



**JAZZ ALBUM • ALTO SAXOPHONE  
• RISING STAR-COMPOSER**

**RUDRESH MAHANTHAPPA**

**FOR THE  
LOVE OF BIRD**

**BY ALLEN MORRISON • PHOTO BY STEVEN SUSSMAN**

Perhaps not every toddler digs Charlie Parker, but Talin Mahanthappa, a 2-year-old with dark eyes and an impish grin, shows a definite preference for Bird. As they were driving recently near their home in suburban Montclair, New Jersey, Talin’s father, alto saxophonist/composer Rudresh Mahanthappa, switched the car radio to jazz historian Phil Schaap’s “Bird Flight” program on WKCR. At the first strains of Bird, a little voice from the back seat piped, “Saxophone! Toot-toot!” The toddler bopped and smiled the rest of the way to daycare.

His son is generally aware of Dad’s job. “If he sees me leaving for work,” Mahanthappa said recently over a lunch of pastrami and corned beef, “Talin will say, ‘Daddy working? Saxophone? Toot-toot?’”

Someday the child will learn of the deep bond between his father and Parker (1920–’55). Mahanthappa’s *Bird Calls* project debuted at the 2014 Newport Jazz Festival, thanks to festival impresario and Mahanthappa fan George Wein. The suite, which is inspired by Parker, uses fragments of Bird’s music but sounds nothing like bebop. It was released as a studio album by ACT in February. The leader surrounded himself with a superb quintet: pianist Matt Mitchell, bassist Francois Moutin, drummer Rudy Royston and 20-year-old trumpet prodigy Adam O’Farrill.

As a concert event and as an album, *Bird Calls* has garnered rave reviews, culminating in

its honor as Jazz Album of the Year, one of three victories Mahanthappa had in the DownBeat Critics Poll. He also won the Alto Saxophone category (for the fourth time in the past five years) and Rising Star-Composer.

There’s not much doubt that this kind of homage to Parker gets the attention of critics. But once that attention is earned, there are an almost unlimited number of ways to screw it up. One could try to imitate Bird, rehash Bird’s greatest hits in a “more modern” style (which might invite unfavorable comparison to the real thing) or try imagining how Bird would have played some of the great tunes he didn’t get to in his tragically shortened life. Instead, Mahanthappa decided to use Bird as an inspiration for an album of music that sounds like himself—and nobody else.

Pretty much everything you need to know about *Bird Calls* is present in its second track, entitled “On The DL”: humor in the wild expropriation of a scrap of Charlie Parker’s “Donna Lee”; the supreme self-assurance of the leader’s tone; rhythms inspired by Parker solos; and passages of grandeur and mystery, with occasional use of Indian scales and generous amounts of inspired soloing, especially by Mahanthappa and O’Farrill, who plays postmodern Dizzy Gillespie to the leader’s postmodern Bird.

Mahanthappa is bemused by, and grateful for, the critical success of *Bird Calls*. He pondered whether the music has been so well received because of its relative accessibility. “It’s a little eas-

ier to grasp,” he conceded. “The rhythmic content is a little more straightforward than, say, the music from *Samdhi* or *Gamak* [two previous albums]. Perhaps the ‘story’ about *Bird Calls* allows people to find it more accessible. Because it’s tied to Charlie Parker, their ears are positioned in a way to hear it—they made themselves more accessible.” He wondered aloud whether, if some of his previous work had had a story behind it, people would have found it easier to appreciate. “If I wrote a bunch of crazy music and said it was based on James P. Johnson, would people have found it more accessible?” he laughed.

Accessible though it may be, it is by no means easy to play. “Technically, maybe it’s a little easier for [musicians] to play, but it’s harder to make great music out of it. As a soloist, *Bird Calls* leaves you a bit naked—you have to guide the band and make something out of these structures. You have to own that music very quickly.”

He admits to being a little puzzled by people who have told him that *Bird Calls* is his best album yet or his most brilliant work. “That’s fine if they think that. . . . When someone says that, I’m thankful, but part of me is like, ‘But wait, did you hear that other album? That stuff is really good, too!’ Of course, I never really say that.”

Audience response has been extremely enthusiastic. “There is something about this quintet, that trumpet/alto sax front line, and the band’s dynamic—it has a special sort of charisma.” That magnetism was on display at the Newport premiere. “I was a little nervous,” he recalled. “I was

Rudresh Mahanthappa at New York City's 2013 Winter Jazzfest



still dealing with issues like, 'Is this the best tempo for this tune?' I was a bit distracted by the technicalities of bandleading, so much so that you almost forget that you're supposed to take a solo right now. But meanwhile, these four other guys were playing their butts off, so it didn't matter. Everyone was on fire."

Even though Parker is universally revered, some might consider Mahanthappa's music to be more "modern." He is not among them. "The ini-

tial point of the album was just to express some love for Charlie Parker. But I also wanted to show that Charlie Parker is still modern. Writing this music was a way of showcasing how we can take these little bits of things that he played and place them in what we consider cutting-edge 2015 musical scenarios, and the end result is that nothing is dated about it.

"Look, bebop was totally modern when it was happening. At some point we had to forget about

what was happening stylistically and look at the bare bones of the music itself. And that's what I did. I didn't worry about whether it was bebop. I was more concerned with, 'Here's this guy playing all this amazing stuff, and it's as forward-thinking now as it was back then. It's the context that makes it sound a bit dated now.' It's certainly not *what* he was playing, which was totally modern."

On the heels of his greatest critical success to date, Mahanthappa is not yet certain about his next project. In the past, he has changed bands often to suit the needs of his current compositions. "But there's something [special] about the *Bird Calls* band," he said. "I'd like to keep it going. They're fabulous. It would be kinda nice to make two albums in a row with the same band." The band is booked to play the Detroit and Monterey Jazz Festivals, as well as New York's Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in August.

Mahanthappa also has a few other things in mind. Last December, he and Arturo O'Farrill (Adam's father) went to Cuba to record *Afro-Latin Jazz Suite*, which O'Farrill wrote expressly for Mahanthappa; they will perform it at this summer's Newport Jazz Festival, and Mahanthappa expects the record to be released later this year (on Motéma). "I also have a crazy inter-disciplinary idea to do something with a chamber group, live video projection and a comedian," he said. "The way comedians think about timing, arc and flow is very much like how a jazz musician thinks."

Mahanthappa also has been appearing with the Ragamala Dance Company, a Minneapolis-based, Indian-influenced modern dance troupe, performing music he wrote for them with a band featuring frequent collaborator Rez Abbasi on electric guitar, as well as traditional South Indian flute, violin and percussion. He may record that music with the ensemble, or possibly arrange it for his Indo-Pak Coalition trio (with Abbasi and percussionist Dan Weiss) as a follow-up to their 2008 album, *Apti* (Innova).

Compared to some of Mahanthappa's previous work, *Bird Calls* seems less explicitly shaped by Indian music, yet the subcontinent continues to exert a profound influence on his saxophone style. "At this point, [the Indian influence] is so woven into the fiber of my musical personality, both as a composer and an improviser, that it's something I don't think about. It just comes out.

Ten years ago it was more deliberate and studied. Now it's like brushing my teeth—whether I'm writing for *Bird Calls*, or Indo-Pak or my saxophone quartet, it's all just *there*, and that's just the best thing. It's like learning a new language. Like when you're *trying* to speak French, but you get to a point where you just *speak* French, and you think in French, and you dream in French and you say, 'Oh, yeah! I'm fluent now.'"