

SATURN QUARTET EPK FULL-LENGTH BIO

by JIM REED

When is a jazz group not merely a jazz group?

Perhaps, when it's the Saturn Quartet.

Made up of four extremely talented young players and composers (the term "prodigies" might not be entirely inappropriate when discussing the group's members), who all fell together initially during their time studying that most unique and challenging American art form in the fabled Jazz Studies Program at Florida State University, the Saturn Quartet is one of the most intriguing –and notable– new entries on the international jazz scene.

However, while the combo proudly wears its sincere reverence for the history of this improv-heavy musical genre on its collective sleeve, its members are also not afraid to gently push the envelope of what might be expected from a band of classically-trained instrumentalists.

The fact that they have both the nerve to treat their chosen material with such an open-hearted approach and the finely-honed chops required to pull off subtly adventurous stylistic detours is a testament not only to each player's nascent mastery of their craft, but to the creative chemistry that exists between them all – a palpable relationship which is instantly obvious, even to casual listeners.

That chemistry and audacity is evident throughout all seven tracks on the Saturn Quartet's brand-new debut album, "Synchronicities," produced with great empathy and elan by the award-winning (and Grammy-nominated) rising jazz star Jamison Ross, and set for worldwide release on May 21, 2022.

The Saturn Quartet's bassist and bandleader, Robin Sherman (who's played or recorded with everyone from jazz icons like Ellis Marsalis and Donald Harrison to punk legend and Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Iggy Pop) says he feels the group's versatility is one of its defining characteristics.

"When it comes to the wide variety of types of jazz music, I feel the Saturn Quartet fits in somewhere around the middle," Sherman muses. "In truth, we aren't really avant-garde, yet we aren't stuck in any musical box per se. We are more about playing for each song (itself) than going super far-out... Though we honestly do both."

Pianist Brendan Polk –a childhood friend and musical compatriot of Sherman's whose deep, longstanding bond with the bassist both men liken to that of a family member– opines that their chosen genre is wide enough to incorporate everything this group is currently doing, and much more.

“Around the world, the jazz –or ‘improvised music’– scene is very complex right now,” offers Polk, who’s performed with the likes of Miles Davis’ late, great saxman Sonny Fortune, and also regularly serves as an accompanist for the revered Mark Morris Dance Group.

“There are so many different styles in use. For example, in New Orleans there’s what’s known as ‘traditional jazz,’ such as in the style of Louis Armstrong or Sidney Bechet. Even some of Allen Toussaint’s stuff fits into that category. But, in New York City there’s a whole ‘nother scene of totally improvised music – which is not technically jazz, yet takes some of those same aspects into a very different –and more extreme– direction.

“I feel we’re pretty balanced in between the two approaches, because we’re essentially playing what’s thought of as ‘straight-ahead jazz,’ but at the same time we are very comfortable being much more free and improvisational. We have the ability to play the straight-ahead stuff quite well. But if need be, we can also go all the way out into the stratosphere, if you will.”

Drummer Gerald Watkins, Jr. (who’s played with both the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra and the acclaimed Jason Marsalis) feels the diverse musical foundations of his band’s members are the key to the Saturn Quartet’s rather eclectic sound.

“I grew up playing (gospel) music in church, while Robin’s father was a rock and funk musician. Brendan is really big into classical music, and Ricardo (Pascal, saxophonist) is Caribbean – so he has a very different history entirely. I think what makes this group gel as it does is that we accept and welcome everyone’s background and experience.”

Watkins, Jr. also posits that their shared time studying jazz at FSU had an incalculable effect on the way they all relate to each other. “That’s a huge part of what makes this group unique,” he says with a chuckle. “I mean, we were all students of jazz, and we all focused on that primarily, but we also definitely wanted to introduce other types of music into our own brand of jazz.”

Sherman notes that the roots of this new group run quite deep, as he, Pascal and Polk “started playing together informally every summer, starting midway through my time at FSU.”

As that school’s Jazz Studies Program is based around transcribing (meaning memorizing music by ear directly from extant, period recordings by legendary figures in the genre, and then performing it note-for-note with as much nuance and respect as possible), he describes passing the time between semesters thusly: “We would learn entire albums together and practice every day on this shit. There was tons of hanging out, eating together, developing inside jokes, all the stuff that makes for strong friendships. That feeling is the basis of our comfort with each other as musicians and friends.”

Polk concurs, adding, “Robin and I were best friends in high school, and we’ve been through a lot together. Ricardo and I are good friends as well, and Gerald and I met in college and

became friends. We've all been on road trips as a group, and there's an emotional connection between us."

Pascal singles out one particular album, pianist McCoy Tyner's 1967 LP "The Real McCoy Tyner," as having a tremendous impact on all four future members of the Saturn Quartet.

That album, the five-time Grammy Award winner's seventh record under his own name and his first after leaving John Coltrane's groundbreaking and highly influential quartet is revered among jazz aficionados as an example of purely personal compositions, arranged and performed without regard for the whims of any potential commercial audience.

While the Saturn Quartet uses very traditional, acoustic instruments (in the same lineup as on Tyner's album), their repertoire is anything but standard-issue. That, too, helps to set the band apart from most of their contemporaries.

"Our instrumentation is pretty conventional," Watkins, Jr. continues. "It's a sax quartet. But, we don't limit ourselves to swing or jazz tunes that have been done to death. We're taking on a lot of songs from the world of pop music and the more subtle types of indie-rock, arranging them to suit our lineup and incorporating them into our sets. So, even as we consider ourselves primarily jazz artists, we have no desire to box ourselves into that framework."

Pascal (known for his work with both piano genius Marcus Roberts and Grammy Award winning vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater) is quick to agree with Watkins, Jr., adding enthusiastically, "It's true that we are an acoustic band with a very traditional setup, and that's how this project was seen from the get-go. So this band isn't afraid to play the roots of this music, explicitly, abashedly in the (original) style – and with great gusto!

"Yet, at the same time, we don't think twice about adapting a Paul McCartney tune from the mid-2000s into our setlists. Having such a wide a breadth of musical sources allows for greater flexibility (than other traditional sax quartets)."

The genesis of the Saturn Quartet began during the relatively early days of the Covid-19 pandemic – which continues to derail and decimate the lives –and livelihoods– of untold numbers of working artists and musicians. The deep, philosophical introspection that naturally resulted from an unexpected worldwide tragedy of such monumental proportions coincided with an utter breakdown of most aspects of the international entertainment industry, and caused millions of performing artists to drastically reassess their career choices and recalibrate their own creative priorities.

For the New Orleans-based Sherman, that meant working through the grief of losing two family members in rapid succession by seizing an opportunity to throw himself into a new project that could (in large part) also serve to honor the memory of his loved ones. Just as

Saturn has long signified both renewal and liberation, this new combo came to represent a new phase of the bassist's burgeoning oeuvre.

"I took care of my Grandma Nita from the summer of 2018 until her death at age 95 in August of 2020," Sherman reveals. "She was a passionate music lover who would unashamedly burst into tears listening to her favorite Antônio Carlos Jobim records. Her son, my father Jack Sherman, died suddenly of a heart attack 11 days later at age 64.

"My dad and I were very close. He was a famous guitarist who was a member of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. He also played on albums by Bob Dylan, George Clinton and many other notable artists. This album is a tribute to them and everything they did to help me become the person and musician I am today."

In fact, Sherman says the album's title itself is a sly reference to his relationship with his dearly departed father. "Synchronicities is a word my dad and I both cherished," he continues. "he didn't –and I don't– believe in coincidence or random occurrences. Rather, we were inspired and excited by finding meaning in how seemingly unrelated little things were actually connected to each other.

"It's also a perfect word to describe the feeling of interconnectedness that occurs when you improvise music with your good friends. It's another way of saying "meant to be."

In the wake of these twin personal tragedies, the working musician and budding bandleader realized the time had come to try and spearhead a new musical project: one that operated as a collective of sorts, with a creative process rooted in cooperation and democracy – and made up solely of players with a pre-existing personal connection. So, in late 2020, he began to reach out and meet virtually with Pascal, Polk and Watkins, Jr., inviting them all to join him in developing this vision.

Before long, these friends and musical peers were planning the recording session which would ultimately result in the Saturn Quartet's debut album.

To further emphasize the aesthetic choices made in the formation of the band, the group specifically chose eschew the prevailing attitude toward recording jazz to instead cut the album in the same way many of their favorite, "classic" jazz albums were made in decades past. Namely, to capture their performances live-in-the-studio, in complete takes, with no overdubs, embellishments or "fixes" of any kind – and to do so on an old-school format: analog tape.

Given that most styles of jazz are inherently and intrinsically based around the kind of respectful improvisational moments that can only come from a free-flowing rapport among the musicians involved, it may seem nonsensical that such a natural and logical approach to documenting performances would have somehow fallen out of favor. However, over the past

few decades, advances in digital recording technology, coupled with a steady shift towards the type of advanced audio editing techniques that can only be accomplished via capturing sounds in sterile, acoustically discrete environments has resulted in the overwhelming majority of jazz records being made in the same manner which long ago became de rigueur for most types of rock, pop and dance music.

The hallmarks of these “clean” recordings are an incredibly quiet soundscape, eerily devoid of the type of “bleed” amongst and between instruments and vocals which occurs naturally at virtually any live concert or band rehearsal. While some recording engineers and listeners may interpret such “crosstalk” as defects or signs of a less-than ideal recording, others may instead find themselves subconsciously comforted and drawn more deeply into the music by the more realistic sound achieved through such vintage miking techniques.

To a man, all the Saturn Quartet’s members feel strongly that the music they are creating is best captured in this (sadly) outdated method.

Explains Watkins, Jr.: “These days, most of the time, jazz musicians record in a manner that is completely different from the way we actually play. When we perform on stage, we don’t isolate ourselves in separate rooms and only hear each other through headphones! Technology has progressed and developed in that direction, but that type of technology can easily stifle creativity.

“All of the records we love and studied in school were made in this manner (played live to analog tape, with all the musicians in a single, open room), so I don’t get why we don’t make records today in this manner that we love and admire! The fact that Robin suggested that we do it this way before I even brought it up let me know we were already on the same page.”

“This was super important to me,” avows Sherman. “Because I think improvising together is all about communication and less about perfect audio quality. And, our producer Jamison was completely supportive of my vision and my desire to record this way. The benefits for the listener are that they are experiencing all the emotions that come from music made by people who are listening really attentively to each other.

“When you don’t use headphones, you have to stay mentally aware of what everyone is doing and play lightly and cleanly. It totally changes the energy of the room when people play like that. Sonically, you get the benefit of some pleasant grit in the sound, and you get a warmth from the drums that is rarely achieved otherwise. It’s just nicer on the ears.”

Polk notes that another added benefit of taking this trickier path is that it leads to all sorts of beautiful, unexpected moments in the music which might otherwise never happen, and thus go unheard.

“When you’re right next to the other players, it will affect how you react to each other. That’s just human nature,” he reckons. “A lot of recordings that are close-miked, where each musician is sectioned off in their own little room and can’t necessarily even see each other while they are playing wind up sounding contrived to me. I tend to appreciate hearing the natural ambiance of what it actually sounds like when a group of people sit alongside each other and make music together.

“I believe that on many of the tracks on this record, listeners will be able to hear that creativity and the special interplay we shared on those days.” For those in doubt, he’s describing telepathy.

For his part, Pascal is adamant that the band took the proper technical approach to making their debut release.

“While it’s no secret, it cannot be stated loudly enough: jazz is an interactive and lived-in form of music,” the saxophonist insists, before adding that “Synchronicities” is, “near the top of (his) studio experiences,” specifically because of the way in which it was documented. When you all record in the same room, you are hearing everyone’s natural sound. There are subtle things which occur that a mic and studio headphones won’t pick up – things that can change everyone’s individual performances.

“The stakes are elevated, because no overdubbing is possible! But the overall beauty, energy, and spirit of each take is enhanced by these increased stakes, and that’s the primary thing you’re looking for in the first place.”

Polk admits that he was not initially sure what to expect from Jamison Ross as a producer, but he instantly warmed to the fellow FSU alumni’s outlook on the recording process.

“I feel like he employed a holistic approach to our music,” the pianist recalls. “He was looking at the big picture of the whole group. So many of his suggestions were very simple, but they were extremely creative – and they brought out a lot of things in the songs we had not previously considered.

“He’s an amazing musician in his own right, and has toured with everyone from Snarky Puppy to Nicholas Payton. So we had a certain level of trust in his judgment. He made the entire experience very enjoyable, and the record would not have turned out the same without his involvement.”

With the release of the Saturn Quartet’s debut album imminent, all of the members are clearly eager to learn how their work will be received by the jazz world. And yet, to hear them speak, they are each much more interested in seeing just where the road ahead takes them as a unit.

Says Sherman, “This band is really different from others I’ve been in where they’re focused on one person’s music and everyone else is only there to support that. Whereas we are truly collaborative when it comes to the music. Once we start rehearsing and playing together, I’m not dictating what’s happening.”

Pascal points again to the almost supernatural rapport these four gifted players share, as he candidly admits, “When all of us are together, it honestly feels like magic can happen. So, any opportunity to document this connection of ours in a musical form is a no-brainer for me! I feel this album and our live shows demonstrate our camaraderie, and I hope that listeners will agree and enjoy these explorations.”

For his part, Watkins, Jr. finds this project somewhat ideal working situation, and one he hopes will continue for a good long while.

“A lot of times, the relationships that bandmembers with each other when they are off the bandstand is reflected in the music,” he confides. “With the Saturn Quartet, I can honestly say that we are all friends first. So, to make music of this caliber with my friends is very liberating and exciting.

“We are legitimately in tune with each other, and I think people that come to hear us play will be able to tell that what’s most important to these guys is that they really like each other,” he laughs.