

Traveling Down Scenic Roads with Clay Ross

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I'm not a musician; I'm a writer. I know nothing about reading music or pitch or anything pertaining to scales or chords. However, music is all about how it makes me feel emotionally—less a head trip than a warm feeling of recognition as if a song or a piece of music was always out there hanging in the air for me to grab. Kind of like Clay Ross's new CD, "The Random Puller," which has a lot of fascinating improv conversations. It's like being at a really cool party late on a Saturday night and everyone is mellow and quiet as they head out towards a huge backyard with candles hanging from the trees—everyone is listening to the imagery coming from speakers that are resting on a roof. Ross is also the guitarist in Cyro Baptista's explosive percussion-driven band, Beat the Donkey. I met Ross at 10,000 Lakes where he gave me a copy of his new CD. When I returned to the West after the long, glorious festival I was in for quite a surprise: popped in his CD and immediately loved its modern jazz explorations. I sat down with him to discuss "The Random Puller," his past and his bright future. As you will see and hear, Clay Ross thinks like a Poet, writes like a Novelist and plays the guitar like a Master.

RR: Let's tackle each song one at a time. The band is yourself on guitar, Stockton Helbing on drums, Kebbi Williams on tenor sax and Brian Mullholland on bass. Disc was engineered, mixed and Executive Produced by Duane Evans. I'd like you to elaborate upon the liner notes that detail each song, as well. I found this to be a fascinating little muse journey as I listened to the songs over and over and tried to apply the notes over the melodies. "Random Puller"—I love the various tempos. Your guitar work matched with Kebbi Williams on Tenor Sax is solid while the rhythm section of Brian Mullholland and Stockton Helbing races to keep up with the ideas of the guitar/sax duo. How structured was this piece? How much improvisation?

CR: This piece was written a while ago, with the different sections changing over time. The composition is very long and arranged with a few sections in the middle and end for structured improvisation. All the chord progressions and melodies that

are played in unison between the sax and guitar are composed, while in and around that is a lot of room for each player to express himself with his own musical input. The sound that you're describing is (I will guess) towards the end. Here, I am playing a chord progression that ascends up a minor scale with a passing tone and the guitar is really the only constant. Kebbi is soloing while Brian and Stockton are creating rhythmic tension and release by superimposing different rhythmic figures (something at which they excel).

RR: "Agora"—gentle stroll. How did you write this number and was the cool trance of the groove always intended? Wonderful guitar solo from 2:45 range onwards...one take? Did you have it mapped out ahead of time?

CR: When I first came to NYC, I started working with this really phenomenal Spanish accordion player. He got me interested in Latin rhythms and, especially, Brazilian music. My interest in this music has only grown in the years and especially now, playing with Cyro, I am constantly absorbing more Brazilian sounds. The rhythm here is a straightforward Samba and the strumming of my guitar is meant to imitate the sound of the cavaquinho (a Brazilian string instrument that looks a lot like a ukulele). I wrote the tune one afternoon with the intention of doing something very simple, singable, and fun. Most every song we did live in the studio in one or two takes. Surprisingly, this one gave us a little trouble, because there was an energy that we were trying to capture. The first couple of takes were all the right notes and everything but they didn't have the spirit of what I was going for. Duane [Evans—Executive Producer and Engineer] was a big help here and before this take he said, "I know what Clay is trying to do here, this is like a jazz standard, its got this cheesy quality, so you all need to play it like you wrote it and not just read the notes off the page." I think everyone loosened up and we caught a vibe. I'm glad you like the guitar solo; I believe this was the second or third take of the tune. I didn't consciously plan the solo, but Duke Ellington said something to the effect that every great solo is thought out, practiced, and planned, which to me means that every great soloist has done his homework to the point that he knows exactly what he is going to play before he plays it. That is the level of musical control that I aspire.

RR: "Falez"—the melody is so beautiful that, like most great songs, it sounds familiar and timeless? Any influences for this song? I love the sax breakdown while everyone plays softly in the background? How long did it take to get this structure perfected?

CR: I wrote this melody while I was living in Paris in 2001. The idea started with the rhythm. I was trying to place a melody over a tango feel in 5/4 time. In the fall

and winter, Paris becomes such a dark and mysterious place, with seemingly few hours of sunlight and a gothic, old world character. This was one of those cases where I must have been dreaming this music, because I woke up and immediately wrote down the melody. I added the initial ideas to my sketchbook and they stayed there for a couple of years. The piece took its final form when I started to prepare for this CD recording. I changed some things in the B section and arranged it for this quartet. This turned out to be one of my favorite pieces on the record and

I think Kebbi's solo is really beautiful.

RR: "Lost Child" – WOW – Coltrane's in the room. You are very generous with your playing as Kebbi Williams shines again. Tell me how you wrote this beaut. Who were your jazz influences?

CR: Sometimes I write music around the things that I am studying. I wrote this theme during 2001 while on a train going from Paris to Switzerland. I had been working out voicings of the harmonic minor scale on my instrument. This scale is used in lots of different music including Klezmer and Arabic, and is associated with a Middle Eastern sound. I wrote the melody and chords together trying to find things that resonated with me and sounded unique. I really liked what I found in the B section, which alternates between the two different forms of unstable harmony, diminished and augmented. Finally, I set the solo form to a blues progression in a minor key, which is something that John Coltrane started to do around '59. The outcome sort of blends Eastern and Western esthetics and I really loved the way the final recorded version turned out. My jazz influences are a wide and long list from guitarists Grant Green, Wes Montgomery, Pat Metheny, George Benson, and Jim Hall, to pianists Wynton Kelly, Bill Evans, Keith Jarrett, Brad Mehldau, to Horn Players Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and Hank Mobley, to composers like Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, and Thelonious Monk. This is really a short list. I love music.

RR: "Luna Belle" – wonderful segue out of "Lost Child." Please discuss your show that you co-created called "A Day in the Life of Otus."

CR: When I finished my degree at the College of Charleston, I formed a band with an admired local bassist, Kevin Hamilton. The group called Otus really pushed my playing to another level and helped me to see my potential for becoming a jazz musician. We were really into Zappa, ARJ, John McLaughlin, and other creative fusion groups. We decided to present a concert and put all of our music to a story. I brought in the sketches of this idea about a battle for the universe fought by

cockroaches. The story evolved to include a cockroach army based on the moon that launched Dildo torpedoes down on Planet Earth. We only performed the entire show once at the College of Charleston Recital Hall. We had a packed house and

really solidified the band as something special in the area. We went on to do some touring, opening for Maceo Parker, Jazz is Dead, Jazz Mandolin Project, Galactic, and other groups on the Jam Scene. "Luna Belle" was always a part of our repertoire and the song outlived the band. It was one of the first "jazz" tunes that I ever composed and I've played it in a few different groups.

RR: "Midway Road"—give me a little stream-of-consciousness about those South Carolina roads traveled...gorgeous melody, expert drifting moods, sublime tune.

CR: In some stretches, you can ride for miles and not see a single house. There can be beautiful rolling hills and lush green trees or dense protective forests that make it easy to hide from the world. Calm, placid lakes rest beside chicken pens and cow pastures. We can park the car, rest on the hood, and command everything in sight. With nothing or no-one competing for space.

RR: "Blue Clay"—describe your musical relationship to the blues. Who were your blues influences?

CR: The blues was a huge influence on me from the beginning, whether I realized it or not. The first music that really inspired me was rock and roll, which is deeply rooted in the blues. Still, I was never consciously interested in playing the blues until I discovered jazz. When I really started to dissect everything, from a historical perspective, it led me right to the blues. Once I finally learned something, I realized how little I actually knew. The blues is such a complete, flexible, and timeless song form. It is certainly something that every musician can continuously rediscover.

RR: "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah"—whose idea for the vocals? Who is doing the vocals at the end of the song?

CR: I wrote this tune for a band in Charleston called "The Gradual Lean." This band was a huge training ground for me, as I was playing with local giants who were also my musical heroes. Every gig with these guys was a lesson and we held a steady gig every Tuesday night for about three years. I brought the tune in with the title and

everything. In the rehearsal, Quentin Baxter (our drummer), was the one who did the vocals between the breaks. This was definitely something that caught on when we would play the tune live. It became our set closer and I remember many an inspired Tuesday night in Charleston with an entire club full of people shouting “Yeah, Yeah, Yeah.” On the album, we did this tune in one take and

Kebbi is the one with the silly high pitch ending.

RR: “The Circle Song”—my favorite song on the CD. What can I say? Why? I’m a sucker for a really good group of musicians who know how to lock into a simple yet complex trance vibration without burying the mysterious melody. I’d love to hear an entire work based upon unrelated major triads. How does a group of musicians start off with ancient jazz, move up to more modern tones, step into a jam space, slip the gear down into blues, jump up into euphoric pop and end in some timeless Radiohead groove? Fantastic! Your opinion of this closing song on “The Random Puller”?

CR: Since you like unrelated major triads, you should definitely check out some Stravinsky. It’s really funny how drastic and strong the opinions of this tune have been. People either love it or hate it. Even at the session, Kebbi and Stockton loved it while Duane and Brian hated it. I really love that it gets such a strong reaction out of people! The complaint with the haters is that “it doesn’t go anywhere, it just sits there, for three-plus minutes.” And yes, that is exactly what I intended for it to do. A few years ago I was turned on to Yoga, Tai Chi, Meditation and Eastern Philosophy in general. I started to really practice meditation and the breakthroughs that I made had a profound effect on my life.

Learning how to focus energy through non-action allows one to fully focus in action. I was surprised just how difficult it was learning how to meditate. Trying hard not to think, not to worry, and to just “sit there, not doing anything, for 30-plus minutes.” That is where the idea for this musical

arrangement came from. The content is a little bit Radiohead and a variation of an idea I borrowed from this great tune by Joey Calderazzo called “Kiss” from Jeff “Tain” Watts’ album “Bar Talk.”

RR: Who is Duane Evans? Describe his influence on your life—musically and otherwise.

CR: Duane was my father's college roommate at Clemson University . He was my dad's "musician" friend, a professional label few and far between in the upstate of South Carolina . No one else in my family plays an instrument, so when I took an interest in the guitar at around 10 my Dad took advice from Duane. He was with us when we picked out my first guitar. A year later, I cut my first demo at his studio (it's hilariously hair rock, but what would you expect from a 12 year old sporting a mullet?). In my first year of college, when I really decided to pursue music professionally, I visited Duane for support. He was one of the first people to help me realize how lucky I am to be passionate about something. He helped me realize how this calling, as difficult as it can be, allows me the unique opportunity to fully live my life in every moment. Until then, my understanding of professions was that you did something you could stand, try to make as much money as possible, and enjoy your life on your time off. For me, Duane was the first living

example of much more appealing perspective. Enjoy every moment.

RR: Describe the location where the tracks were taped.

CR: Duane is a partner in a media company called Williamson Evans Words, Music, and Moving Pictures (www.williamsonevans.com). They do commercial music and own a beautiful recording studio in downtown Greenville , South Carolina . Although they don't do many band recordings, the facility is top notch and we had everything that we needed. We were all set up in the same room, but were able to control the sound fairly well. We had amps in different rooms and baffles to isolate the drums and saxophone.

RR: Any unreleased tracks from these sessions?

CR: There are some full takes of the same tracks and we picked what we liked best. I have to give praise for the performances because we really went in there and knocked it out. We played what you hear.

RR: What is your relationship with these musicians? Where did you find them?

CR: One of the goals of this project was to document my relationship with the bassist Brian Mulholland. Brian and I are both from Anderson , South Carolina and he has always been one of the most gifted musicians I've known. His talents are

absolutely frightening and he was always someone who I aspired to play with. We went to the same high school, but walked in different circles. Once I started to take music more seriously, we reconnected. Since we've become good friends, we complement and inspire one another in different ways. He is now living in Texas , but for the past five years we have presented this reunion concert in Anderson around Christmas. It has really become a special event for us. Last year, we did this recording the week before the concert. Brian introduced me to Stockton [Helbing-drums] two years ago when he played at our reunion concert. He is from Florence , South Carolina and has played with Brian since they were in All State Jazz Band in high school. They are now both members of jazz legend

Maynard Ferguson's touring band. I met Kebbi [Williams-tenor sax] through Quentin Baxter (who I mentioned earlier). The two used to perform in Charleston as a duo and provided me with some truly inspiring music. We have since become friends and have played together in different settings. Kebbi lives in Atlanta and has worked with Outkast, Oteil Burbridge, Jeff Watts, and Meshell N'degeocello. I love his natural and unique approach to the horn.

RR: I love the CD design. Who is Sue King and where did you find her?

CR: We live in modern times. I never once met Sue King in person. She lives in Australia and I stumbled upon her website, www.bubblewrap.com.au. I contacted her there and we did the album art through the Internet. We never spoke on the phone and exchanged ideas and images only through e-mail. It was probably the most unconventional way to go about it, but it was a unique experience and I'm pleased with the result.

RR: You, rock star, you. How many days growth of beard did you have on the liner sleeve photo?

CR: The photo is by my good friend Susan Pittard, who also did all the photos on my website. (2 days, 7 hours, 26 minutes)

RR: Detail your musical training and background? Where are you from? Where have you been? How have these travels influenced your playing?

CR: I started with the guitar at around ten years old. I took lots of lessons at different guitar stores and learned all the Metallica and Ozzy songs my family could stand. I studied classical guitar in high school and then in college. In college I discovered jazz and studied with lots of great teachers in the area. I got my degree in classical music composition, but really learned on the bandstand playing with musicians that are better than me. I'm from South Carolina, but I've traveled all over. Living in Paris really influenced my writing. A few of the tunes on the record were written during that time.

RR: How did you get involved with Cyro Baptista's Beat the Donkey? What is it like to play with him? His band? How was the 10,000 Lakes Festival for you?

CR: I first heard about Cyro from his associations with Herbie Hancock and Trey Anastasio. Shortly after moving to New York City, I was really turned on to Brazilian music. I started to meet and play with some of the musicians in Beat the Donkey. When I heard that Cyro was looking for a guitarist, I really went after it. I really wanted to play with him, so I would go to all his gigs, workshops, and hang out wherever they were. Finally, they called me in to rehearse and it really went great. I feel really lucky and so far everything has been incredible. From the rehearsals to the gigs, everyone has made me feel welcome and I've really enjoyed the collaborative spirit in the group. Everything is open, everyone sounds great, and everyone laughs a lot. I'm really having fun. 10,000 Lakes was an incredible experience for me in many ways. First of all, I am a huge Trey fan. When I was 17, I discovered Phish, which sparked my interest in improvised music. From there, I discovered all the great Jazz artists that have shaped my musicianship. Phish, and especially Trey, created a musical bridge that allowed me to appreciate so much more music. So here I am ten years later sitting on the side of the stage watching the set with a grin from ear to ear, with my friend Les Hall (another South Carolina native) in Trey's band. It was a little surreal. Another reason the festival was meaningful was the BTD set. That was one of the largest audiences that I've ever played for and the energy in the air was electric. I think a lot of things came together for this new lineup on that gig, and I think it was a promising sign of things to come.

RR: What are your musical goals for the future?

CR: BTD will tour the Southeast in September. In October, I will make my first trip to Brazil, where I will be at a jazz club in Rio [de Janeiro]. In February [2006], I am touring to the Balkan region as a U.S. Jazz Ambassador. So, with those things already planned, this is shaping up to be a really big year. Musically, I want to stay on a

creative path, seeking opportunities for my own group and contributing to exciting projects like BTD. No matter how things unfold I plan to make the most of every moment.

For more information about Clay Ross, please visit www.clayross.com