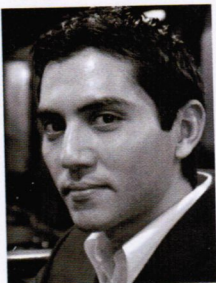


The Gig

By Nate Chinen

Deft Poetry Jams

NOAH KALINA



Jazz and poetry have long endured a marriage of ungainly compromise. Poets borrow jazz trappings for beatnik window-dressing, the stuff of walking basslines and bongo drums. Musicians, for their part, have often enlisted verse as catnip for grant agencies and bookers, or as a means of classing up the joint. That mutual history of garish opportunism explains why any earnest cross-disciplinarian readies him or herself with disclaimers. A couple of years ago I saw Robert Pinsky, a former Poet Laureate, begin one jazz-club performance with a throat-clearing. “This is not an exercise in nostalgia,” he declared, adding, “We hope the evening will not be about goatees and berets, but about art.”

Sam Sadigursky, a Los Angeles-born, Brooklyn-based saxophonist and composer in his early 30s, comes to the party with his own set of concerns. “The thing I really try to avoid,” he said recently, “is framing these poems too tightly, and setting any sort of definitive stance. I try to find sounds and rhythms and forms that let the poems breathe.” He further reflected, “Every poem is really different, and some of the settings do come out of a preconceived musical idea. There are a few where I had a stylistic notion about the thing I wanted to do. And some really just sort of came more from a blank page.”

Over the last few years Sadigursky has been achieving an admirable jazz-poetry alchemy with a series of albums featuring new musical settings for a healthy range of poems. His first effort, *The Words Project*, released in 2007, included works by the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, as well as by Maxine Kumin, Donald Justice and Sylvia Plath. *Words Project II*, from 2008, stretched to include several blocky prose poems by Andrew Boyd. And *Words Project iii: Miniatures*, released last year, delved into short pieces by, among others, Carl Sandburg, Kenneth Patchen and Emily Dickinson. All three albums, out on New Amsterdam Records, speak to a smart, refreshingly non-idiomatic approach to the jazz-poetry conundrum. As Pinsky might say, they’re about art.

Sadigursky didn’t get this ball rolling with a wealth of poetry experience. The Words Project was born of his desire to find new ways of showcasing the gifted vocalists in his peer group, unclassifiable singers like Monika Heidemann, who appears on each of the albums, and Heather Masse, who sat out the second one. He had been extremely impressed by the analogous efforts of pianist-composer Frank Carlberg, who tackles contemporary poetry and other texts in an ensemble featuring his wife, Christine Correa. (It’s no accident that Correa appears on *Miniatures*, bulldozing through an uneasy Maxim Gorky poem.) Another inspiring precedent was the Lincoln Center-approved singer and composer Gabriel Kahane, whose best-loved work is a witty song cycle with lyrics lifted from Craigslist personal ads. (Sadigursky has worked extensively in Kahane’s band.)

The music on each Words Project album is unequivocally jazz-stamped, with room for solos and a premium on band cohesion. But it also leans toward chamber-music dimensions, especially on the most recent release, which opens with a Meredith Monk-like treatment of a

David Ignatow poem (those layered voices all belong to Heidemann) and further includes a chorale (with vocals by Michael Leonhart, similarly multitracked). The instrumentation has generally involved Sadigursky’s array of reeds against a euphonious wash of guitar, piano, bass, drums and the occasional cello; recently it expanded to include violin, tabla and English horn. Abstraction and melody coauthor a productive tension in Sadigursky’s music; harmony gives it depth and hue.

Of course it doesn’t always work, this play of words and sound. “Miss Teen U.S.A.” mars *Words Project II* with a melodic twist on an infamous bit of pageant banter. (Rather than making music out of the original cadence—a strategy memorably employed some years back by pianist Jason Moran, and recently nailed by drummer Dan Weiss—Sadigursky reframes the spoken material, leaching it of humor.) Another kind of shortcoming bedevils “Danse Russe,” based on a poem by William Carlos Williams, who was nothing if not purposeful with a line break: As scored for Leonhart, Sadigursky makes it a syncopated jaunt, essentially disregarding the terrain. And “Swirl,” a setting of a Carl Sandburg poem, finds Heidemann repeatedly trawling up an Eastern scale, which yields an evocative melodic line but no sense of gathering weight. (On the page, the poem, in three brief stanzas, is a compact lesson in emotional accumulation.)

The misfires come with the territory, though, and fade into a broader success. When Sadigursky finds a good route, the result shines favorably on both musical and poetic fronts. One of the finer moments on the new album is “Wistful,” featuring a vocal by Sunny Kim, who articulates Sandburg’s compressed imagery perfectly, against a quiet swell of horns. “Paths,” which opens the second album, paints a convincing portrait of the “dark and difficult path” imagined by Andrew Boyd, pausing meaningfully for a punch line involving Yanni.

And then there’s “Love,” from the inaugural Words Project album, a Milosz poem rendered intervallic, and sung with intimate conviction by Becca Stevens. “Love means,” she begins, spanning a perfect fifth. “To learn to look at yourself,” she continues, ending that last syllable (“self”) on the same note as her first (“Love”). The cyclical nature of that melody is designed to underscore the poem’s philosophical message: a view of the self in proper perspective, “the way one looks at distant things.”

Given that Sadigursky still describes the Words Project as an intuitive endeavor, ungoverned by a guiding process, I can’t help but hear deeper meaning in the way that piece concludes. “It doesn’t matter whether he knows what he serves,” Heidemann and Stevens both sing, slightly out of phase. “Who serves best doesn’t always understand.” **JT**

**Abstraction
and melody
coauthor a
productive
tension in Sam
Sadigursky’s
music.**