



Rez Abbasi

UNPLUGGED FUSION

By Allen Morrison | Photo by Jimmy Katz

Facing west, the view of Upper Manhattan's Morningside Park and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine from Rez Abbasi's modern 10th floor apartment on the southern tip of Harlem is sensational. "I think we bought it at the right time," he grins, speaking of the real estate coup that he and his wife made four years ago when the neighborhood was starting to gentrify.

It's been a long journey for the jazz guitarist who came to America from Pakistan as a 4-year-old boy, was raised in Los Angeles and is now, at age 48, a confirmed New York City resident. It's been a long musical journey as well, one that took him from playing progressive rock as a teen, to bebop, to Indian music—he spent two years in India studying with master percussionist Ustad Alla Rakha—to jazz studies at University of Southern California and Manhattan School of Music, and

eventually to the forefront of the jazz world. Although emphatically a jazz artist, his sinuous, often hypnotic playing dances along the East-West continuum, with critically praised albums including *Snake Charmer*, *Bazaar* and *Things To Come*.

Abbasi now seems poised for even greater renown as a result of new music that faces west in musical terms, deconstructing and rebuilding from the ground up a particular genre of Western jazz. After coming in first place in the Rising Star-Guitarist category in the 2013 DownBeat Critics Poll, he now leads the fearless and virtuosic Rez Abbasi Acoustic Quartet—RAAQ for short—with vibraphonist Bill Ware, bassist Stefan Crump and drummer Eric McPherson. Their sophomore album, *Intents And Purposes*, reinterprets jazz-rock tunes of the '70s in unplugged fashion, with astonishing results.

Abbasi has become known for music that explores the intersection of jazz and Indian music in eight previous albums as a leader and in collaborations with Rudresh Mahanthappa, pianist Vijay Iyer and with his wife, the Juno-award-winning Indo-Canadian singer/songwriter Kiran Ahluwalia, for whom Abbasi serves as musical director. Nevertheless, in more recent projects like his 2012 trio record *Continuous Beat* (with bassist John Hébert and drummer Satoshi Takeishi) and especially on the new album, the Indian subcontinent's influence is far more subtle.

Abbasi acknowledges the shift, but says he was just following his intuition. "It wasn't even a conscious decision," he explains. "It could be a subconscious aesthetic choice. When you've done something as an artist, your tendency is to move on." But, he adds, his Pakistani-Indian musical heritage is an intrinsic part of him, and he has no intention of leaving it behind. Indeed, he has new projects in the works that incorporate and transform ideas from his South Asian heritage. "I'm

continually learning about Indian music—I sure haven't mastered it—far from it! I'm much more of a jazz musician—by light-years—than I am any sort of Indian musician. But that doesn't mean the essence hasn't influenced me."

Ware, the veteran vibraphonist who is a founding member of The Jazz Passengers and has played with RAAQ since 2010, says, "Rez has this sensibility from Indian music and brings that to jazz—it's a wonderful thing. He brings such a different flavor to the music. I've watched Rez develop over the years as a bandleader, and I'm very impressed with his leadership on the new album."

Known primarily as an electric guitarist, Abbasi always dreamed of doing fully acoustic records; it's what motivated him to form the Acoustic Quartet in 2010. The group's entertaining first album, *Natural Selection*, consisted of mostly original tunes; its somewhat tentative, exploratory sound, in retrospect, seems like a warm-up for the evocative music and impassioned performances on *Intents And Purposes*.

For the new album, Abbasi and his bandmates excavated the melodic and harmonic essence of a handful of fusion classics, re-orchestrating them for the group's distinctive combination of timbres, especially the unusual blend of acoustic guitar and vibes. Gone are the ARP and Oberheim synthesizers Joe Zawinul played on Weather Report's "Black Market"; the ring-modulated Rhodes from Billy Cobham's "Red Baron"; and the phase-shifted electric guitar from Larry Coryell's "Low-Lee-Tah." Gone, too, are all the digital effects Abbasi used so creatively on *Continuous Beat*.

On those songs and Herbie Hancock's "Butterfly," Pat Martino's "Joyous Lake," Chick Corea and Return to Forever's "Medieval Overture," John McLaughlin's "Resolution" and Tony Williams' "There Comes A Time," the band strips away the electronic flash from the original tracks and rediscovers the underlying compositions, playing with a freedom that can only come from being profoundly locked into the rhythm and from the band's unflinching trust in each other.



Rez Abbasi at the 2013 Newport Jazz Festival

STEVEN SUSSMAN

Ware emphasizes that RAAQ is a real band, not a group of random session players who come together for a few dates then disperse. “It starts with good leadership and ends with trust. It took me some time to get used to E-Mac [McPherson’s nickname, so christened by Jackie McLean] and Stefan. They work really well together. It’s a solid rhythm section, yet there’s a lot of ‘air’—that’s the only word I can use to describe it. There is a lot of polyrhythmic activity—a real conversation with the bass and drums. As I got to know these guys, I realized there’s a conversational quality to the playing, which I like. I don’t want to play to a music-minus-one record. As a soloist, you feel you’re not alone in the car; everybody’s driving it. It divides the focus in a way that keeps you interested, and it’s very exciting for the audience. With this group, it’s such an adventure: You’d better stay on your toes, because at any moment things could get hairy.”

Abbasi is effusive when he talks about his collaborators in the acoustic quartet. “Each one of them is extremely versatile. Eric McPherson played over the years with a variety of artists that influenced me, including Andrew Hill. He has his own sense of rhythm. There’s something loose and tight about him at the same time; it’s something that you can’t teach. Stefan Crump is one of

‘You’d better stay on your toes, because at any moment things could get hairy.’

the most grooving acoustic bass players I’ve ever heard. He gets into every eighth note as an anchor to support Eric’s looseness—although they can both be loose and tight. It makes for a very elastic rhythm section. And then Bill Ware, he’s got so much tradition in him: jazz, r&b; he played with Steely Dan, too. He’s just a monster.”

Without having this particular group, Abbasi says, the concept of *Intents And Purposes* wouldn’t even have occurred to him. “It’s specifically because Eric is on drums, Stefan is on bass and Bill is on vibraphone. I knew what this band was capable of, and I knew this was what I wanted: a looser, 21st century interpretation of this music.”

He approached the jazz-rock of the ’70s with a dry eye for a very simple reason: He was hearing most of it for the first time.

“For a lot of musicians my age, fusion was their entry point into jazz. But it wasn’t mine. I

hadn’t listened to 90 percent of [it] before this project. When I discovered jazz, as a 16-year-old in the ’80s, I had just been playing in a bunch of bands that played Rush, Yes and Van Halen, and I listened to a lot of King Crimson. So when I discovered jazz—Charlie Parker’s “Au Privave” was the first jazz tune I heard—it was all about the acoustic nature of the music, the feel, the swing. Then when I first heard fusion, it was all too reminiscent of what I had just left—somewhat polished music with a heavy, straight-eighth feel. The electricity, high energy, high volumes—those were a lot of the things I found appealing when I was young, but didn’t find them in Parker and Coltrane.”

Approaching the fusion era with an utter lack of nostalgia gave Abbasi a different—and more dispassionate—perspective than if he had listened to, played and loved that music during his impressionistic teen years: “I had a clean

slate as I started the project. That was important because instead of the music being attached to extra-musical experiences, such as high school or vacations, the choices came from a present-day aesthetic—who I am and what I like in music right now. All the decisions were musical. So I could be somewhat objective, even given the subjectivity of an aesthetic choice.”

To prepare for making *Intents And Purposes*, Abbasi listened to hundreds of records and made a mental note of albums and songs he liked. “A month later I re-listened and started writing down lists of tunes,” he says. “The next step was to ask, ‘Will this work for my acoustic group?’” An early selection was Herbie Hancock’s “Butterfly.” “That was a no-brainer for me. That’s because I played it in Mike Clark’s band.” (Clark was the drummer on Hancock’s 1974 album *Thrust*, on which the song first appeared.)

As complex and challenging as some of these tunes are, a lot of their “wow factor” is in their “space-age” electronics—the very element that now sounds so dated. Stripping the tunes of those synthetic, high-tech trappings allows the wow factor to shift to the musicianship itself. “And also to the compositions,” Abbasi adds. “That was the point. These tunes are not often listened to today because the technology makes them sound dated. Get rid of the technology, and you have these gems of compositions.”

He didn’t like everything he heard. “Some of it continued to turn me off, the same way it did when I was 16. I enjoyed everybody’s musicality, but I didn’t necessarily enjoy the tonality of all of those tracks. In terms of texture, it all kinda sounds dated to me. I still don’t love some of the guitar sounds from that era. They cut through, but it’s a little ear-piercing at times.”

In reconsidering fusion, Abbasi opted not to revisit one of the godfathers of the entire genre, Miles Davis, even while covering several artists associated with him (Shorter, McLaughlin, Corea and Tony Williams). “There are many Miles tributes,” he says. “I revisited *Bitches Brew*, but it didn’t interest me to do that—it’s been redone so many times by others. A lot of that era’s music doesn’t necessarily translate to an acoustic sensibility. My personal best-of list required taking really strong compositions and improvising over them. As opposed to taking a little motif, and then the whole band grooves and improvises for more than 20 minutes. That’s not what I wanted to present.”

One piece he has unreserved enthusiasm for is “There Comes A Time” from Tony Williams Lifetime’s 1971 album, *Ego*. “I liked the hypnotic, circular chord progression and groove. Of course, we played it less groovy and more open. I liked the fact it was in 5/4 meter. And I think the melody is unbelievable. It’s brimming with a universal kind of beauty. And I love the way he sang it. When Tony comes in with his vocal, so late in the game in the tune—I’m getting chills just thinking about it—it was just astounding. I was a little sad that I had to take away the lyrics.”

The tune is the second on the album to feature Abbasi playing a de-fretted steel-string acoustic guitar (“Butterfly” is the other), a sound reminiscent of certain Indian instruments. “Maybe you’re hearing the sarod, which is fretless,” Abbasi says. “I’ve definitely been influenced by that

instrument, even more than the sitar. I’ve always dreamed of de-fretting one of my acoustic guitars, but I really didn’t have a reason until this project. The microtonality is beautiful, because it allows for another improvisational aspect.”

A classic overachiever, Abbasi has his work cut out for him in 2015. He plans to tour with RAAQ to support the album, including Los Angeles and Bay Area dates in February and a booking at New York’s Iridium in April. He’s in rehearsals with an electric group to be called Rez Abbasi’s Junction—“the polar opposite of the acoustic group,” he says—in which he plays electric guitar with Mark Shim on tenor saxophone and EWI, Ben Stivers on keyboards and organ, and Jaimeo Brown on drums, for an album

he hopes to release later this year. He’s writing new music for the Invocation band under a grant from Chamber Music America, with an album expected in 2016. That’s in addition to arranging and leading the band for his wife, Kiran, who has an upcoming album of original songs that combines Indian classical music with Saharan desert music and jazz.

Abbasi continues to straddle two hemispheres in his music, balancing his infatuation with Eastern motifs with purely American jazz; he even loves to play standards, though he has no plans to record them. But no matter how much his music veers toward the west, his Pakistani heritage is always with him. “The only way I would give up on that part of my music is if I gave up music,” he says. **DB**

A New **GIANT** Tenor from a **TENOR** Giant

The GIANT Tenor combines the shape of hard rubber with the precision of Anodized Aluminum to create an extraordinarily big, rich and full Tenor sound. Now working with George Garzone, Jody Espina has developed two larger tip openings. The new GIANT Tenor George Garzone Signature 9* and 10* models offer more harmonics and a darker tone, but you’ll be amazed at how easy they are to play.



A Giant Step for Your Sound

Available Tip Openings:
GIANT Tenor - 6*, 7*, 8 & 8*
GIANT Tenor George Garzone Signature - 9* & 10*
Visit JodyJazz.com for more info.