

# The Gazette

Week of January 20 through 26, 2011

## On the Beat

Thomas Staudter

### The WJO Revisit 'Maiden Voyage'

When Mike Holober took over the job of artistic director and conductor of the Westchester Jazz Orchestra at the end of 2006, one of his immediate tasks was to start organizing an upcoming spring concert that would feature big band arrangements of Herbie Hancock's renowned album *Maiden Voyage*, a recording that many aficionados place in the top tier of the jazz canon.

Of course, the new arrangements for the concert had yet to be written.

Holober, though, was the right person for a task that many in the music world would characterize as daunting. A remarkably adroit and forceful pianist and composer who first came to prominence during the early 1990s in a quartet led by late baritone sax great Nick Brignola, Holober has won wide acclaim in the past 10 years for his own small group and big band efforts around the globe.

A native of Brooklyn, Holober grew up mostly on Long Island, focusing on music early on and learning to play the flute and saxophone along with the piano. After receiving a master's degree in classical piano at Binghamton University, he stayed on for a while as an instructor before he turned to jazz full-time and moved back to New York City. Besides working with Nick Brignola, the pianist enjoyed plenty of sideman stints while also working in large ensembles like the HR Big Band in Frankfurt and the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra. In time, he formed his own big band, the Gotham Jazz Orchestra, which released a superb CD, *Quake*, a few years ago.

Since then, Holober's compositions and arrangements have earned him a reputation as one of New York's most respected jazz writers, with numerous jazz and classical ensembles performing and recording his works. Presently, he is also associate director of the BMI Jazz Composers' Workshop, following in the steps of famed jazz writers like Bob Brookmeyer, Jim McNeely and the late Manny Albam.

I got a chance to talk with Holober earlier this week while he was on his way to a BMI Workshop rehearsal. A green-minded

individual, he was taking the bus from his home in Nyack, which he shares with his wife, Melissa Hall, a college art professor.

"It takes a long time to write a good arrangement, and by the time I had my feet on the ground with the WJO it was already February," said Holober. "So, there was no way I could have done the whole job on my own."

Luckily, Emily Tabin, founder of the WJO, had been enlisting various arrangers to provide new scores for the jazz big band since its inception in 2003. One of those arrangers, trombonist Pete McGuinness, who leads his own big band and has been working closely with Holober over the years, contributed the "Maiden Voyage" chart for what Holober was envisioning to be the "Maiden Voyage Suite." Two members of the WJO, saxophonist Jay Bradford and trumpeter Tony Kadleck, penned charts for the "Little One" and "Dolphin Dance" sections of the suite, respectively.

Holober, meanwhile, took care of the charts for "Eye of the Hurricane" and a two-part look at "Survival of the Fittest," as well as segueing material that became a "Prelude," "Interlude" and "Epilogue." Writing and rehearsing the material practically up to the day of the concert, Holober and the WJO premiered the "Maiden Voyage Suite" at the band's April 14, 2007 appearance at the Irvington Town Hall Theater, and the acclaim was immediate. In many ways, it announced that the 17-member band was taking a new direction—and an intensely artistic one. With a veteran, highly respected arranger and conductor at the helm, the WJO took a big step forward from being an entertaining regional jazz ensemble to a world-class organization. A few months later, Holober led the WJO into the recording studio to cut its first album, *All In*, and since then the band has been operating in the jazz stratosphere, earning a reputation as one of the top jazz big bands now in business.

Of the many seminal small group jazz recordings to base a suite upon, *Maiden Voyage* stands as a perfect vehicle for a big band interpretation, as the album's five



Herbie Hancock

songs heralded an era where the orthodoxies of bebop and free jazz were reunited with melodicism and harmonization without infringing upon the improvisers' art.

Recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's fabled Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey studio on March 17, 1965, less than a month from Hancock's 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, *Maiden Voyage* was the pianist's fourth release as a leader, and not his first, as the title suggests. (In this regard, I'm always reminded of *The Voyage Out*, the title of Virginia Woolf's first novel.) But it was the first, and only, album created by Hancock within a special quintet of collaborators that included trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, tenor saxophonist George Coleman, bassist Ron Carter and drummer Tony Williams.

Hancock's amazing rise in the jazz world began in his native Chicago. Though his parents were not musical, Hancock started piano lessons at age 7 and was quickly identified by his teachers as a prodigy. By 10, he was playing with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In high school, he was gigging around the Windy City with his own band, but then decided to attend Grinnell College and study engineering. Hancock continued playing, though, and eventually switched his major to music composition. Returning to Chicago after graduation, he was working as a mail carrier when he got his lucky break. Legendary tenor saxman Coleman Hawkins had come to Chicago for a two-week engagement at the Bird House over the winter holidays and needed a pianist. Hancock was recommended and raised eyebrows with his talent.

Following Hawkins into the Bird House that winter was trumpeter Donald

Byrd, who also hired Hancock for the Chicago gig and then brought him to New York as a full-time member of his quintet. In September 1961, Hancock joined Byrd in the studio to cut an album for Blue Note Records, and it wasn't long before the label's head, Alfred Lion, asked the pianist to lead some sessions. Released in 1962, Hancock's Blue Note debut, *Takin' Off*, included the hit "Watermelon Man," and from that point, the pianist was in command. In quick order, Hancock recorded three more albums—*My Point of View*, *Inventions and Dimensions* and *Empyrean Isles*—while also gaining a new employer, Miles Davis. Several weeks prior to the *Maiden Voyage* session date Hancock was in the studio with Davis's quintet to record the album *ESP*; the pianist's composition "Little One," in fact, appears on both albums.

Holober reminded me that Hancock's liner notes to *Maiden Voyage* sum up images and ideas about the sea, emphasizing the album's thematic unity, which the WJO conductor and arranger also wanted to replicate in the suite.

"The more I listen to those early Hancock recordings, the more I appreciate him as a pure improviser," said Holober. "He is genuinely spontaneous with unlimited tools; his preparation, his life, allows him to create in the instant."

"With the 'Maiden Voyage Suite' it was important to design a work that would hold together while providing a lot of opportunities for the arrangers and soloists. The WJO is really a writers and blowers band. This really comes together in this particular work. I was really pleased with how the band performed it in 2007, and this upcoming performance of the suite should be even better. The band just sounds amazing now, with each section playing better than ever. The way the trombone section handles these arrangements, with such soft phrasing and balance, is unbelievable."

This spring the WJO plans to record the "Maiden Voyage Suite" and release it as their second CD.

*The Westchester Jazz Orchestra will perform the Music of Herbie Hancock and its "Maiden Voyage Suite" on Saturday, January 29 at the Irvington Town Hall Theater, 85 Main Street, Irvington.. Tickets are \$35/adults, \$30/seniors and \$10/students. For more info call 861-9100 or visit [www.westjazzorch.org](http://www.westjazzorch.org).*