

Skerik's Taint

BY TODD MATTHEWS

The year was 1940, and Henry J. Anslinger, the Commissioner of the U.S. Bureau of Narcotics at that time, was on a mission: rid the U.S. of what he called the 'syncopated taint.' His campaign had a particular bias against jazz musicians — performers Anslinger saw as responsible for the spread of drug use among the nation's impressionable youth.

"I was on tour with Les Claypool," recalls one-named saxophonist Skerik, via telephone from a concert stop in New York City, "and I came across this book called *The Birth of Heroin and the Demonization of the Drug Addict*. It's a great book. This is a book that is truthful about how heroin was introduced in the U.S. Here was Anslinger calling jazz musicians the syncopated taint."



'I want to rid this country of this syncopated taint.' He hated jazz music, and wanted all jazz musicians put in jail. Since all my heroes are jazz musicians, I thought 'syncopated taint' would be a great name for a band."

Anslinger would surely spin in his grave if he knew that a gifted septet had proudly taken the syncopated taint moniker as its own — giving this taboo title new meaning. The self-titled Skerik's Syncopated Taint Septet is perhaps one of the most talked about small-label recordings to be released in recent weeks — appearing at #16 on the Billboard jazz charts this summer.

The septet formed during summer 2002 while Skerik was taking a break from touring with a number of other groups and performers. He phoned several local musicians — baritone saxophonist Craig Flory, trumpeter Dave Carter, alto saxophonist and flutist Hans Teuber, and trombonist and electric pianist Steve Moore — and floated the idea of creating a large sax-and-organ group, with an early interest in

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West Seattle's Second Annual Jazz Festival

Back for its second run, the West Seattle Jazz Festival will bring some of the finest Seattle musicians (plus a few from elsewhere) together Saturday, September 13, and Sunday, September 14. Three stages — two for music and one for kids activities — will set up on a stretch of California Avenue between Oregon and Edmunds Street.

With a solid lineup from beginning to end, the two music stages are thoughtfully staggered in their schedules so no one need miss any set entirely. So bring your festival legs and, likely, a sun bonnet. The larger Main Stage gets rolling at noon. The Café Stage starts up at 1pm.

Here is a complete schedule:

Saturday, September 13

Main Stage:

- 12pm Cascade Big Band
- 1:30pm Pearl Django
- 3pm James Knapp Orchestra
- 4:30pm m-pact
- 6pm Jay Thomas
- 7:30pm Sonando
- 9pm Amy Stephens Quartet

Café Stage:

- 1pm Deardorf/Peterson Quartet
- 2:30pm Woody Woodhouse Quartet
- 4pm Ficus Trio
- 5:30pm Bill Anshell Trio
- 7pm Larry Fuller Trio
- 8:30pm Rik Wright 4Tet
- 10pm Prohibition Jazz Band

Sunday, September 14

Main Stage:

- 12pm Roy Cummings Memorial Big Band
- 1:30pm Greta Matassa Quartet
- 3pm Skerik's Syncopated Taint Septet
- 4:30pm Scott Amendola Band
- 6pm Kelley Johnson Quartet

Café Stage:

- 1pm Julian Priester Quartet
- 2:30pm Floyd Standifer Quartet
- 4pm Randy Halberstadt Trio
- 5:30pm Darren Motamedy Group
- 7pm Jay Roulston Quartet

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performing old gospel tunes. After a few performances — and the addition of organist Joe Doria — the group began writing original compositions. “It was just something fun to do, but something that I wanted to guide in terms of instrumentation and what we played,” recalls Skerik. “Those guys started writing stuff for the band, and it was so good, I just found myself as kind of a janitor of the band. The communist secretary. The people’s secretary.” After a few performances at Seattle’s Owl & Thistle pub, Skerik and crew knew they had something valuable on their hands. What started as a side-project during the summer turned into a full-fledged working jazz ensemble.

The group decided to record a live album at the venue. “When it sounded that good at a place [like the Owl & Thistle], the last thing I wanted to do was move it into a studio,” argues Skerik. Enlisting engineer Mell Dettmer, the group built a control room in the bar and recorded a performance last September. The result is one of loose spontaneity and spectacular musical moments (at times, it’s easy to forget that this album was recorded live in one take). The first two songs on the album — “Freakus Piniatus” and “Philadelphia” — are completely improvised, and dabble in hip-hop and the avant-garde. The third track — “Let Me Be Your Voodoo Doll” — is a raucous Harry Pierce tune, with blaring horns and a New Orleans-style sound that is immediately catchy and memorable. “Runnin’ Away” is a Sly Stone song, from his album *There’s a Riot Goin’ On*, but arranged anew by saxophonist Flory. The use of a Wurlitzer organ and electric keyboards give some of the tracks a space-age feel, not unlike the jazz of the ’70s and ’80s (think Miles Davis’s *In A Silent Way*). And elements of Critters Buggin’ creep in throughout the album (the screaming and ranting, both vocal and saxophone, on “Christina” and “Morphine” is reminiscent of the *Guest* or *Host* albums by the Critters gang).

“The great part about this band is everyone writes music for the group,” says Skerik. “For me, these guys represent what

is best about Seattle musicians.”

Though Syncopated Taint is a relatively new project for Skerik, the saxophonist is hardly a newcomer to the Seattle music scene. Born and raised on Mercer Island, he was first introduced to music by way of a junior high school instructor named Gene Ferguson. “He taught me about



All eyes on Flory... Syncopated Taint Septet performs at Bumbershoot in August. Pictured fromleft: Skerik, Dave Carter, Craig Flory

earshotjazz photo/steve cline

discipline and respect and reverence for music,” says Skerik. “He was not messing around.” In high school, Skerik continued to study music. After performing with an orchestra, he was hooked. He was interested in attending Cornish College of the Arts, specifically to study with Carter Jefferson. But when Jefferson left the college, Skerik lost interest in the program. Instead, he moved to the South Pacific for a year. After returning to Seattle, he studied with Hadley Caliman and, later, enrolled in a class at Cornish taught by Julian Priester. “It was amazing,”

raves Skerik. “Someone like Julian was living in Seattle. That was amazing to me. And not only was he living here, but he was accessible. How could you not take advantage of that? To this day, it definitely was one of the greatest musical moments.”

Skerik traveled abroad again, living and performing in Paris. “I wish I had gotten involved in a school with a four-year program,” he recalls. “But I have a lot of experiences that a lot of people wouldn’t have in schools. Playing a lot of rhythm... learning African Soukous music... I wasn’t always pre-occupied with a linear method. I was more interested in applying different ideas and having a broad rhythmic palate — performing different kinds of music from around the world.”

In the mid-1990s, Skerik headed up the “improvisational sci-fi punk rock jazz” group Critters Buggin’. The band (including drummer Matt Chamberlain, bassist Brad Houser, percussionist Mike Dillon, and Skerik on saxophone) released four albums on Loosegroove records in the late-1990s.

In 1996, Skerik joined R.E.M. guitarist Peter Dinklage, Screaming Trees drummer Barrett Martin, and Luna bassist Justin Harwood to form Tuatara — a group that covered many genres and styles of music, including Middle Eastern, Latin, jazz, and the truly ethereal and cinematic. Tuatara released three albums on Sony records between 1997 and 2002.

In addition to the Syncopated Taint Septet, Skerik is currently a member of

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Brazilian music; don't expect the often fiery oeuvre of Baden Powell, Sivuca or Olmir "Alemão" Stocker.

The tempos, rhythms, and dynamics steer towards a rather lazy, subdued middle-of-the-road ambiance that is sustained throughout the program. This is mood music, and the mood evoked is predominately bright, cheery, breezy and optimistic. A number of different instrumental combinations are utilized — ranging from duos to sextets — with the flute of Lucas Robatto the most prominently featured second lead voice, producing textures that are light, airy and transparent. Some of the loveliest sound colors come from the grouping that joins Hans Teuber's sax and clarinet with the cello of Laurie Goldston. The combination of Teuber's clarinet with Goldston — best known as co-leader of The Black Cat Orchestra — elicits many of the most elegant and eloquent moments.

This music is a warm breeze blowing in from Brazil by way of Seattle, and may be just what you're looking for to crank the old metabolism down a notch or two if you're stuck in an I-5 traffic jam. Or, for that matter, as the perfect accompaniment to a romantic dinner and a bottle of fine wine; hey, you might not even need the wine, the temperate glow provided by *For the Moment* might suffice.

— Bill Barton

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"I know each one of them very well and it will be interesting," Silverman agrees. "They could deliver short pieces or long pieces. Steve is very quirky and will do some interesting, weird loop things; he's a wacky drummer. Gregor is performing a lot live these days with electronics. He's using some live on-the-fly looping software that will lead him in certain directions. Nem, the DJ, is the craziest. He really loves pure sound. Crackles, weird pops, sounds we would normally reject, he will use. Marc is kind of a groove-meister. Briggan doesn't like beats. His stuff will likely be more textural.

Since the project has come to fruit, Silverman has been contacted by more artists interested in the idea of working with common acoustic material, which suggests that Resound to Sender is only just begin-

ning. "This will continue, I think," Silverman says. "Everybody wants the files to do their remix. I'm already thinking of a second Resound to Sender; doing it as a yearly thing, or every six months. Maybe making the files available on an FTP site and saying that your only obligation is to upload your mix. It'd be an open-source concept."

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Garage a Trois (with Stanton Moore & Charlie Hunter), Ponga (with Wayne Horvitz, Bobby Previte and Dave Palmer), Black Frames (with Dillon, Houser and Chamberlain of Critters Buggin, along with drummer Earl Harvin), Blotallica, Crack Sabbath, and SadHappy.

The good news: fans of Skerik's music don't have to look very far to find a group with his signature sound or involvement. The bad news: it can be difficult to keep up with the various groups and projects Skerik may be involved in.

"They are all relevant and different," says Skerik, commenting on the different bands. "If I could have one band that could play all those things, I would do it. But everyone's busy. I love Critters Buggin, but everyone in the band is busy. Well, what am I going to do? Sit at home for nine months out of the year? I can't do that. I have to play every day. If it takes having ten bands to connect the year together, then that's what I have to do. It's kind of a hassle sometimes, but it's all a musical necessity."

At press time, Skerik's Syncopated Taint Septet was preparing for a performance at Bumbershoot over Labor Day weekend, and the West Seattle Jazz Festival in mid-September. The group will also perform at the Triple Door — a new venue opening beneath the Wild Ginger restaurant in downtown Seattle. And Skerik hopes to tour the group this fall. For now, he is excited about the music and how well the album has been received. "It pops up on music charts all over the world," he says. "That never happened to me in fifteen years of making records. It's fun. It's the one record where I least expected it. I think when you are not manipulating music, and you get lucky and it all comes together like that, sometimes it can connect with people in a really strong way."

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