

Matthias Lupri

Metalix: A Wondering and Wandering Suite

An accomplished composer and promising new talent on the international jazz scene, vibraphonist Matthias Lupri is also a savvy bandleader who has always surrounded himself with outstanding sidemen. (Past recordings and tours have featured such stellar players as saxophonist Mark Turner, Greg Osby, Chris Potter, Rick Margitza and George Garzone, drummers Antonio Sanchez, Greg Hutchinson and Jeff Ballard, bassists Rueben Rogers and John Lockwood, trumpeter Cuong Vu and guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel.) One of the primary reasons that Lupri has been able to recruit such heavyweight players for his projects is by virtue of the sheer quality and striking character of his material. Great musicians love a challenge, and on any Lupri gig that comes in the form of devilishly tricky heads and odd time signatures, intricate lines and sophisticated, moving harmonies.

Just as his one-time Berklee mentor Gary Burton did during the 1970s, Lupri is making a singular statement on his instrument while carving out some new territory along the way. But unlike Burton, he's doing it while also embracing electronics and incorporating extended techniques. "I'm just trying to find different palettes of color and use them to the best of my ability to say what I want to say," explains the vibraphonist who also currently works in the percussion department at Berklee. "And I'm also using the electronic stuff to expand that palette."

On the atmospheric opener, "Metalix IV Prelude," the first thing the listener hears is the eerie sound of Lupri playing a violin bow on the vibes, but it's been reversed, looped and distorted electronically. He creates a similarly ethereal texture with the violin bow on the chilling soundscape "Ghost Clusters." "I've been exploring that more," he explains. "It's playing with two violin bows or playing with one violin bow in one hand and mallets in the other hand. The idea is, you can play something with the bow and start looping it with electronics, then you put down the bow and play with mallets over the loop."

Lupri opened this Pandora's box of electronics on 2004's *Transition Sonic* (particularly the ambient piece "Iceland Dark"). He continues in that experimental vein on *Metalix*, organically melding loops, shimmering reverb and backwards effects into the fabric of his thoughtful, evocative compositions. From the powerfully stirring "Wondering & Wandering" to more reflective pieces like "(another) Lost Creek" and "Still Lingering" to the exhilarating up-tempo burner "Glass Stairs" and the buoyantly swinging "Dream Nocturne," he exhibits a seasoned approach to composition while also distinguishing himself as a first-rate improviser.

Joining him on this ambitious and riveting 16-part suite are guitarist Nate Radley, bassist Thomson Kneeland and drummer Jordan Perlson (all returning from *Transition Sonic*). Radley, a brilliant but under-recognized player on the New York scene, is coming out of the Pat Metheny school of fleet-fingered, fluid improvisers and is also solidly in the Kurt Rosenwinkel-Ben Monder camp of warm-toned, harmonic provocateurs who are in search of something fresh. He contributes outstanding solos here on "Wondering & Wandering," "Glass Stairs" and "Time Design," the latter being laced with distortion and delay (somewhat along the lines of a Bill Frisell, Terje Rypdal or Allan Holdsworth).

Kneeland and Perlson, who have forged a dynamic and highly interactive chemistry together over time, play hand-in-glove throughout *Metalix*. "These guys all play beautifully and can nail the odd time signature stuff," says the composer. "And it just spurs you on to write and keep moving the music forward." Together they skillfully negotiate the odd time signatures of pieces like "Dream Nocturne" (in 6/4), "Metalix" (9/8), "Wandering and Wondering" (5/4), "Lost Creek" (which is in a variety of time signatures), "Glass Stairs" (13/4) and "Time Design" (which nimbly shifts back and forth between seven and six, and four).

Being a former rock drummer himself (he toured the Canadian rock circuit during the '80s before enrolling at the Berklee College of Music and graduating in 1994), Lupri can no doubt appreciate the muscular intensity and visceral appeal that Perlson delivers on turbulent pieces like "Glass Stairs" and "Time Design," both of which reach audacious, Bad Plus levels of bombast.

But the big news on *Metalix* is that Lupri is writing for two saxophones for the first time (since college). And in alto player Myron Walden (a gifted young player on the New York scene who has worked with trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, Brian Blade's Fellowship, the Josh Roseman Unit, and the New Jazz Composers Octet) and rising tenor star Donny McCaslin (who has worked with trumpeter Dave Douglas, Maria Schneider's Jazz Orchestra, Steps Ahead, pianist Deanna Witkowski and the co-op band Lan Xang), he has found two gems for his front line. Together they create an airy texture (with Walden on soprano sax and McCaslin on alto flute) on the brooding ballad "Still Lingerin'." Their pungent harmonies on alto and tenor ignite the fast-paced, boppish "Glass Stairs" while their spontaneous interplay on soprano and tenor during the free form section of "Time Design" sets off sparks.

Elsewhere, the dark, funereal "Flowers for Mary Jane" (named for Lupri's black cat) is underscored by Walden's superb bass clarinet work, and then as the piece opens up it develops into a powerful showcase for his uncommon authority with the alto sax. Walden's alto also shines on the dynamic "(another) Lost Creek," an ode to Lupri's nostalgic memories of swimming and fishing in creeks where he grew up in Alberta, Canada. McCaslin's tenor is fiery on "Glass Stairs" while offering more controlled abandon on "Dream Nocturne". He also proves to be equally facile on alto flute solos on the darkly dissonant "Metalix" and the hauntingly beautiful "Still Lingerin'."

There is also a non-musical subtext here that is as provocative as the sounds heard on *Metalix*. As Lupri explains, "The idea of *Metalix* came to me as some kind of symbol of life itself. It's a very cryptic kind of thing and as I think about it more and delve deeper into it, I find out more answers for myself regarding it. But it's just one of those symbolic things that came to me...sort of in a dream. A lot of stuff comes to me at night in that period when you're sleeping and where you kind of fade in and fade out of consciousness. That's where pieces like 'Dream Nocturne,' 'Ghost Clusters' and 'Flowers for Mary Jane' came from. You know, when you live your life around music and creating music and writing music, it comes and goes and it filters through all the time - when you're dreaming, when you're sleeping, when you're waking up. And with me it's gotten to the point where it's like, 'What came first the chicken or the egg' with all this stuff: You write your music and it reflects your life, then your life reflects back to your music. And as your life develops, you continue to grow with the music. And as an improviser, too, you're always trying to keep searching for that infinite thing."

So far, Lupri's search has led him to this place. "I'm just trying to be myself and do my own thing," he says, "and I hope that it comes off as something a little different." A thinking man's musician with an abundance of chops, a luminous solo voice and a crew of killer soloists, he succeeds on so many counts with *Metalix*.

-- *Bill Milkowski*

Bill Milkowski is a contributor to *Jazz Times* and *Jazziz*. He is also the author of "JACO: The Extraordinary and Tragic Life of Jaco Pastorius" (Backbeat Books)