



Kris Davis

by Martin Longley

In just over a decade, the Canadian pianist Kris Davis has become an important player on the NYC alternative jazz scene. Early this month, she'll be marking the release of a quintet album on the Portuguese Clean Feed label. This Cornelia Street Café gig will reunite the makers of *Capricorn Climber*, promising to harness its refined, bittersweet aura. Davis has sculpted an exquisite construction of chamber ice, which is frequently populated by ripping molten outbursts, alternating with marshaled themes: an ambulatory Monkishness can (and indeed does) evolve into a sparse séance 'scape.

Davis is joined by Mat Maneri (viola), Ingrid Laubrock (saxophones), Trevor Dunn (bass) and Tom Rainey (drums). This quintet played their first gig at Barbès in Brooklyn two years ago. At that genesis point, they were solely concerned with improvisation. Then Davis decided that she wanted to write for this lineup, the five subsequently playing at Cornelia Street Café and The Jazz Gallery.

"It's a mix," says Davis, just before a meeting at the latter venue, where she was set to finalize the details of an artist residency. "A lot of composed things that are manipulated by the artists. I wanted to allow them to have the space to be free, to do whatever they feel is right for the music. But I still want there to be a written component, so they interpret whatever I have there."

Clean Feed has been the main home for the pianist's work in recent years, whether as a bandleader, bandmember or even as a completely solo performer (*Aerial Piano*, 2009). "There are solo sections," she continues, explaining the *Capricorn Climber* method. "Some of it is collective, some is completely written, trying to sound completely improvised. I wrote for those specific players, but sometimes the situation is that you're writing for a project and you don't know who's going to be playing, so you go with what your concept is at the time. There isn't a set way that I write, I'm usually exploring an idea for an individual piece."

A pivotal outfit is Paradoxical Frog, where Davis is joined by Laubrock and drummer Tyshawn Sorey. This is one of the most mystically ritualistic combos on the scene, specializing in composed music that sounds improvised (is some kind of pattern developing here?), with all three members contributing pieces. "We take a lot of liberties with it," Davis admits. "But we have pages and pages of material! For the first record we had pieces separately and we just brought them in, but for the last record we wrote them specially for the group."

Davis' journey went from Calgary to Toronto and then down to New York. "I always wanted to live here and I had met a lot of New York people at the Banff Centre For The Arts, so when I came down I already knew a few people. I didn't know if I'd be able to make it work, but I wanted to try. Right after I finished school, I came down and dove in, tried to find my way. There were a couple of times when I thought I wasn't

going to be able to stay, being a Canadian, for immigration reasons. But I found someone to sponsor me and I was able to work here legally. Once that happened, I knew I was going to stay. The scene here is flourishing and things are changing all the time. It's an exciting place to be!"

Davis studied and practiced in the classical mode, but became attuned to jazz at a very early stage, drinking in Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and Keith Jarrett. She studied with Jim McNeely in New York and Benoît Delbecq in Paris, then met the saxophonist Tony Malaby at Banff. "He was a big influence for me," says Davis. "When I moved to New York I hadn't really composed that much and he encouraged me. After I did *Lifespan* (Fresh Sound-New Talent, 2003) I wanted to explore blurring the lines between improvisation and composition."

For the first half of her career Fresh Sound was a prime supporter and then the emphasis switched to Clean Feed for the second stage, at least so far. Davis penned all of the arrangements for Malaby's 2011 large ensemble *Novela* album. "It was the first time I'd written for a group like that and heard a whole large-scale project come together. I've just been awarded a grant to write for a large ensemble, so I'll be doing that this year. I want it to focus on bass clarinets, three or four of them, plus piano, accordion, organ, guitar and trumpets."

I quiz Davis on whether she's ever felt drawn to electronic keyboards. "I don't know if I will end up doing that. I haven't really experimented with that. I feel like that's such a large world, you can really fall into it."

Even though most of her output is composed, Davis still has a firm commitment to improvisation. The 2005 *Fiction Avalanche* Clean Feed album found her working as part of the RIDD Quartet with saxophonist Jon Irabagon, bassist Reuben Radding and drummer Jeff Davis. "That record was completely improvised," she confirms. "We worked a lot on improvising concepts together, for a year before we recorded."

Another fully improvising project is soon coming: a continuation of a quartet with Laubrock, Rainey and trumpeter Ralph Alessi. An album was recorded last year and will be released later in 2013.

That above-mentioned residency at The Jazz Gallery was indeed finalized and will take place in May, revolving around new works written for Davis' trio with Rainey and bassist John Hébert. "There's so much history and so many people doing it and, as hard as it is, that's also attractive, to find your own way of doing it."

Deep contrasts are the Davis way, with composition that sounds like improvisation, improvisation that sounds composed, cerebral constructions delivered with glacial calm and heat-of-the-moment inventions negotiated with a vigorous emotional attack. All of these will doubtless transpire at that enticing Cornelia record release party. ❖

For more information, visit krisdavis.net. Davis is at Cornelia Street Café Feb. 2nd with *Capricorn Climber* and 22nd-23rd with *Ellery Eskelin*. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- RIDD Quartet - *Fiction Avalanche* (Clean Feed, 2005)
- Kris Davis - *Rye Eclipse* (Fresh Sound-New Talent, 2007)
- Kris Davis - *Aerial Piano* (Clean Feed, 2009)
- Paradoxical Frog - *Eponymous* (Clean Feed, 2009)
- Tony Malaby Novela - *Eponymous* (Clean Feed, 2011)
- Kris Davis - *Capricorn Climber* (Clean Feed, 2012)

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