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Aaron Diehl: The Well Tempered Pianist

By Allen Morrison

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Aaron Diehl is in his comfort zone, seated on the piano bench in the tastefully appointed living room of his Harlem home. Before him is his pride and joy, a 5-foot, 7-inch 1986 Steinway model M that he recently purchased.

Scattered around the room, within easy reach, are well-thumbed books of print music: Art Tatum transcriptions, Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, a Thelonious Monk fakebook. We're talking about his development as a jazz pianist, so the conversation turns to one of his greatest yet most unusual inspirations: *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

“One of my earliest introductions to jazz was through that program,” Diehl says, referring to the sparkling, virtuosic piano of Johnny Costa, who was the late Fred Rogers’ longtime musical director on the children’s TV series, which aired nationally in the United States from 1968 to 2001. “I think about this today, that we had children’s programming on TV where you heard jazz. [Costa] just had this amazing technique and facility like Art Tatum. At one time, I thought, ‘This *must* be Art Tatum.’ I went as far as to email the people at Pittsburgh Public TV to ask if it was Tatum; they told me it was Costa and sent me a CD of his music.” Later, Diehl’s first jazz piano teacher in Columbus, Ohio, included Costa on a list of piano greats to whom his 14-year-old charge should be listening.

Diehl admires and continues to be inspired by Fred Rogers on another level. He shows his guest a YouTube video from 1969 of Rogers melting the heart of a skeptical U.S. senator, gently persuading him to support an increase in funding for educational programming for children. The video has been viewed more than 2 million times. Diehl explains its appeal this way: “It’s just that the guy appears so unassuming, and his demeanor could be misconstrued as soft and weak. He presents his argument in a very cool, collected and respectful fashion. To be able to win someone over like that senator in the space of—what, six minutes?—it’s an incredible lesson in temperament.”

Diehl’s cultivation of a calm temperament, it turns out, is one of the keys to his singular artistic voice. He has become a model of pianistic poise and self-mastery.

The classically trained Diehl is known for many things: his impeccable technique; his mentorship by Wynton Marsalis, who famously took him on a European tour with his septet when the younger man was only 17; his sartorial style; his abilities as a private pilot, sometimes flying himself to gigs; and especially for his role as accompanist and musical partner to his close friend, singer Cécile McLorin Salvant.

Diehl, 30, is one of the leading exponents of a school of jazz piano that seeks to incorporate the entire tradition, from Jelly Roll Morton to Duke Ellington to Thelonious Monk and beyond, enrich it with references to the classical piano repertoire and use it all to compose forward-looking music.

His fourth CD, *Space Time Continuum* (Mack Avenue), is his breakout set. Diehl had become known as a “finesse” player—a word not always used as a compliment. Recorded with his longtime trio of bassist David Wong and drummer Quincy Davis, the new album confirms the arc of his development: from a neo-traditionalist with spectacular technique, through a kind of chamber jazz vibe, to something earthier and more original—all without sacrificing the finesse. He has found a way to combine his many classical and jazz influences, and compose music that’s simultaneously traditional *and* modern.

Davis has noticed a change in Diehl in the last few years, a move away from perfectionism. “When we first started playing, I could see how sometimes he was

overanalyzing,” the drummer says. “He’s at a point now where he can let go and enjoy himself more. He’s not thinking as much.”

The new album is intergenerational by design, including guest-starring roles for the legendary Benny Golson, who plays tenor saxophone on two tracks, and baritone saxophone master Joe Temperley. It also features younger, rising players like tenor saxophonist Stephen Riley, trumpeter Bruce Harris and vocalist Charenée Wade.

Golson met Diehl in 2006 when the iconic saxophonist had been commissioned by The Juilliard School to compose a work for the school’s centennial, to be performed by the Juilliard Jazz Orchestra. Diehl was the pianist. “He had it together when he was a senior at Juilliard,” Golson remembers. “I had written things to be played in a certain way. But I noticed that on occasion he added some things I had *not* written—and they were gems. Aaron has a high quality of imagination. He has something to say. And now he’s moving along at the speed of light.”

At a recent three-night stint at Ginny’s Supper Club in Harlem, Diehl featured Golson and bassist Buster Williams on Friday, Temperley on Saturday and Marsalis on Sunday. The trumpeter played with tremendous force of personality, almost daring the younger players to step up their game. Diehl, whether accompanying Marsalis on a mournful version of the Gordon Jenkins classic “Goodbye,” or trading solos with the master at a breakneck tempo on “Lover,” proved himself to be a player of the first rank, an apprentice no more.

Diehl spoke about his life and varied musical influences with DownBeat for nearly three hours, illustrating his comments with musical examples on his Steinway, as well as playing YouTube videos of some of his idols. As the interview began, he was practicing “Along Came Betty,” a Golson tune that he might need for the weekend’s performance.

You obviously have great respect for your musical forebears; it’s certainly evident on the new album. How do you prepare for a show with a jazz giant like Benny Golson?

Mr. Golson told me, ‘Oh we’ll just do some of the standard tunes’ - like “I Remember Clifford” or “Stablemates.” These are *his* compositions, standards of the jazz repertoire. To be able to play with someone like that – that’s mind-blowing for me. It gives me a hint of what it might have been like to know and play with Duke or Monk or Bud Powell. I’ve found that guys like that – for example, Hank Jones, who I knew when I was in college, and Jimmy and Tootie Heath, who I heard last night - they’re so warm and welcoming of younger musicians. I hope if I have the privilege someday [to be in that position], that I show younger musicians that same kind of warmth and respect. They’re still playful, too – but dignified. Ron Carter - when he comes to play, he’s always dressed immaculately.

Is that a priority to you - the way you look, your bearing?

It's not just the way you look, it's also the way you carry yourself. Not to say you can't be relaxed and joke around; but these guys really knew how to carry themselves in public in a dignified way. I imagine a lot of that had to come with... being African-American at the time they came up in America. You had to be that way. It's also the way I was raised.

Wynton Marsalis brought you on a European tour by his septet when you had just graduated high school. You once said you never understood exactly why he did that. You've spent a lot of time with him since then—did you ever ask him?

No, I haven't. Maybe I should; maybe I'm afraid to ask him. I think what Wynton sees in everyone that he's cultivated and nurtured is *potential*. He recognized my passion for music, even if the raw materials weren't yet developed. [*Exhales*] I didn't know *what* I was doing.

There were nights when ... they would look at Wynton, like, "Why did you bring this kid out here?" I was incredibly stressed, and sometimes depressed. I told Wynton a couple of times that I was gonna go home. And he's like, "OK, go home." [laughs] He was using reverse psychology on me. "OK, quit! We can have somebody else come out on the road." And then I was like, "I don't want to quit." Somehow he knew that I was very serious about playing music, and he wanted me to see what it was really like to be out on the road, playing with first-class musicians. It was a sacrifice for him—it certainly wasn't my playing.

I've been fortunate to play with some incredible musicians, and I've certainly developed a lot since those days. Even when I play with him on Sunday, there will be a fair amount of nervousness involved, because what he requires is very specific. I'll have confidence, though, because I'll be with my guys Paul [Sikive, bass] and Lawrence [Leathers, drums, who constitute Diehl's second trio, which backs McLorin-Salvant], and Wynton loves how we play together. I'm looking forward to it. I haven't had that many opportunities to play with him [now that] I'm a more seasoned musician.... Once you get over the intimidation of playing with Wynton Marsalis, it's a lot of fun.

You began with classical piano lessons. When did you start to play by ear and develop an interest in jazz?

When I started, at about seven, I wasn't interested in jazz. I loved classical music. I was a big nerd for Bach and Beethoven and focused primarily on that until my teenage years. My sight reading abilities - and I'm not boasting - are stronger than my ear. I've had to gradually develop my ear, even till today, to be able to hear something, because it's so easy for me to read. I still try not to look at lead sheets unless I have to, so I can develop my ear better. At the end of the day, that's what people hear. They don't hear how well you read music.

Who was the first major jazz musician you met in person?

Ahmad Jamal. I was at a concert of his in Columbus. He was cordial, very approachable. I wasn't that intimidated, because at the time I didn't realize how important he was. At

that time, I was heavily into Oscar Peterson. My first jazz teacher, Mark Flugge, helped turn me on to other pianists, playing all kinds of jazz. He knew a ton of tunes and pianists I would have never heard of, like Costa; also, who's that guy who played the great left-hand bass lines?

Dave McKenna?

Yes! He would walk bass lines all the time. He was a wonderful pianist, and so was Costa. These are people that most jazz musicians wouldn't talk about, they're kind of under the radar...

At Juilliard, we had an assignment to transcribe Jamal's live album *At The Pershing*. I had to learn all those piano parts. That was the beginning of Jamal's influence on me in a very serious way. The way he used dynamics; he had these roaring chords, but also ... [*he illustrates at the keyboard with a delicate single-note line in the right hand*]. Then he'd leave some space, then ... [*he follows with a fortissimo chordal fusillade*]. He is a master of space and dynamics, and both of those things are so valuable. He used space so well that you can almost hear him playing when he's not playing.

If there was one person who has consistently been an influence on my piano playing, it would be Duke Ellington, and that happened because of Todd Stoll [former director of the Columbus Youth Jazz Orchestra, currently vice president of jazz education at Jazz at Lincoln Center]. In a lot of ways, Todd is why I'm sitting here. [*Diehl relates how, as a member of that youth orchestra, he was able to compete in JALC's Essentially Ellington national high school jazz band competition, in which he came to the attention of Marsalis.*]

So that competition was critical to your development.

Absolutely. Because of the competition and Todd I've had a lifelong love of Ellington. From an early age, I knew a little bit of Ellington from my grandfather, who taught me "Satin Doll" and "Take the A Train."

The degree of dynamic control that you have at the keyboard is something we tend to associate more with classical players. Do you think all jazz pianists should study classical music—and classical technique—alongside jazz?

[*He describes the advice he recently gave to a mother who sought his advice on how to encourage her young daughter to study jazz piano.*] I told her, first get [*the child*] involved with jazz by *listening* to it; [then] get her involved with the piano by taking classical lessons, because she'll learn the fundamentals and the history of the instrument... Once you have that foundation, then you'll have the freedom, technically, to explore jazz.

I'm not saying that in order to be a great jazz musician you have to be a great classical pianist first. But I am saying that it makes things easier when you can get around the instrument, and you have some idea of how to approach the various hurdles. There are so many timbres you can get out of the instrument. [*He demonstrates, playing a fortissimo passage from the Romantic era, then some delicate French impressionism, then some*

percussive Bartók.] In Beethoven and Chopin, there are so many sounds that you can get -- [*plays a bit of Chopin's "Revolutionary Etude"*]. That was a little sloppy, but to execute that [piece] well, you have to develop your left hand. That's a big issue with a lot of students playing jazz—they don't have a left hand. They think the left hand is just for comping. To be able to play stride, or a piece of classical music that involves left-hand linear development—it's almost impossible for them because they have no facility in that hand. And if you don't practice that stuff all the time, you lose it.

Earlier, you cited the cool temperament of Mister Rogers. Why is temperament so important to you?

The older I get, the more I realize the importance of maintaining an even temperament—not getting too emotional, focusing on the task at hand. You don't want to make a business deal based on your emotions. It's like Warren Buffett said: The stock market has no emotion. It doesn't care if you're angry or you're happy. You can't treat it as an emotional entity. I think that's something we can all learn from greats like Hank Jones, or Mr. Golson, or Joe Wilder. They all knew how to carry themselves. Even if they were pissed off, they found a way to express it where you didn't know they were angry. It's like what Mister Rogers said: Yes, being angry is a natural emotion, but it's really a question of how you deal with it.

Controlling emotions and channeling them manifests itself in your playing. You've been cited for your restraint as a player, respecting silence and not being overly flashy.

I've had some conversations with Marcus Roberts, who has always encouraged me to let go a little bit. He said, "You have so much finesse, Aaron, more finesse than when I was your age. But sometimes it's a little too thoughtful or perfect." To be able to take that risk, dive in there and get your hands dirty—I always think about that. There's a huge part of me that's thinking about perfection. I have to fight that urge, to try to live in the moment, reach for something that I might be hearing, and not second-guess myself.

Sidebar: Jazz Pilot

Aaron Diehl flies small planes as a hobby. His interest began at age 14, when his father decided to spring for flying lessons.

"I got hooked instantaneously," he said. "Being a jazz musician, it's not like having flying as a hobby is the most practical thing. He laughs when asked if he owns a plane. "Oh, hell no! I rent from a flying club in New Jersey. But I still fly at least once a week. I love it."

It has certainly come in handy, though—like the time in 2013 when he and Cécile McLorin Salvant missed their commercial flight to Quebec City, where they were to perform that evening. "Cécile and I were at JFK [airport], having breakfast," he said. "We were two hours early for our flight. But [*after a mix-up about the boarding time*], we

realized we had just missed our flight. Now we're panicking. There were no direct flights to Quebec, and the earliest flights would get us in too late. Trains, driving—none of the other options worked. It was late October, but the forecast for the next few days was sunny, both in New York and Canada.

“So I called my friend [*at the flying club*], and he loaned me a plane for the weekend. Cécile was willing; she had flown with me before.”

After a quick study of Canadian flight regulations in the backseat of the car on the way to the airport, they flew the Cessna 172 to Quebec, getting there about an hour before the gig.

“Two nights later, we were booked to play in Montreal,” Diehl continued. “To avoid bad weather that was heading our way, we left Quebec [*after the gig*], at about 10 p.m. Now, about 70 percent of flying is boring if you have auto-pilot. So I was trying to start a conversation with Cécile, just to stay awake. I had four Red Bulls in the back, just in case. I'm talking to her, and she's out cold in the passenger seat. So I woke her up and said, ‘Hey, you've got to keep me awake!’ She said OK, what should she do? I said, ‘Let's play a game.’ I ended up teaching her the aviation phonetic alphabet—Alpha, Bravo, Charlie—but she wouldn't stay awake. I was so mad at her.”

Tired but determined, the pair made it safely to Montreal by 11:30 p.m. —*Allen Morrison*