

Music at Main Dec. 6: the Daniel Bennett group

By Max Newman



The downtown Cleveland Public Library is no stranger to presenting eclectic musical offerings. Through its Music at Main series, the library's fine arts department is transformed into a concert space on select Saturday afternoons, a recurring event which has platformed an ever-widening spectrum of genres and styles since its inception.

At 2:00 pm on December 6, the Daniel Bennett group will continue this trend. the trio, led by their namesake saxophonist, will bring a self-described “mix of jazz, folk, and minimalism” to the third-floor lobby. I spoke with Bennett over the phone about the upcoming performance.

Bennett says his journey with the sax began in his formative years in Rochester, New York. Kickstarted by a particularly striking performance at a high school jazz concert. “I heard a kid play the Pink Panther theme on tenor saxophone, and that was life changing for me.” From that point, Bennett said he did all he could to further his bond with the instrument. “I went through the school band program, concert band and marching band, and I taught myself to play guitar on the side. I was writing songs and singing and playing in church 2 or 3 times a week. I was doing everything.”

After plentiful gigging, and spending his undergraduate years at a small Christian liberal arts college in Rochester, New York, Bennett moved to Boston to complete his masters at the New England Conservatory. The jump, he says, was refreshing. “In a way, it allowed me to get out of the sphere of academia, and into the real world. I started playing some symphonic gigs around New England, and then a ton of theater gigs

around Boston. I was also playing in a dinner cruise band a couple of nights a week. So I was really getting my feet wet.”

Bennett’s first steady role as bandleader came in the form of a weekly spot at Boston’s Liberty Hotel. The recurring gig gave him the confidence to go in his own musical direction. “I knew I could play it safe and do standards, and I did do that a bit. But I also figured out early on that I could branch out as long as people were into what I was playing. My tone is very chill, so I could write songs that were weird, but still kind of mellow. People really liked it.”

After further successes in the Boston area, Bennett moved to New York in 2010, where he began to hone his genre-bending composition skills. “There are a lot of classical overtones in my music — I don’t think I’ve ever written a song using a 2-5-1 chord progression. But the songs are also very groove-based. I compose all my music on the guitar, strumming chords and singing. Then I transfer that to the alto sax, clarinet or flute. After that, each song kind of takes on a life of its own.”

The Daniel Bennett group also began to take shape around this time. “At the beginning it was like a folk trio. I had a banjo, an upright bass, and an alto. But with the larger gigs we were doing, we needed a little bit more of an edge, so we gradually added drums.”

The group’s current iteration, which will play at the library on December 6, features Coco Bermejo on drums and keyboard. “He actually plays them at the same time,” said Bennett, “it’s really wild,” and Jeff Dingler on electric bass. The lineup, according to the bandleader, has been fairly consistent for “maybe 5 or 6 years,” and has toured extensively, performing at venues such as Blue Note, Herb Alpert’s Vibrato Club in Los Angeles, and the Zingari jazz club in San Francisco.

They are also currently working on their 11th studio album, which will feature covers of compositions by such artists as Joni Mitchell, the Beatles, and Sam Rivers. “I’m very excited for it,” Bennett. “It’s a few months delayed, but it’s going to come out early next year.”

Daniel Bennett says the group’s sound, as well as its personnel, has evolved substantially over the years into something that refuses to be categorized. “After developing our folky sound, we went into sort of a minimalist electronic phase, inspired by Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Terry Riley, and Lamont Young. I think there are still elements of that in the music, like repetition and strange modulations. People have called our music ‘avant-pop,’ and that’s probably somewhat accurate, but all of a sudden in one of our songs, I’ll pick up the flute, and we sound folkier again.”

It is this thrilling amalgamation of influences that will be on display on the 6th of December. This is not the Daniel Bennett group's first rodeo at the Cleveland Public Library — they performed in the space several years ago — but they are thrilled at the prospect of returning. "We love the venue," said the saxophonist, adding that CPL's music librarian and event coordinator Andrew Kaplan "is amazing. He's always been very supportive of who we are, and what we do. It's going to be a really cool experience."

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