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John Escreet: The Trio Goes West

PIANIST JOHN ESCREET HAS ALWAYS HAD ideas. Born in England, he migrated to New York in his early 20s to study at the Manhattan School of Music, learning from Kenny Barron and Jason Moran. Over the course of a decade, beginning with 2008's *Consequences*, he made eight albums that covered a startlingly broad spectrum, from the three-part avant-garde suite that opened the debut to 2011's electronics-tinged, abstract *The Age We Live In* to a freely improvising quartet with saxophonist Evan Parker, bassist John Hébert and drummer Tyshawn Sorey. That group released a studio album, *Sound, Space And Structures*, and a live document, *The Unknown*. He was also working as a sideman with adventurous players like alto saxophonist David Binney, drummer Antonio Sánchez and trumpeter-composer Amir El-Saffar. He wasn't a household name, not even in jazz-loving households, but he was admired by those in the know.

In 2019, though, he decided it was time for a change. He got married, and less than a year later,

was packing up to move to Los Angeles. "I met my wife in New York and we both just kind of felt like we wanted a different lifestyle," he explains. "I'm a believer that sometimes you have to force a change to make things happen, even if you don't know entirely what the end result is gonna be."

He arrived in January 2020, full of optimism.

"I wasn't earning that much money in New York City. I was earning most of my money by going on the road and touring ... so in my mind I wasn't losing any work or any opportunities, I was only kind of enhancing and adding to it by moving to L.A. I thought that there were probably more opportunities to work locally, and also get into some other musical areas with the stuff that's happening out here, while maintaining all the stuff I was already doing.

"So my intention was to add and build my artistic output."

Of course, the world had other plans. Still, after lockdown eased, he was able to make (and strengthen) some connections, and now he's got a

new album, *Seismic Shift*. It features a brand-new rhythm section of bassist Eric Revis and drummer Damion Reid, and ... that's it. After close to 15 years of recording and touring, Escreet has made his first trio recording.

This is surprising, given that the trio is the fundamental formation for jazz piano, but as Escreet explains, "I never felt the pressure to make one because, I mean ... there's enough average piano trio albums out there, and I didn't want to contribute to that kind of sonic pollution, you know? I wanted to wait until I had something worthwhile to contribute." He reveals that it almost happened a decade ago; the group with Hébert and Sorey (which he describes as "a really happening trio ... that I really enjoyed") was a working group, and he'd planned to take them into the studio, but "when we did get a chance to record, we had been performing with Evan as a quartet, so that was an opportunity that was too good to miss, and that was what was happening at that moment in time. Therefore, I was like, 'Well, you know what? I'm just going to document what's happening rather than forcing something.'"

Seismic Shift offers nine tracks, several of which are in-studio improvisations and one of which is a re-recording of "The Water Is Getting Worse," from Escreet's 2011 album *Exception To The Rule*. The music is thrillingly varied, despite the absence of any of the touches he's added to previous albums — no horns, no switching from piano to Fender Rhodes to synth, no electronic manipulation of the sound. Instead, Escreet and his bandmates explore many versions of the piano trio language. "Perpetual Love" may remind some of Matthew Shipp, while "Digital Tulips" and the aptly titled "Quick Reset" (it runs just 1:42) bounce on thick Revis grooves, the former accented by high-pitched tom barrages from Reid that recall Tony Oxley. There's also an interpretation of Stanley Cowell's "Equipoise," drawing on the version heard on 1974's *Musa-Ancestral Streams*.

Escreet was introduced to Cowell by Nasheet Waits, with whom both men played at different times, and they formed a friendship.

"I would email Stanley because I wanted to study with him, but he wasn't really into giving lessons at that time," Escreet said. "But I did send him my recordings of what I was doing back then, which Nasheet was on, and to my delight, Stanley actually not only listened to them but wrote me back and was super-encouraging about them and very complimentary, which obviously meant the world to me.

"After that we had longer email exchanges where he would elaborate at length about all kinds of stuff. Musical concepts and how to sustain one's creativity in the music business, in the music industry, and recording contracts. He really was very generous with his time and his knowledge." —Philip Freeman