

PMP Awards Mine Philadelphia's Treasures of Jazz, Blues, and Improvisation
By Larry Blumenfeld
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One of jazz's greatest drummers was so strongly associated with the city of Philadelphia that the town literally became part of his name. Philly Joe Jones, who died in 1985, made his mark with legendary players from Duke Ellington to John Coltrane. Through Jones's drumming, the city's influence changed the beat of jazz. In fact, Philadelphia always was and still is both home and birthplace of a long list of jazz standard-bearers, ranging from the traditional to the commercial to the avant-garde. Saxophonists Charlie Ventura, Jimmy Heath, and Stan Getz were born in Philadelphia. Both trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and saxophonist John Coltrane made important stops in the city. The legendary bandleader Sun Ra and the hit-making saxophonist Grover Washington Jr. both called the town home. And today, saxophonist Odean Pope and guitarist James "Blood" Ulmer reside in Philadelphia, along with many other influential musicians who play jazz full-time or who have been affected forcefully by jazz.

That legacy – especially its forward and outward thrust, and its connection to other musical traditions – will get a mighty boost from the latest round of grants awarded by the Philadelphia Music Project. And the projects that flow from this funding will display not just the diversity of forms the jazz impulse takes these days, but also the variety of venues and artistic endeavors that the jazz tradition touches.

The innovative work seeded by this latest round of PMP funding includes the following initiatives: Opera North will present a fully staged production of *Vanqui*, an opera scored by flutist and Philadelphia native Leslie Burrs, at the Prince Music Theater; the Prince, which received a separate grant, will mount *CrossCurrents at the Prince*, a series including the world premiere of *Mr. Mystery: The Return of Sun Ra to Planet Earth*, which is a collaboration between jazz composer Fred Ho and writer Quincy Troupe; the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society's *Modern Masters* series will feature new music by Odean Pope; the Painted Bride Arts Center will utilize PMP funds to support *JazzJaunts*, a series that stretches over two years and span the far-flung geographical roots of some of today's best jazz, incorporating musicians and instruments from South Africa, Cuba, Brazil, South India, Iraq, Japan, and throughout the Jewish Diaspora; Montgomery County Community College's *All Hues... All Blues* series will

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display the vitality and range of that distinctly American art form; and Relâche's *Future Sounds* series will commission brand-new scores to circa-1920s animated films.

Nearly all of this work has some logical and formative connection to Philadelphia's musical heritage. Odean Pope remembers when the city's Columbia Avenue, since renamed for local hero Cecil B. Moore, was home to dozens of thriving jazz clubs. "There'd be a club on every block along that Avenue, all the way from 2nd Street to 33rd," he recalls from his home. There are still dedicated jazz haunts in the city – Ortlieb's, Zanzibar Blue, and Chris's Jazz Café among them – but now, Pope notes, the music has quite naturally intermingled with other forms and has integrated with the programming at other venues.

So it comes as no surprise to Pope that his new commission stems from an association with the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society. "Still, it's an honor," he says. According to the society's executive director, Philip Maneval, "The commission grew out of a performance that Odean did as part of Max Roach's group. He had an innovative and exciting approach to jazz. He really explored the full range of harmonic and sonic possibilities of his horn. And his music connects quite naturally with the sort of contemporary composition we usually support."

Indeed, "Foliage," the piece Pope will present, is a composition based on a six-tone scale, to be performed in a quartet that augments his saxophone with bass, drums, and harp, and which makes extensive use of Pope's multiphonic approach to the saxophone, wherein he produces two, three, and even four tones at once.

"Especially since 1960," Maneval explains, "Philadelphia has been enormously influential for jazz and for contemporary classical music." The chamber society's funded projects will also boast the premiere of a new work by Philadelphia-based composer Richard Brodhead. And it will include performances and workshops by the legendary pianist and hometown hero, McCoy Tyner, as well as by violinist Regina Carter.

When Leslie Burrs, whose opera *Vanqui* will be presented by PMP grantee Opera North in May 2005, was growing up in Philadelphia, he was influenced by the full swirl of musical activity that encompassed nearly all forms of African American music.

“My greatest aspiration back then was to be one of the Temptations, to sing doo-wop,” he recalls. Burrs, who started out as a trombonist as a child and then gravitated to the flutes he’s since mastered, had his ears opened by the free-thinking 1960s jazz of Charles Lloyd and Keith Jarrett, but also by experiences closer to home: singing in the choir of Philadelphia’s St. Marks Church and playing in dance and marching bands at his public high school.

All of those influences, as well as traditional African music and Western classical forms can be heard in *Vanqui*, to form what Burrs refers to as “urban classical music.” Musically, Burrs blends a jazz quartet (which features African hand drums instead of a traditional trap set, and Burrs’ own use of bamboo flutes) with a chamber orchestra and operatic soloists. “The work addresses issues and concerns of diversity, American history and African American representation in opera,” he says, “primarily due to the great work of my librettist, the celebrated poet and novelist John A. Williams.”

Vanqui traces a powerful imaginary history. The story, which begins in the mid-1700s and ends in 1861, is part mythical and part real, expressing both down-to-earth and spiritual issues surrounding slavery in the United States. A young runaway slave, Prince, is killed during a slave revolt after his wife, Vanqui, is sold to another plantation. A jealous plantation owner’s wife in turn, murders her.

“The idea is that Prince and Vanqui are spirits,” Burrs explains, “yet they have the ability to walk the earth. They are consigned to ‘ride the wind’ in search of each other. And along the way, the audience gets introduced to historical figures such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and John Brown.”

Composer Fred Ho’s commissioned opera is likewise rooted in the real but finds its voice in the realm of the imagined. *Mr. Mystery: The Return of Sun Ra to Planet Earth* focuses on one of Philadelphia’s – and jazz’s – most interesting and enigmatic figures of the 20th century. Sun Ra was a wildly talented and eccentric musician and composer, whose work ranged from doo-wop to large ensemble jazz. He wore flamboyant costumes and claimed to be from Saturn, facts that often obscured the seriousness and spiritual heft of his musical achievements, and the ways in which he extended the tradition of Duke Ellington’s and Fletcher Henderson’s orchestras.

“The piece isn't meant to be biographical,” says Ho, who is a veteran of innovative opera works. “It's totally fictional, and starts with the premise that Sun Ra never actually passed away, that he just returned to Saturn. It takes place in the not-too-distant future, during which a planetary distress signal is sent from earth, which is careening toward crises – ecological, social, and political. And Sun Ra answers with his extraterrestrial orchestra.”

Ho's opera is set on the bridge of a spaceship; onstage musicians are members of the flight crew. And his ambitious storyline will be fleshed out by writer Quincy Troupe, whose long list of credentials includes a biography of trumpeter Miles Davis. As with Burrs' project, it's the realization of a collaboration that the composer has wanted to do for a long time. And it enables Ho to make an aesthetic statement about music.

“Sun Ra was a very innovative large ensemble composer,” Ho explains, “and he used all sorts of unconventional instrumentation. That's what grabbed me. I've been fixated on the composer tradition in so-called avant-garde jazz, because it's presumed that the music is all improvised or 'free.' But Sun Ra epitomized the extended notated strategy of composition. It sounds improvised but it's largely composed.”

For Marjorie Samoff, the Executive Director of the Prince Music Theater, works such as Ho's ambitious opera and another opera by Paul Drescher, both of which are featured in the PMP-funded *CrossCurrents* series, enable her organization to take on new work that looks to a new generation of creators. Combined with the master classes, panel discussions, films and smaller productions that will complement these operas, Samoff hopes to create some of the excitement of a European festival.

“It doesn't matter how much you ended up liking or not liking the show,” she says. “You come out afterwards and argue about it in the café, and you get a real sense of creativity and ferment and of people developing new ideas.”

The Painted Bride has been a favored stage for jazz for some 35 years. In 1986, Lennie Seidman began curating a world music series for the theater. For Seidman, who is a tabla drummer and composer specializing in what he calls “intercultural percussion,” tracing the far-flung roots and flowerings of various styles of music is nothing new. But

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with the two-year *JazzJaunts* series he's curating with PMP funding, he is able to showcase the particular lineages of seven different musicians.

"The idea was to bring in artists that are from another culture or who are predominantly bringing another culture to bear on and expand the ever-changing notion of what jazz is," he says. "I always naturally lean toward intercultural work, but this was an opportunity to formalize that idea and to really explore it with the proper financial support."

Indian American saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa has long integrated his family's background into his brand of jazz to a certain extent. But for his *JazzJaunts* performances, Mahanthappa is developing an extended piece that will focus on a collaboration with a South Indian saxophonist Kadri Gopalnath, who has adapted the Carnatic traditional style of music to his horn.

"Some years ago, my brother bought me an album called 'Saxophone, Indian Style,'" he recalls, "with this really tacky photo of Gopalnath on the cover. It was supposed to be a joke, but it turned out to be killing. So when I heard he was playing in the United States, I sought him out. I thought it would be exciting to take these two traditions of saxophone playing and combine them. We play differently, but we do have a point of connection." The two saxophonists will work on their collaboration both in the United States and in India.

Cuban-born drummer Dafnis Prieto has become one of Latin-jazz's most in-demand drummers since coming to the United States about a decade ago. But while opportunities to play are plentiful, chances to explore the full scope of his artistic ambitions are hard to find and even harder to fund. He considers his *JazzJaunts* commission "the chance to do what I dream of doing in front of an audience." For his concerts, Prieto plans to augment his working group with strings and additional percussion. And he will do something that's quite natural in his native Cuba – incorporate dance into the performance.

Among the other participants in *JazzJaunts* are South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, who will add a horn section to his band, Iraqi trumpeter Amir El Saffar, who will feature Middle Eastern string players and percussionists, and New York trumpeter

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Steven Bernstein, who will blend New York jazz, traditional Jewish melodies, and New Orleans brass. Each of seven commissioned artists will play two concerts and conduct a workshop.

Over at Montgomery County Community College, Director of Cultural Affairs Helen Haynes was struck by the Martin Scorsese's recent PBS series on the blues. "It made me remember how the blues gained in popularity again when I was in college," she says, "and how it took British rock musicians to get Americans to recognize these great indigenous artists."

With a title that winks at a famous Miles Davis tune, "All Blues," Haynes's curated series, *All Hues... All Blues* demonstrates the vitality and breadth of modern blues music, ranging from James "Blood" Ulmer's gritty takes on classics to Mose Allison's wry Southern wit, from the bold, swaggering swing of singer Kevin Mohogany with Kendrick Oliver's New Life Jazz Orchestra to the Piedmont country style of Cephus and Wiggins.

And although the ever-inventive Philadelphia-based organization Relâche has commissioned eight new works for its PMP-funded series called *Future Sounds*, the resulting performances will actually do some fascinating revisionist history. Diane Monroe and Arthur Jarvinen will take on the task of scoring short films by early animation master Max Fleischer.

"The concept is formed around the idea of comedy and this heroic genre that these early films produced," Relâche's former Executive Director Thaddeus Squire says of the works for animation. "Fleisher, who was the creator of 'Popeye,' really founded this good cop-bad cop paradigm that's infused much of our popular culture."

Monroe, a former member of the Relâche ensemble, is an African American violinist/composer who freely blends classical and jazz influences, and is equally at home in both contexts. She was energized after viewing Fleischer's film shorts, many of which portrayed the artist interacting with his animated creations.

"There's just this amazing sense of possibilities," she says. "He would put some ink in his hand and just blow on it and open his palm, and produce a whole figure, who would then run around and create a whole storyline."

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Monroe hopes to capture some of that surrealistic magic in her compositions. And although Fleischer's films were made in the 1920s, in keeping with the *Future Sounds* theme, Monroe's score will sound thoroughly contemporary, reflecting modern jazz and contemporary classical music. "It will come from my life and times," she says, "superimposed over his work."

Inspired by imaginary pasts and fictional futures as well as real-life roots and contemporary sounds, the constellation of projects funded by this latest round of PMP grants will take elements of blues, swing and improvisation and carry them into new territory – all of which speaks of and to the city of Philadelphia, where so much innovative music has been birthed.

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