeks he played on the street. His big break came while visiting his parents in Oakland. He got a call from saxophonist Ralph Moore, whom he had befriended at a Dallas jazz club when Moore was passing through. "Ralph said, 'You should get back here as soon as possible because Roy Haynes is looking for you.' I thought, 'How the fuck does Roy Haynes know about me?'"

Moore, who had heard Handy play in Texas, was leaving the tenor chair with Haynes to join trumpeter Freddie Hubbard's group; he recommended Handy to replace him. "So he says, 'You want to do it or not?' I said, 'I'll be right there!'" He was on a plane the next day. After that, one thing led to another—a European tour with Haynes and invitations to join Mingus Dynasty and pianist Abdullah Ibrahim's group.

Handy is especially proud of his three years as a member of Hancock's quartet. "I grew up listening to Wayne Shorter with Herbie, then George Coleman with Herbie, then Dexter with Herbie," he says. "I was pinching myself." Hancock's solos took the group and the audience "on a trip to another galaxy," as Handy remembers it. "Then the bus pulled back in at 42nd Street, Port Authority, and I'm supposed to get on and take the train somewhere. And I'm like, 'What song are we playing?'" Hancock would sometimes restate the head to reorient the dazzled Handy.

Craig Handy & 2nd Line Smith has been gestating for 25 years, Handy says. In the liner notes, the saxophonist writes that the project "is the Jimmy Smith Songbook reimagined as a high-energy blend of a contemporary jazz quintet and second-line brass band. The sound is rooted in tradition and innovation."

After years of playing in the serious world of hardcore, straight-ahead jazz, it's also a kind of musical cleanse for Handy. The project includes his core band members, the reliably funky Kyle Koehler on Hammond B-3 and Matt Chertkoff on guitar, and features Clark Gayton, a sousaphonist who brings the Crescent City brass band funk. Bridgewater, Wynton Marsalis and blues singer-guitarist Clarence Spady make guest appearances. The album's crucial element, however, is a bullpen of three superb drummers schooled in the New Orleans style: Jason Marsalis, Herlin Riley and Ali Jackson Jr.

Jackson, who has known and worked with Handy over the last decade, says the recording "evokes a sense of party jam. ... Craig brings a debonair sound to this hot bed of groove. It's a cool sound with hot notes. Which makes me want to get deeper in the grooves I'm laying down."

Lady Dees and the Handy-Man

Craig Handy cites vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, with whom he played for more than three years, as a major inspiration for *Craig Handy & Second-Line Smith*, on which she makes a guest appearance, singing "On The Sunny Side Of The Street." Both the singer and the saxophonist spoke to DownBeat about their mutual admiration.

Handy remembers his first gig with Bridgewater at San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts. "During the break between sets, Dee Dee said to me, 'Do you want to play the rest of this gig? I didn't hire you to tiptoe around me—you better *bring it!*'" he says. "She was furious, ready to fire me right then and there. Apparently I was pussy-footing around her, not engaging enough. She had told me via phone, previous to the gig, 'Think of me as another horn player in the band. I want you to get in there and play with me. Don't think of me as a singer.' So, after that incident, I knew she wasn't bullshitting."

"In three years I never heard her phrase the melody the same way. She has amazing ears, she is not afraid to try something new, or break away from a sure formula for success. She challenged everyone in the band to take it to another place, every song, every night. She would revel in the band's diversity and avant forays. I love her. And she's extremely generous when it comes to sharing the stage. As long as you are doing something that is making a genuine contribution to the performance, she will give you all the latitude you desire. I'm a big fan. In Lady Dees I trust."

Bridgewater describes Handy as "extraordinarily" talented. "He's been a little bit unsung in terms of his talent," she says. "He's extremely melodic, very lyrical, with a beautiful tone. But he can also go 'outside' and be free. He played totally different with the Mingus band. He's a very intelligent player. Wonderful taste. He knows when to play out, when to hold back. He can get funky; he can put a gospel tinge on a solo. He can work people into a frenzy, so that by the end of a solo, people are screaming."

"He was a little uptight in the beginning," she recalls. "The first concert we did, he came unprepared; he hadn't really listened to the music. At intermission, I took him to task. I told him, 'You thought you were just gonna play with some singer and you could wing your way through.' I said, 'If you don't get back out there and play what you're supposed to be playing, I'm docking you.' I ended up docking him. I did. I love him—but I believe in tough love!"

"He's very charming and intelligent; and he loves to converse. But he was always late. When we'd get ready to leave, we were always waiting on Craig Handy. He'd come running and he'd have bags in his hand—he'd decided to go shopping. I had to tell him, 'We only have one diva in this band—that's me.' He did believe in practicing, though. Very disciplined about his music."

"I really grew to love him. When I'd introduce him, I'd say, 'This is my Handy-man. Anything I need, he can fix it!' He was quite a lady's man—quite a charmer. He was eye candy for women—big, strapping dude. So I had fun playing with him, playing into the fact that he was good-looking, hamming it up. And he really got in on the act."

"One night in Albany, I think it was, we were doing 'Fine And Mellow,' and he played a solo that was so funky, and so sensual, that at the end of the song—and you know I'm a real ham—I got down on the floor, and I grabbed his leg. You know, like you see in those old movies in France, where the man wears the beret, and the woman has the tight skirt with the slit, and he's dragging her across the floor. I grabbed a hold of that leg, because he's got those big old legs, and he sure did pull me across the floor—and people were going crazy." —Allen Morrison

It may sound like a far cry from the angular, sometimes knotty post-bop he had been playing, but Handy points out that contemporary jazz is totally informed by New Orleans music. "It's a continuum," he says. "It's not one or the other. For me to relate to either one, I have to be able to understand where it came from. Doing so has opened up an enormous palette for me to paint with." And indeed, as melodic and swinging as he plays it on this album, one hears the harmonic sophistication of his former work just under the surface of the organ-trio groove and second-line rhythms.

"I wanted this music to be accessible for everybody. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in jazz to understand it. I don't want it to be like the secret-handshake band where everything is in code. For years I've tried to figure out, How do you get people to dance and enjoy the music while still dropping some code on them? We're still bringing the tradition, [but] we're saying, 'There's also a lot of interesting stuff in here that, if you're listening carefully, you might hear.' At the same time, if you're only listening on [a more superficial] level, it should be something that you can groove to and have a good time with."



DEE DEE BRIDGEWATER
PHOTOGRAPH BY R.R. JONES

He credits his stint as a sideman with Bridgewater (from 2009–'12, filling a chair vacated by James Carter) for inspiring him to loosen up on stage enough to make this exuberant music. “Working with Dee Dee taught me that it’s OK to smile and have a good time on stage, and it’s OK to be yourself and include the audience in on everything that’s going on. I used to have so much fun with Herbie. And the same with Dee Dee. Why not put that front and center?”

For a modern jazz player like Handy, the album is radically different in another way: It’s all danceable, which means no tricky time signatures or sudden stops. It’s got one foot in the past and one foot in the present—what’s been called “jazz/funk” or “soul-jazz,” but played with more than the occasional hat-tip to modalism and other more progressive styles.

He explains, “I have a lot of roots in different kinds of soul and r&b. That’s my shit. The tricky times and odd meters are great, and that can be fun, too. But, to me the pendulum had swung too far over in that direction for too long. It’s time to bring it back down to earth, where people can feel it.

“This is like a heartbeat. The heartbeat doesn’t do tricky rhythms. It’s regular. If it does tricky rhythms, you end up in an ambulance. There might be other pyrotechnics along the way, but [the beat is] the foundation. You have to lay that groove down.”

The album could simply have been an homage to Jimmy Smith. So why did he decide to reinterpret this material in the style of New Orleans second-line?

“Well, ‘High-Heel Sneakers’ and ‘The Cat,’ two of his biggest hits, have modified New Orleans street beats. Why were they more popular than, say, Stanley Turrentine’s ‘Minor Chant’ [recorded with Smith]? It’s the groove. To do that you need a New Orleans drummer on board. When I hear Herlin Riley or Ali Jackson or Jason Marsalis playing it—it sounds right. The drums are the key.”

The album began to take shape three years ago, when Handy, Koehler, Chertkoff and various drummers began trying out the organ-quartet format at some low-profile gigs around Manhattan. “I love that sound—who doesn’t love a great organ groove?” he says. At a restaurant on 57th Street the sound was “greasy, fat and juicy,” and they found their groove. “Pretty soon the whole room is buzzing—they’re throwing chicken wings at the bandstand, barbecue sauce is flying around.”

After five gigs, he thought the vibe was just right. But he also realized that it was familiar territory: “Everybody has done this before—a straightahead jazz organ record. Jimmy Smith and Grant Green—it’s not gonna get any better than that.” Then came the idea to bring some New Orleans into it—“to turn it back in the direction of where it came from,” he says. “We had taken the music out of its environment and put it in a glass bubble. It’s shiny and nice to look at—but you put it back in the swamp where it came from. In order to get the flavor just right, it’s got to be the right temperature. And New York is cold. And so is Boston and Chicago. But New Orleans has the right temperature.”

Handy isn’t shy about assessing the current state of contemporary jazz: “It seems to ... lack the ability to inspire people. The way the rhythm section is interacting now—it’s definitely being over-thought by the people who are playing it. Look,” he muses, “I’m not trying to tell the world to do anything. But in order for *me* to have a good time on the band-

stand, I need a drummer who’s going to do what [Riley, Marsalis and Jackson] are doing, to ride that wave. I love playing straightahead; that’s what I came up on. But it seems like it’s time to do this now.”

After so many years as a successful sideman, why stage his comeback as a solo artist now? “My father’s passing in 2010 had a huge impact on me. He had multiple myeloma and was sick for three years, a slow decline. He was 84. I didn’t realize how much hope I had until one day my mother said, ‘Your father is not going to get better.’ That just ripped the rug right out from under me. It was another eight months before he passed away. I think I had been in a holding pattern for three or four years. But after he

passed, I realized I had to get on with my life. I kinda woke up out of a dream, and said, OK, let’s do it.”

But what changed? He was already a successful jazz musician.

“I was a successful *sideman*,” he corrects. “I hadn’t led groups in a long time. His death just shot me out of the cannon. Maybe I had been thinking that I would never die, that I was immortal, and there would always be time. But his passing showed me that no, it’s finite—there’s an ending, at least to this part of the play. You might open somewhere else in another town, another time, but it definitely closes down in this town. It spurred me to get up on the horse and start riding again.”

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