

Kind,
dependable
and diligent,
**Donny
McCaslin** is
also a supremely
gifted technician
and an endlessly
curious
improviser—a
certified player's
player. But for
the 44-year-
old family man,
chops aren't the
point. McCaslin
is trying to move
people.

B
B
I

It's been said that New York is a big small town, but the Brooklyn jazz community is outright tiny. Stepping in for a lunch interview at Zaytoons, a Middle Eastern spot in Prospect Heights, Donny McCaslin immediately stumbles upon fellow saxophonist Ohad Talmor and trumpeter Russ Johnson sitting down to lentil soup. The conversation buzzes. Talmor loses no time in ribbing McCaslin over his favorite basketball team, the Golden State Warriors. Then talk turns to that most freighted of New York subjects: where to send the kids to school.

For a moment you forget these are monster musicians. To invoke the late Mister Rogers, they're people that you meet in the neighborhood.

Looked at another way, this encounter shows the warmth and good will that McCaslin has earned among his fellow players. At 44, he is indisputably one of the major saxophone voices of his generation. But he's as-

cended patiently through the ranks, investing years of work and balancing solid go-to professionalism with the hunger of his own creative pursuits. He has nine CDs as a leader, a Grammy nomination and high-profile sideman roles with Danilo Pérez, David Binney, Maria Schneider, Dave Douglas and others to his credit. But he's a humble character and a family man. His wife, Sarah, is a Presbyterian minister (he was baptized himself in 2001). They have a 2-year-old daughter, Claire, and another child on the way.

A gentle giant at 6-foot-3, McCaslin has the easy vibe of a native Northern Californian, an unflappability that once led pianist Frank Kimbrough to bestow a nickname: "the Donny Lama." "He's such a giving person, on and off the bandstand," says Johnathan Blake, the drummer on McCaslin's 2008 trio manifesto, *Recommended Tools*. But maybe there's more to that mellow, peaceful rep than we think. "You've just got to spend more time with me," McCaslin says, smile unbroken.



By David R. Adler | Photograph by Ron Jones

Donny **BIG** LOVE McCaslin



“I don’t want to think about this chord or that chord. I want to think about thematic development and having the music feel really good.”

If anything, you can sense his more aggressive side from the music itself. “Donny has this energy that he puts out really consistently night to night,” says bassist and longtime friend Scott Colley. “You can tell his whole being is involved in each note.” Binney, the producer of McCaslin’s last five albums, agrees: “He plays like he means it, the same way he plays basketball.” Dave Douglas, after hiring McCaslin for his acclaimed quintet, drew a straightforward conclusion: “You can be a really nice guy and still cut the music to shreds with your horn.”

McCaslin’s newest CD is *Perpetual Motion*, his second outing on Douglas’ Greenleaf label. It’s a foray into electric jazz, and certainly one of his more hard-driving statements. But even if the aesthetic is markedly different from his trio music or his three efforts to date for the Sunnyside label (the brass-augmented *Declaration*, the Latin-inspired *Soar* and *In Pursuit*), there’s a clear and coherent thread running through all the tenorman’s work. You hear it most in his vibrant, room-filling tone, in the boundless rhythmic fluency of his soloing.

McCaslin also shares with Binney a reluctance to think in terms of genres. “The choices are really all just about music—what works, what doesn’t work,” Binney insists. “The style and instrumentation doesn’t make that much difference. The music is above all that.” It helps, too, that *Perpetual Motion* is packed with talent: McCaslin on tenor, Binney on alto and electronics, Tim Lefebvre on electric bass, Adam Benjamin on piano and Rhodes (Uri Caine plays on three tracks), Antonio Sanchez and Mark Guiliana appearing separately on drums. With their help, McCaslin made an album that harks back to some of his earliest roots as a music lover.



McCaslin had the benefit of a musical upbringing in Santa Cruz. “I lived with my mom,” he remembers, “and I would see my dad [pianist/vibraphonist Don McCaslin] one day a week. He would pick me up

on Sundays and we’d drive down to the Pacific Garden Mall, this main drag. There was a restaurant/bar and an outdoor patio with tables. He’d play there from noon until 5 or 6 on a Sunday, and I’d go and listen. They’d play Cal Tjader-style tunes, vamping on one chord, and the sax player would play this avant-garde solo, and people would be dancing—the hippie vibe. Then they’d play ‘I’m Beginning to See the Light,’ and then ‘Mustang Sally.’ So all of those things coexisted for me.” McCaslin still sits in with his father during West Coast tours.

Attending high school in nearby Happy Valley, McCaslin absorbed important lessons from band director Don Keller: “[Keller] was in the Navy with [Ellington trumpeter] Bill Berry, and he had copies of all the old Ellington charts. So in the early ’80s my school band was playing the real shit, way before those charts were readily available. Paul Gonsalves’ solo on ‘Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue’ was a big part of my teenage years.”

By the time he got to Berklee in 1984, McCaslin had caught the John Coltrane and Michael Brecker bug. During college he would throw down on gigs with faculty drummer Tommy Campbell, known for his early ’80s work with John McLaughlin in the Translators. Future McLaughlin bassist Kai Eckhardt was in the band, as was Aydin Esen, the highly advanced Turkish keyboardist. Fusion was

thick in the air, and McCaslin was already a player to be reckoned with. “When we met at school,” says pianist Danilo Pérez, “I remember he was playing ‘Donna Lee’ in all the keys. I was like, ‘Hey, wait a minute! This cat is serious.’”

After Berklee, McCaslin says, “I stopped listening to [Coltrane and Brecker], because that was the majority of the language I was drawing from. I felt I really needed to broaden my influences.” Enter Sonny Rollins. “I think Sonny once referred to himself as a ‘blue-collar improviser,’ and that really resonated with me. I don’t want to think about this chord or that chord. I want to think about thematic development and having the music feel really good.” Hear McCaslin play “Along Came Betty,” the first track on his 1998 debut, *Exile and Discovery*, and you know what he means. The tone is gruff, the swing laidback and steeped in the tradition, palpably Rollins-like.

A funny thing happened, however, on the way to stylistic independence. McCaslin, by now a New Yorker, landed a gig with Mike Mainieri and Steps Ahead in the early ’90s. And he found himself performing music inescapably associated with Brecker, the band’s former tenor saxophonist. “Tunes like ‘Oops’ and ‘Pools,’ we were playing them every night,” he recalls. “I loved them so much and I had to find my own way to play on them. It was a great opportunity.” McCaslin’s *In Pursuit*, released soon after Brecker’s untimely death in 2007, includes a poignant dedication in the liner notes.

Earlier, McCaslin had served a key apprenticeship with vibraphonist Gary Burton, who always stressed that “one way to find your own voice as an improviser is by writing.” McCaslin heeded this advice, but it wasn’t until he formed the collaborative quartet Lan Xang, with Binney and Scott Colley, that his composing found a full-fledged outlet. Jeff Hirshfield played drums on the group’s self-titled 1997 debut; Kenny Wollesen, a friend of McCaslin’s going back to junior high, played on *Hidden Gardens*, the 2000 follow-up. Lan Xang’s music had an open, unscripted, hard-swinging feel, though the compositions and overall

Donny **BIG** LOVE McCaslin

approach took shape in a workshop-like atmosphere over the course of years. “I don’t think any of us had much work then,” Colley recalls. “I had an apartment on 72nd Street and we had sessions there, two or three times a week sometimes. There was a lot of development going on for all of us.”

By the time Lan Xang formed, McCaslin had already appeared on Binney’s 1995 disc *The Luxury of Guessing*. Binney recruited him again for *Free to Dream* (1998) and *Balance* (2002). There was clearly an intricacy and refined knowledge to Binney’s writing, but also a lyrical fire and an intuitive, visceral quality that sparked McCaslin’s interest. “I didn’t go to school for that,” Binney says of his composing process. “I know what I’m doing, but I don’t bother to figure it out. Donny and I come at music from completely different angles, but it works.”

“I noticed that [Binney] had a lot to offer in terms of a conceptual role,” McCaslin explains. “We had a shared musical aesthetic and I really respected his opinion. In terms of his producing, the way it works is we get together before the date and talk about orchestration, form, whatever. Maybe he’ll come to a gig and offer feedback, adjust some things and go from there.”

“We start really early on in the writing process,” adds Binney. “We’re already working on Donny’s next record—I can tell, without him even mentioning it. I seem to be working on some new tunes.”



Of all the factors contributing to McCaslin’s artistic growth, his immersion in Latin music is among the most significant. He had produc-

tive stints with pianist Hector Martignon and bassist Santi Debriano’s Panamaniacs. And reuniting with former classmate Danilo Pérez, he appeared on the Boclé Brothers’ *Tales From the Reefs* (1993), as well as *The Outsider*, a powerful 1997 Savant date by Argentine guitarist and composer Fernando Tarrés. The latter set the stage for Donny’s involvement in *Motherland*, Pérez’s landmark achievement of 2000. “I grew up in the era when jazz education for sax players was focused on harmonic language—chord scales, chromatic substitutions—and there wasn’t much emphasis on time and rhythmic variation,” McCaslin says. Studying Sonny Rollins helped him address the imbalance, but Latin music brought about an even deeper shift.

And no experience was more pivotal than gigging with Pérez. “Various times I just brought blank music paper when I was on the road with Danilo,” McCaslin recalls. “We’d be at soundcheck and he’d show me these different ideas. It was like being back in school with a master teacher, and it changed my life.”

“Donny’s human quality and work ethic were superbly high,” says Pérez. “I started hearing in his improvisations some of the things we were addressing. The connection got beyond just the normal lines that a horn player would play. He could also address rhythms and cycles in a way that has to do a lot with the music I grew up listening to. It was the perspective of a North American embracing the music of the Americas, really going into the folk material. And I sensed something starting to change, because Latinos had always learned a lot of jazz, but people like Donny showed me how Latin music was being looked at as something serious, worthy of study—not only in the percussion sense, but also in melodic terms and in sound and phrasing. Not just how the clave goes.”



art jazz presents **Aug 11-14, 2011**
The Brampton Global Jazz & Blues Festival

Mark your calendars for the first annual Brampton Global Jazz and Blues Festival, a celebration of the best in jazz, blues and world music. We’re gathering the legends of today and the rising stars of tomorrow so bring the family and take in the FREE outdoor concerts in Gage Park, along Main Street and at the Rose Theatre Patio. With mainstage concerts in the Rose Theatre, family matinee concerts, jazz and blues for juniors, music workshops and clinics, dance performances, art exhibits and more, historic downtown Brampton will be transformed into a global village filled with sights, sounds, tastes and treats from around the globe.

Highlights of the Festival include:

- the artistry of South Asian Jazz • the sounds of New Orleans • Jazz 'n Film
- Art 'n Jazz • free late night jams • Sunday Gospel brunch • and world cuisine

Be there. For more information visit artofjazz.org

   

Donny **BIG** LOVE McCaslin

In February 2001 McCaslin played the Village Vanguard in a Pérez-led quartet with Essiet Essiet on bass and Adam Cruz on drums. High-caliber bands at the Vanguard are not unusual, but now and then one hears players who go that extra step and simply wreck the place. Pérez dealt with material from *Motherland* but in the most exploratory fashion, as if the tunes themselves were suggestions, outlines. McCaslin blew like mad, keeping mainly to soprano sax. Pérez's road band was at its peak. "It was kind of heart-breaking," says Pérez, "because when I got the opportunity to play with Wayne [Shorter], I had to give them the news that I might not be able to follow up with the group. Wow, it was a sad moment for all of us. But Donny and I touched base again on my record from 2003, ... *Till Then*." McCaslin, on soprano as before, plays on two tracks only—Chico Buarque's "Trocando em Miúdos" and Milton Nascimento's "Vera Cruz"—and conjures a bit of that old Vanguard spark. "We had hardly any rehearsal, and man it was fascinating," Pérez recalls. "We hadn't been playing together,

but I just called him and he came and it was there. I'm sure it will never go away."



Big bands also loom large for McCaslin: He's lent his talents to the George Gruntz Concert Jazz Band and the Mingus Big Band, as well as Ken Schaphorst's ensemble on the 1998 opus *Purple* (an effort that included future Dave Douglas bandmate Uri Caine). He has a beautiful solo on "Cerulean Skies" from the Maria Schneider Orchestra's *Sky Blue*. But it stands to reason that a Spanish-tinged work, "Buleria, Soleá y Rumba" from Schneider's 2004 disc *Concert in the Garden*, would land McCaslin a Grammy nomination for Best Jazz Instrumental Solo.



PERPETUAL MOVERS: McCaslin at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, with Uri Caine, Scott Colley and Antonio Sanchez (from left); Feb. 28, 2011

McCaslin vividly remembers laying that solo down in the studio: "As you can imagine, it's so thrilling to get up there in front of Maria's writing. What you're hearing behind you is so beautiful." His prevalent influence here was

the new gary burton quartet

common ground

Gary Burton • Julian Lage • Scott Colley • Antonio Sanchez

Pioneer of the virtuosic four mallet technique, vibraphonist Burton returned to the studio for an all-new session in his favorite setting: vibraphone, guitar, bass and drums.

iTunes amazon.COM mackavenue.com • garyburton.com

MACK AVENUE
The road to great music.

FRANK STEWART/JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

Donny **BIG** LOVE McCaslin

the great tango vocalist Roberto Goyeneche, whose rich sound McCaslin had discovered during tours in Argentina with Fernando Tarrés. “The way Goyeneche sings, half the time he’s talking,” says McCaslin. “And it’s really over the bar line, it’s got this real vibe. A light went off: That’s the way I could approach playing on Maria’s piece.”

Naturally, the experiences with Schneider, Pérez and others have had an impact on McCaslin’s own music. “Soar” came from soloistic ideas he generated while practicing Schneider’s “Hang Gliding,” though he also mentions the rhythmic language of her piece “Journey Home.” The multihued sound palette of McCaslin’s *Soar* and *In Pursuit*—roiling percussion, flute and alto flute, layered guitar timbres, Luciana Souza’s vocals (on *Soar*)—suggest a new and confident synthesis, honed by Binney’s production, but also owing something to the eclecticism McCaslin heard from his father all those years ago.

Perpetual Motion, though stamped with complex and insinuating harmony, is more an elemental blast of grit and funk. “It makes me think a lot of Santa Cruz,” McCaslin says. “For example, Tower of Power was popular and based in the Bay Area, and I grew up loving that music. My tune ‘Energy Generation’ is coming directly from that.” The title “L.Z.C.M.” stands for Led Zeppelin and Christian McBride, and as a description of the tune it certainly fits. “Firefly,” an evocative melody that McCaslin wrote for his wife, is Adam Benjamin’s moment, a feature for his creative sonic approach on Rhodes. “Memphis Redux” taps into a rich vein of American soul music, from Cannonball Adderley to Donny Hathaway.



Early in 2011, McCaslin was playing the *Perpetual Motion* repertoire live with varying personnel, in both acoustic and electric settings. At Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola in late February, Uri Caine backed McCaslin on acoustic piano alongside Colley and Antonio Sanchez. In late March Caine found himself on Rhodes with Lefebvre and Guiliana at the 55 Bar. Purely in terms of decibels, the electric date was quieter, oddly enough, and the music found a more elastic, irresistible pocket. The venue itself was significant, a clubhouse of sorts for players in McCaslin’s circle: Binney’s quartet has played the 55 Bar regularly for years. Lefebvre held court here on weekly gigs with Wayne Krantz. Chris Potter launched Underground, his own electric unit, in the same room. For McCaslin, too, this is home: a place to stretch out, try things and connect with fans in an intimate—OK, positively cramped—space.

Between sets, as McCaslin shook hands, autographed CDs and grinned for snapshots, one thought of something he said back at Zaytoons. “Reading about Coltrane when I was younger, I remember him talking about playing in front of people, and wanting to spread this feeling of love through the room. That meant a lot to me. And that’s how I feel, that’s what I strive for, touching people in a way that’s positive. For me, that’s where the element of rhythm comes into play. If you’re playing something with a strong feel, with rhythmic integrity, it’s going to move people regardless of its analytical nature. That’s really compelling to me as a human being.” **JT**

JAMEY AEBERSOLD'S 2011 SUMMER **JAZZ** WORKSHOPS

2 GREAT WEEKS OF JAZZ!
July 3rd - July 8th OR July 10th - July 15th

University of
Louisville
Lou., KY

ALSO
2-DAY
WORKSHOP PRIMERS

GUITAR/BASS/DRUMS
July 2nd & 3rd
July 9th & 10th
SEMINAR W/JAMEY!
July 2nd & 3rd

- ALL AGES
- ALL LEVELS
- ALL INSTRUMENTS
- JAZZ COMBOS
- MASTER CLASSES
- JAM SESSIONS

1-800-456-1388 • SUMMERJAZZWORKSHOPS.COM