





THE POTTER

PARADE LIST

Chris Potter
embraces funk,
with multiple
twists, on his
new album,
Underground.

BY DAVID R. ADLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOURDES DELGADO



can hear Chris Potter's sound even before he starts to improvise." These are the words of Ravi Coltrane, Potter's fellow saxophonist and contemporary, in a November 2005 Blindfold Test for *Downbeat*. The track Coltrane heard was "Sintra," from David Binney's 2004 release *Welcome to Life* (Mythology). Potter states the initial melody in a calm yet resolute tenor voice—nothing fancy, just 10 or so legato notes, but enough for Coltrane to identify him. This is perhaps the ultimate compliment for a saxophonist, who invests his very breath in the instrument and strives for a personal tone above all else.

Potter's tone has served him well. He is a figure of international renown by age 35. He's the youngest musician ever to win Denmark's JAZZPAR Prize. His discography, from a creative if not a commercial standpoint, is pure platinum: over a dozen albums as a leader and counting, plus sideman credits with Dave Holland, Dave Douglas, Steve Swallow, Paul Motian and many others. In David Liebman's estimation he's "one of the best musicians around." Motian calls him

"one of my favorite saxophone players." Holland calls him "a great craftsman on the instrument." Swallow calls him "a complete musician." Others just call him.

Since coming on the scene as a Red Rodney apprentice in the early '90s, Potter has worked unstintingly, but he's mustered the discipline to advance his own music at every step. Reporting for sideman duty is one thing; building a career as a leader is a whole other challenge, even for a player this successful. Potter compares it to pushing a boulder up a hill. And much as in the myth of Sisyphus, the process begins again with each new band.

Potter's latest is a quartet with Wayne Krantz on guitar, Craig Taborn on Fender Rhodes and Nate Smith on drums. The group's debut, *Underground*, is Potter's second recording for Universal France/Sunnyside. It follows *Lift: Live at the Village Vanguard*, the swan song of an earlier working quartet with Kevin Hays, Scott Colley and Bill Stewart.

This isn't the first time Potter has employed Rhodes. Hays went partially electric on *Lift* as well as on *Gratitude* and *Traveling*

Mercies, Potter's two albums for Verve. Potter's stint with the Dave Douglas Quintet involved plenty of Rhodes as well—on *The Infinite* and *Strange Liberation* (both BMG/Bluebird), Uri Caine played the instrument exclusively. It's a sound that has carried over to *Underground*, facilitating Potter's plan "to do something more funk-related," touching on "music that seems to be in the air, all around us. At first I couldn't decide—is organ the right texture? I didn't hear acoustic bass on it, but I didn't really hear electric bass either. Playing with Craig, I realized: That's actually the sound. That's where it should go."

Rhodes and guitar essentially cover the bass role in the group, although in Taborn's view "that role is not really present at all. Wayne and I will both drop down to fulfill some of what I would call 'bass function,' but the idea is that it doesn't always have to be there, which can be liberating." Taborn also notes the "long history of keyboard bass-function playing in blues, jazz and rock—not to mention classical. I look to the boogie and blues piano players, gospel and jazz organists, Nat 'King' Cole, Duke Ellington, Sun Ra, Geri Allen and some Ligeti

for ideas about groove and independent left-hand things. The Doors never had a bassist and used the Rhodes bass exclusively. John Paul Jones did a lot of the live Led Zeppelin songs on a Rhodes. So there is a lot of precedent for what I am trying to do in this group. My goal is to have a more 'ignorant' and discursive bass concept. I am thinking of James Jamerson, Michael Henderson, Bill Laswell, Beefheart stuff, Prime Time, Mike Watt, Geezer Butler and Erik Fratze [of Happy Apple]."

As Nate Chinen noted in his June 2005 column for this magazine, the *Underground* instrumentation closely parallels Tim Berne's *Science Friction* group, of which Taborn was also a member. But according to Taborn, "The differences in the players and compositions always drastically change the aesthetics. Also, the compositional approaches of Chris and Tim each have their own improvisational implications." In Potter's case, the idea was to draw upon a "funk rhythmic language" but keep the music "as free as the freest jazz conception." Potter went so far as to impose a rule: "If the chart is more than one page long, it's too long. It got me to work in a different way. I wanted to see if every night we could invent a different composition. A big inspiration for this has been Wayne Shorter's quartet [with Danilo Pérez, John Patitucci and Brian Blade], where you have themes that [delin-]eate] a particular tune but basically it's a spontaneous group composition."

Overtly funky as it is, *Underground* is not a clean break from Potter's past work. "High Noon" from *Gratitude*, "Fishy" from *Vertigo* and "Migrations" from *Traveling Mercies* evoke a similarly groove-based aesthetic. And if the Dave Holland Quintet—a creative home for Potter since 1998—isn't funky, it's hard to imagine what is. Nate Smith replaced Billy Kilson in Holland's group about two years ago, so he and Potter have had a chance to ripen together. Holland says of the two: "They were touring without a bass player in the *Underground* band, and when they came back to the quintet I could hear some hookups that had developed." Wayne Krantz, a unique stylist who rarely works as a sideman, also has a galvanic effect. "Whatever he does, he's digging into the time," Potter says, "maybe breaking it up, maybe harmonically left-of-center. But it always has this pocket thing that I really respond to." Of the Krantz/Taborn combination, Potter enthuses: "It's this soup. This thick, rhythmic, textural thing, a rich sound to play over even though it's only two people."

Potter may have set out with the no-bass concept in mind, but the music can accommodate a bassist. In March 2005, with the studio effort already in the can, Potter and Krantz

played the *Underground* book on a short tour with electric bassist Fima Ephron and drummer Ari Hoening. In December Potter held court at the 55 Bar in New York with Nate Smith, Tim Lefebvre on electric bass and Adam Rogers on guitar (a mid-'50s Telecaster, to be exact). Rogers, who played some of the group's earliest gigs and also doubled some parts on the album, will appear more often now that Krantz has been hired by Donald Fagen.

More than a month before the *Underground* release date, this lineup was already playing new but similarly conceived music—what Chinen has described as "an aggressive but consonant progressivism, often but not always rock-infused." With Taborn absent, Potter doubled on Fender Rhodes himself, comping with skill and sensitivity under Rogers' solos. His tenor playing was ferocious. His projection, over an amplified guitar and bass and roaring drums, seemed effortless. He did not use a microphone.

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Chris Potter has long distinguished himself as a multireeds player, but on *Underground* he plays only tenor. "The most I'll take on the road now is the tenor and soprano," he says. "I've decided there's so much to explore with one horn." With Red Rodney he played alto, his first instrument, on which he is devastatingly effective. For proof look no further than Dave Holland's "Claressence" and "Metamorphos" from the Holland Quintet's double-live album *Extended Play*. Or try "A Seeking Spirit," a Robin Eubanks composition from Holland's 2000 disc *Prime Directive*. Of course there is also Potter's tartly melodic alto solo on "Janie Runaway," from Steely Dan's *Two Against Nature*. His finest bass-clarinete work can be heard on the original "Chorale" from *Moving In*, the Beatles' "The Fool on the Hill" from *Pure*, Willie Nelson's "Just As I Am" from *Traveling Mercies* and Kurt Weill's "September Song" from Potter's 1994 live duo session with pianist Kenny Werner.

By focusing on tenor, Potter seeks to

broaden its expressive range, to do with one horn what he once did with several. His command of the instrument can be astounding. As Ravi Coltrane puts it, "He can play anything he wants at any moment." Dave Douglas, who first heard Potter on a Manhattan dinner cruise playing "The Girl From Ipanema," offers: "Sometimes I hear Chris play and I think, 'OK, I know what that is, but I would have never imagined it happening right *there*, like *that*.'" There is an excellent illustration of this on the live version of Potter's tune "High Wire," from Holland's *Extended Play*. Cue to 3:41 and you'll hear Potter allude to Charlie Parker's "Confirmation," then quickly follow with a reference to "Anthropology." But he's only getting started. At 4:03 he delivers a fully formed quotation from "Ornithology," at an odd place in the form, over chord changes that shouldn't support it. Not only does this work, it swings hard enough to damage those in the front row. "He's got so much music under his fingers that it's just ridiculous," Douglas says, "but he never flaunts that for its own sake."

Other examples of Potter's virtuosity abound, such as "Boogie Stop Shuffle" from *Lift* and "No Cigar" from *Unspoken*, a bracing trio number with Holland and Jack DeJohnette. There's also the entirety of Steve Swallow's *Damaged in Transit*, a live trio suite featuring Potter with Swallow and drummer Adam Nussbaum. Or the must-hear session *What Now?*, where Potter shines in the drumless company of Holland, Kenny Wheeler and John Taylor. Potter is also integral to several recent cutting-edge sessions for Criss Cross (the label on which he debuted in 1992): *Allegory* and *Apparitions* by Adam Rogers as well as *Steppin' Zone*, *Hindsight* and *Equilibrium* by trumpeter Alex Sipiagin.

In regard to Potter's lyricism, a few recent performances stand out. On *Fellini Jazz* by pianist Enrico Pieranunzi, Potter steps forward with a haunting and powerful account of Nino Rota's theme to *La Dolce Vita*. On *Doorways* he joins Pieranunzi and Paul Motian on three cuts, rendering Pieranunzi's "The Heart of a Child" with extraordinary depth. On *Underground*, he leaves room amid the funk for a rubato reading of Billy Strayhorn's "Lotus Blossom." "All of a sudden it's this antique-sounding harmony," Potter says. "It's functional in an almost late 19th-century Romantic way, the way Strayhorn would write. I just play the melody; it's a short piece in the middle of these extended funk things." The album closes with another rubato meditation, "Yesterday" by the Beatles (a group partly responsible for Potter's interest in music). "'Yesterday' was originally an exercise," he recalls. "There are a couple more sections

where I completely Goldberg Variationed out, with 16th notes all over the place. It didn't really fit with the final version."

Potter will soon document a marvelous tentet project that premiered at the Jazz Standard last May, with Mark Feldman, Greg Tardy, Steve Cardenas, Larry Grenadier, Adam Cruz and others. Then more large-ensemble work: "I've written an album's worth of big-band music that I've performed with several big bands around the world. But that's a whole other

thing for the future."

As for the present, he's in a healthy place, free of the symptoms of Meniere's Disease, an inner-ear condition that causes debilitating, hours-long episodes of vertigo, without warning or apparent cause. It is little understood by the medical profession. Some years ago it cost Potter most of the hearing in his left ear. Obviously, neither the disease nor the partial deafness has hindered his progress. "I haven't had a dizzy spell for years," he says. "A lot of it boiled down to me deciding it was going to be OK. That helped,

frame of mind. It was a source of strength."

Frame of mind is important for someone who finds himself subbing for Michael Brecker in Dave Liebman and Joe Lovano's Saxophone Summit, or taking the stage with Herbie Hancock, Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette at the 2005 North Sea Jazz Festival. "Just realizing how open that situation can get," Potter muses, leaving the sentence unfinished. Flourishing under high pressure isn't a matter of luck, he suggests, but a skill in itself. "It's an unself-consciousness, even if there's 2,000 people out there," he continues. (He's played Madison Square Garden with Steely Dan, to far more than 2,000.) "You do want to communicate, but on your terms. Being an artist means that when the tendency is to freak out, you can't. You have to hold your ground. It's not an unfriendly stance. It's about trying to give as much as you can of what you really believe in. Rather than playing what worked last time." **JT**

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Tokyo String Quartet, Beethoven: The Late String Quartets (RCA Victor):

"There's not a major seventh; there's no color tones. It's really bizarre music, and really moving."

Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 6 (recording unknown)

Graham Nash, Songs for Beginners (Atlantic)

Hank Williams (anything): "He's got this unscripted, unfaked emotion in his voice."

Wayne Shorter, Juju (Blue Note): "I just got it again, hadn't heard it in years."

Gearbox

Tenor: Selmer Balanced Action 34000 series, silver-plated, nonengraved, late '40s.

Mouthpiece: Old Otto Link from the '60s. "It's been opened up and changed; I think it's a 7* opening."

Reeds: Rico Jazz Select 4 medium, filed. Also François Louis 4 1/2: "They're kind of expensive but really good."

Soprano: Selmer, Super Action Series 3, new. Old Selmer Soloist E mouthpiece: "They're making them again but I prefer the old ones."

Alto: Selmer Mark VI with a Selmer Soloist mouthpiece, "but I'm not playing alto at all these days."

Bass clarinet: "A really old Selmer from the '20s, with weird, clunky fingerings. I think it's an old Bundy mouthpiece that came with the instrument."