

## **John Petrucelli**

### *The Way*

The temptation, upon hearing John Petrucelli's uncanny flow and remarkable command of his tenor sax in all registers on tunes like the suite-like opener "Arrows of Longing," the cascading "Boots" or his superb take on the sumptuous 1948 ballad "Early Autumn," is to say: "Where has this cat been?" The New Jersey native spent some time in the Virginia-D.C. area working with trumpeter John D'Earth and in New Orleans, where he played in trombonist Delfeayo Marsalis' group, before returning to the New Jersey-New York area to attend Rutgers University studying under Stanley Cowell, Charles Tolliver and Ralph Bowen, and finally relocating to Pittsburgh where he currently resides. The gifted 26-year-old now makes a startlingly mature, fully realized statement as player-composer-bandleader on his auspicious debut. Surrounded by a first-rate crew of New York players, kindred spirits and marvelous improvisers -- pianist Victor Gould, guitarist Peter Park, bassist Alexander Claffy, drummer Gusten Rudolph and special guest drummer Victor Lewis on three tracks -- Petrucelli weds astounding technique to harmonic and rhythmic invention and a forceful sense of swing on *The Way*.

A cursory listen to his flowing and intense tenor lines on any number of tunes here, from the urgently burning "The Flip" to "For Dawn" (dedicated to vocalist Dawn Thompson) to his forceful opus "Hil's Blues," will invite comparisons to such modern tenor titans and role models as Ralph Bowen, Michael Brecker, Chris Potter, Mark Turner and Donny McCaslin. But Petrucelli is also quick to point out the towering influence of Lennie Tristano disciple Warne Marsh, he of the long flowing line and vertical improvisation concept. In fact, Petrucelli did a harmonic analysis of Marsh's recordings as his master thesis at Rutgers, and he takes those lessons to heart on *The Way*.

"I've always seemed to have a technical knack for the instrument," says the saxophonist who is presently working on his doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh. "And one of the things that I've been really trying to sculpt through the years is how to apply and when to apply that technique. I especially have been trying to do that in terms of composition, and the album is like a chronology of how my compositions have been taking shape over time. The earliest composition is four years old now and the most recent was written two weeks before the session.

So I feel like there's a trajectory to my compositional and improvisational approach that is very evident in the pieces here."

Blowing fluid Marsh-like streams of notes over myriad changes is a characteristic of Petrucelli's playing throughout *The Way*, whether it's the Herculean tenor intensity he exhibits on "Boots" (written for a friend in the military who had recently returned home after being deployed in Afghanistan), his 'sheets of sound' approach over the African clave vibe of "Hil's Blues" or his dizzying flurries on "Prism." As he explains, "I think 'Prism' is a good example of where there's a flow to the melody that is through-composed in an important way. That's a big direction to my music right now, both in terms of composition and improvisation. I'm trying to find a way to have an internal logic to the line while simultaneously not really repeating in a traditional way.

"The idea of flow is definitely a part of my playing," he continues. "I'm deeply committed to having that facility over all the different registers, studying with Ralph Bowen and listening a lot to Michael Brecker, Chris Potter and especially Donny McCaslin definitely convinced me early on that I wanted to be able to do that. So I've spent a lot of time working on that -- playing Parker solos up and octave, playing Coltrane solos up an octave and that kind of thing. But in the last few years I've also been trying to branch out and include other influences as well, like Indian classical music. I've been studying tabla for the last three years and it's been a really enlightening experience to try and translate those rhythms, to some extent, onto the saxophone in my own rhythmic concept. And you can hear from some aspects of 'Arrows of Longing' that I'm also deeply influenced by classical music. So I'm trying to sit at the intersection of a lot of these ideas on this album."

Petrucelli further showcases his tenor prowess on his modernist blowing vehicle "Moment of Grace" and the dynamic title track along with a romp through Thelonious Monk's chopsbusting "Gallop's Gallop," arranged by guitarist Park and drummer Rudolph, and a fresh spin on the jazz standard "I Hear a Rhapsody." As he explains of his take on that 1941 chestnut, "It's a 3/4 pattern but it shifts between 4/4, 3/4 and 5/4, and the phrases are constantly changing. It's loosely based on one of the variations from my tabla study and improvising on it required a whole new set of challenges. I've always admired Steve Coleman's approach to the mixed meter thing, in that he's really able to flow over top of these changing metrical forms and I'm trying to

do a similar thing here. I'm trying to implement some of those really complicated rhythmic ideas but also not have it descend into an exercise. The trick is to really make it sing."

Throughout *The Way*, particularly on "Boots," "The Flip," "Gallop's Gallop" and "Hil's Blues," Petrucelli can be heard weaving intricate unisons with remarkable precision alongside guitarist Park, sounding not unlike the seamless blend that Warne Marsh achieved with his alto sax partner Lee Konitz in their heyday together. The two met while attending Rutgers and they've been playing together ever since. "I think what's so cool about Peter and I is that we have a real mutual understanding of phrasing of melodies together now that we've developed over time," says Petrucelli. "It's not really a mixing thing, it's more like we're speaking as a shared voice."

There's an abundance of rewarding music to savor here. And while there may be a cerebral quality to some of Petrucelli's devices, the compelling tunes carry a potent blend of yin and yang that captivates the listener. "The important thing to me is, this band can swing its ass off and we can transition between that and then go into some really straight eighth ECM modern stuff and come back out on the other side swinging just as hard," says the leader. "That kind of elasticity, I think, is really important to us."

As *The Way* launches him on his way, saxophonist-composer-bandleader Petrucelli remains someone to watch in the future. -- *Bill Milkowski*

**Bill Milkowski is a regular contributor to *Jazz Times* magazine. He is also the author of "JACO: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius" and co-author of "Here And Now: The Autobiography of Pat Martino" (both published by Backbeat Books)**