

Denman Maroney

by Marc Medwin



Photo by Scott Friedlander

There are few minds as agile and inquiring as that of pianist, composer and educator Denman Maroney. Over nearly 40 years, he has managed to rethink the piano's vocabulary, creating a readily identifiable language on the instrument. He calls his contribution "hyperpiano", a method of playing inside the piano that is characterized by a dizzying and diverse pallet of sonorities that make the instrument into an orchestra. He has also developed an equally unique compositional language involving combined pulses, employing the phrase "temporal harmony" to describe it. Yet, there is a directness, at times almost a simplicity, in his music. With his playing and in his compositions, Maroney combines musical genres and transforms sounds we think we understand, adding depth and color, often at great speed, while never sacrificing clarity.

Maroney's love of music began quite early. "My mother claimed that when I was five, I picked out Chopin's 'Minute Waltz' by ear," he states drily. "I don't remember it." Whatever his first foray into the world of piano might have been, his early exposure was to classical music. "My parents had a small record collection and I remember enjoying Bizet's *Carmen* and Beethoven's *Pastorale Symphony*, that sort of thing. I listened to those records all the time." He continued playing the piano and remembers improvisation as being a large component of his practicing, though his teachers were not sympathetic. It wasn't until he was 11 that jazz entered his life after seeing Thelonious Monk's picture on a Prestige record cover. "I'd never met anyone with a goatee, growing up in suburban New Jersey; I heard the music and I was hooked."

Maroney's college years were spent pursuing a political science degree at Williams College while studying with Jimmy Garrison, among others, at nearby Bennington College. "Bennington was where I really started playing jazz with other people and it was a fantastic experience," he remembers fondly. However, his studies with James Tenney at California Institute of the Arts cemented the path for his future explorations. "I was also studying piano with Tenney and we worked on ragtime and on a lot of Charles Ives, out of which my ideas of temporal harmony were born. It's a way of bringing Ives' complex concepts of layered pulses into improvised music." Hyperpiano also began to take shape at about that time, when Maroney made his first released recording, right after he graduated from CalArts, a project called the Negative Band, including future collaborator and fellow CalArts alum Earl Howard. "We recorded a realization of Stockhausen's *Kurzwellen*, a piece in which each player imitates shortwave radio. I borrowed a couple of glockenspiel keys and started using them as slides - thus, the birth of hyper piano." The technique would later extend to include plastic bottles, Tibetan singing bowls, potato mashers and other tools used to stop, strike and/or scrape the strings. The sounds he elicits encompass everything

from bent notes to glassy shimmers and a lot in between. The techniques owe a debt to John Cage and Henry Cowell but stake out their own territory.

Unfortunately, apart from the Stockhausen projects, Maroney's earliest hyperpiano activity remains unreleased. Even when Maroney was absent from recording during the '80s, working fulltime in advertising, as he would do until 2005, he was involved in sampling the sounds made inside the piano. He had stopped doing this by the time he began to make CDs in the early '90s. "On a sampler you can only play samples; on a piano you can play anything," he concluded. It was then that Maroney's recorded association with bassist Mark Dresser began. Their most recent collaboration is a stunning live document, on the Israeli Kadima Collective label, of performances from 2001 and 2008. As the new millennium entered, other long-standing relationships were formed, those with Reuben Radding, Ned Rothenberg, Michael Sarin and Dave Ballou, all of whom have been integral to the realization of his recent work.

To describe the nature of Maroney's compositional vision would require a treatise. Yet, there is a remarkable unity to his pieces, composed over the last 40 years. The trajectory from the early compositions on *Gaga* (Nuscope) to the much more recent *Udentity* (Clean Feed) demonstrates a refinement and advancements of the multiple rhythmic layers associated with temporal harmony. "In the early pieces, I might have combined two different tempos, whereas in my more recent work, I might juxtapose three or four." Despite this, the melodic and harmonic material on which Maroney draws is remarkably simple. Often triadic and employing ample space between phrases, there is a sense of modality about his tonal language that puts the rhythmic intrigue in stark relief. Ballou, Radding, Sarin and Rothenberg have the perfect sound to realize these scores, blending precision and a certain restraint with rich full sonority. "I think *Udentity* is my most successful integration of hyperpiano into an ensemble work to date," explains Maroney and indeed, the clean clear recording accentuates both piano and ensemble favorably.

Udentity was composed in 2006-2007 and is one of Maroney's most ambitious works. Since 2005, he can now dedicate himself much more fully to composition and recording and several exciting projects have emerged. His most recent recording is the translucent duo *Gleam*, a Porter release with glass player Miguel Frascioni. Porter is also due to release a solo concert recording from Roulette, featuring an extended hyperpiano improvisation. In addition to this flurry of activity, Maroney is teaching American history part time at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. "I incorporate what I call the music of history, where I use music as a window on the important issues in American history, such as racism." The approach is symptomatic of Maroney's penchant for presenting music and history, as the protean forces they are. ♦

For more information, visit denmanmaroney.com. Maroney is at Korzo Aug. 3rd, Douglass Street Music Collective Aug. 10th and The Stone Aug. 17th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Mark Dresser - *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Music for the Silent Film) (Knitting Factory, 1994)
- Denman Maroney - *Hyperpiano* (Monsey, 1998)
- Mark Dresser - *Aquifer* (Cryptogramophone, 2001)
- Mark Dresser/Denman Maroney - *Live in Concert* (Kadima Collective, 2001/2008)
- Denman Maroney - *Gaga* (Nuscope, 2006)
- Denman Maroney Quintet - *Udentity* (Clean Feed, 2008)



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