




SHOCKING

CHARLIE HUNTER AND BOBBY PREVITE COLLIDE AND BUILD BRID



Jazz can go stale as quickly as a crust of bread left on the counter overnight. You can return to the old school, but there's much to be said for building anew. It's necessary to document and preserve the past, but not at the expense of looking ahead and allowing for the freedom that jazz offers—even if that means pulling up anchor and sailing for lands yet to be mapped.

This is the story of Groundtruther, the Charlie Hunter–Bobby Previte duo that—complemented by a shifting trio cast of explorers such as Greg Osby and DJ Logic—explores the jazz frontier, building innovative bridges between the acoustic and electric fronts of the music.

“That’s always been my thing, to seek out the unknown,” said acoustic and electric drummer Previte at Hotel Rosetta in Perugia, Italy, after Groundtruther, with saxophonist Osby, wowed the Umbria Jazz Festival crowd in July with its set at Teatro Morlacchi. “I’m comfortable in the unknown.”

“Over the last 10 years, I lost my way working within the corporate, unbalanced music industry,” said eight-string guitarist Hunter, relaxing in his hotel room on a rare day off from a cross-Europe tour. “I had to find a gateway that kicked me off the path that I was on and put me into another space. At first that was hard because I was clinging desperately to my old modus operandi. But I found a new track.”

Admittedly, this track is out-leaning and rambunctious, yet elementally grounded in rhythm. “We’re making a hybrid genre, as much informed by Stockhausen as by the Meters,” said Previte, who composes by using electronic pads that trigger samples he’s made. “An aural landscape is created by the electronics that the guitar and bass swim around in. If someone thinks Groundtruther is exciting and fresh, it’s the nexus of these two elements that makes it so, not the groove.”

Though it’s not populist—it doesn’t go down smoothly like Hunter’s funky sides—Groundtruther’s music is exhilarating. It’s free, but unlike the anything-goes attitude in the 1960s that was more

» BY DAN OUELLETTE » PHOTOS BY JIMMY KATZ

REALITY

GES BETWEEN ACOUSTIC AND ELECTRIC JAZZ

about self-gratified blowing than exploring. Rather, the music is steeped in open-ended improvisation, but with the end result being more about discovering beauty that miraculously blooms from anarchy.

At Umbria, the threesome played like a power trio: ragged, loud and corybantic. Previte activated whistling and popping electronic sounds that developed into a calamity of clatter and clang. Hunter concocted a metallic riff that he repeated in drone-like fashion before launching into a heavy metal fury. And Osby, sometimes seeming like the odd man out as Previte and Hunter fixated on each other's faces, joined the fray with rhythmic phrases and ornamentations. The music submerged into the abstract, then reemerged from the murky chaos into dance. Out of the crush came song.

"We're trying to create little songs on the spot," Hunter said. "But it's much more impressionistic than writing a song. It's being creative, not so much in the linear sense, but creative in an orchestral sense."

Previte notes that the element of surprise is paramount, both to the players and audience, as the music seamlessly slants from one angle into another. "We go into different directions, but it's as if where we're going has always been there," he said. "It's sculptural, like Michelangelo. He said he didn't make a sculpture, but he chipped away and discovered it."

Hunter laughed. "Here we are in Italy, and you're saying that."

Previte continued, "But that's what we're doing. The music is always there. On our better nights, we just see it. We hear all of it, and we tune in to what's in the sound. Some nights, we don't see it or hear it."

This was the case at the show the day before the Umbria date, when Hunter, Previte and Osby played in front of a standing-room-only crowd at Rembrandtzaal at the North Sea Jazz Festival in The Hague. The energy was high as the sound blared and the speed was like a runaway freight train. But something was amiss, which all three members noted after the show. Osby's stage monitors malfunctioned. The saxophonist, who often seemed like he was relegated to the sidelines, likened the experience to drowning. "I couldn't hear what was going on," he said. "I've got an effect on my saxophone, but it's an acoustic instrument that couldn't break through."

It wasn't until the improvisational thrust abated and the rhythm slowed to a waltz that Osby shined, offering a stretch of gorgeous balladry to usher in the calm after the storm.

At Umbria, Osby could hear and therefore took the initiative to move the music. "At North Sea, I could hear Greg across the stage better than he could hear himself," Previte said. "I loved what Greg did, bringing in the textures. But we always have to deal with the room, the sound. You have to expect that anytime you plug in. The more electric we get, the more we're at the mercy of the sound man."

The Groundtruther story began when Hunter, in search of more musical challenges in his adopted New York home, started to mix it up with different drummers, including Leon Parker and Adam Cruz. He hooked up with Previte when recording engineer Joe Ferla acted as a musical matchmaker. He recommended to both that they should meet. Four years ago, Hunter and Previte set up shop at keyboardist Jamie Saft's recording studio in Brooklyn's Park Slope.

What was their first meeting like? "Very different from now," Previte said.

Hunter agreed, but noted, "Looking back on it, it was very much like now, but a nascent version."

Previte, who kept a set of drums at Saft's studio, wasn't playing electronics that day. "But I remember thinking that this could be cool," he said. "We could come up with something different because of the different worlds we were coming from. Charlie inhabited a different part of the jazz universe."

Previte emerged from New York's downtown scene even though he too had experience playing in a groove sensibility. "I veered off while Charlie went deeper," he said. "I hadn't mined that territory much. So, I started to think that maybe we could find a third [stream] between my world and Charlie's. It might have been awful, or maybe interesting."

Hunter's curiosity was piqued. "I had developed a knee-jerk way of

BEYOND TRUTH

The Groundtruther project is only one card in both Charlie Hunter and Bobby Previte's decks.

Hunter recently released a DVD, *Solo Inventions* (Shanachie), a solo concert of eight-string guitar jams, originals such as "Lulu's Crawl" and "Oakland," and covers "Stars Fell On Alabama" and "My Heart Belongs To Daddy." Around the same time, Hunter was also featured on the album *Earth Tones* (Breadfruit), which matched him with guitarists Ernest Ranglin and Chinna Smith. In addition, 2005 also saw the sophomore release of the jazz-funk collective Garage A Trois, *Outre Mer* (Telarc), featuring Hunter with drummer Stanton Moore, saxophonist Skerik and percussionist/vibraphonist Mike Dillon. Earlier in 2005, Blue Note released a Hunter compilation, *Steady Groovin': The Blue Note Groove Sides*, from his seven-album stint with the label from 1995-2001.

Hunter's main band these days is his trio, with saxophonist John Ellis and drummer Derrek Phillips. Their last album, *Friends Seen And Unseen* (Ropeadope), was released in 2004. The new trio album, *Coperopolis*, will come out on Ropeadope in February and will feature Ellis spreading his instrumental wings on bass clarinet, flute, Wurlitzer and melodica.

"I don't want to write every song with the tenor sax carrying the melody," Hunter said. "I don't want it to dominate my music, and John has such a heightened harmonic sense on all the other instruments. So, now the tenor sax becomes an event as opposed to something expected."

As for his guitar parts on the new trio disc, Hunter said that he's doing some skin-shedding. "I can't play like Jim Hall, so I'm more into finding my own voice. I want to improvise more, to maintain excitement, so I'm letting my freak flag fly on the guitar. The album will be smashing, more rocking stuff."

Best known for his distinctive eight-string guitar with two extra bass strings, Hunter will record for the first time on a six-string Telecaster on Previte's upcoming album, *Coalition Of The Willing* (Ropeadope). Out in February, the album features a touring band that's comprised of Steven Bernstein (who does all the horn arrangements), Jamie Saft (who co-produces with the leader), Moore and Skerik. "You have not lived till you've heard Charlie play just a guitar. He's a guitar god," Previte said. "This album is my homage to the electric guitar."

"This album is into voltage," Hunter said. "It's rare to find someone like Bobby who has such a compositional affinity for electric guitar. Some of the pieces he has me play are hard as hell to learn because they're so precise. They seem easy to play, but the rhythms are misplaced. And playing the six-string so takes me out of my reality."

Previte will also release a solo electronic drum CD on Ropeadope. In addition, as a follow-up to his 2002 project, *23 Constellations Of Joan Miro* (Tzadik), Previte is working on *The Separation*, a major music-libretto theater project with Andrea Kleine. Based on the *Missa Sancti Jacobi* by 15th-century composer Guillaume Dufay, the work reimagines in modern musical terms the role of religion in our culture today, in regard to the separation of church and state. The project will premiere in November and be performed at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and the Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center in Buffalo, N.Y. —D.O.



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playing with drummers that was very specific," he said. "We'd hook up, get killing time, then I'd play bass lines and solo over the top. Then we'd trade back and forth."

But this didn't pass muster when working with Previte. "Bobby, who's an instantaneous composer with his electronics while also keeping time, put me in this space where I thought, 'What do I do?'" Hunter said. "I couldn't rely on any of my little strategies that always worked. They sounded like shit. That's when I realized I have to put my head in a different space. It opened up a new way of thinking about music and my instrument. I started playing in a compositional way in the moment while keeping the time happening."

At heart in their collaborative improvisation was the notion of busting out beyond the style each had developed, with Hunter playing bass and guitar and Previte drums and electronics, each simultaneously. "The idea was to get away from the traditional roles of those instruments," Previte said. "We wanted to get to a place where we could go in any direction we wanted to."

He explains that the electronics he releases set up serendipitous moments to which Hunter instantly adjusts. "Charlie can take what I'm doing and effortlessly respond to it harmonically and rhythmically," Previte said. "That's freeing."

Hunter responded: "This keeps me out of my patterns. It makes me react naturally to what I would never do in a 'jazz' setting. Ultimately, I'm not scrambling; I'm relying on what I do naturally."

From their practice sessions, the pair took their full-improvisational playground into such venues as the Knitting Factory's Old Office, where they played music that would spin into any direction at a moment's notice—a funky vibe speeding into rhythm drive with psychedelic dynamics, then turning a corner and sinking into a lyrical slow tune.

In 2003, Hunter and Previte documented their alchemy on *Come In Red Dog, This Is Tango Leader* (Ropeadope). "We recorded eight hours of live music, then Bobby edited it down to 50 minutes of songs," said Hunter, a.k.a. Red Dog. "We build songs from the ground up."

Tango Leader Previte added, "We're like a quartet. Charlie plays the bass lines and guitar parts, and my left and right hands with the electronic effects are like two people."

"Between the two of us, we're a quartet," Hunter said.

Meanwhile the project was expanding into a trio, with a rotating third collaborator. "We didn't want to limit ourselves," Previte said. "We made the first album to present a picture of

what we were doing. We both felt another voice was in order, but we couldn't bring ourselves to get just one specific voice."

"That third person we figured could push us in other directions," Hunter said. "So we began to have these four-night gigs where we'd invite different people each night."

"The only rule was that we wouldn't bring in a drummer or guitarist because we already had that covered," Previte added.

The third-party operatives have included



trumpeter Randy Brecker, soprano saxophonist Jane Ira Bloom, tenor saxophonists Peter Apfelbaum and Seamus Blake, alto saxophonist Oliver Lake, trombonist Ray Anderson, slide trumpeter Steven Bernstein, pianist Uri Caine and two DJs—Logic and Olive.

The pair chose collaborators based on their having nontraditional approaches. "Neither Charlie or I play in a traditional way," Previte said. "Charlie plays guitar and bass, and my setup is extremely nontraditional with the electronics."

They cite Osby as a key third member of Groundtruth. "He's not married to any horn-playing agenda," Hunter said. "Just listening to what Greg plays is missing the point. In a lot of ways, he plays like a drummer. What he's actually playing is the tip of the iceberg of what he's thinking. He plays time and precise soundscapes. He uses us to play polyrhythms on the horn, which is an unusual approach. That helps to keep the saxophone from being a diva instru-

ment, which is what it always wants to be."

Hunter and Previte invited Osby to tour Europe with them two years ago, a fruitful association that resulted in the first Groundtruth album, *Latitude*, the first part of a trilogy that Thirsty Ear Records is releasing. Issued in 2004, *Latitude* spotlights Osby in an unfamiliar milieu, yet the alto saxist sounds right at home. The triumvirate swings through the dance beats and negotiates the twists and turns of avant electronics. Since there are no designated solo spaces, Osby blows his sax when he sees fit. The 11 cuts are edited-down samplings of the trio's in-the-moment adventures.

Hunter says he's benefited from the interaction with Osby and his unorthodox approach to playing the saxophone. Back when Hunter decided to focus on playing jazz, he felt he had "to conform to a jazz standard, to have the jazz sound." After awhile, in the context of Groundtruth, he realized that was limiting. "That's only a small part of what I like about the guitar," he said. "I woke up to the fact that the electric guitar is the dopest instrument of the last 50 years and that it holds so much more potential."

"It's the transcendent instrument of the 20th century," Previte agreed. "That instrument has changed the music the most."

"I came to a point where I returned to where I originally came from with the guitar," said Hunter, who cites a range of early influences, including Dick Dale, the Beatles, Albert King, pedal steel players and Congolese soukous. "I spent so many years in situations where the horn is the dominant influence and playing stuff that is conducive to horn players. It's nice to

put myself in a space where I can use my jazz mentality—understanding harmonic structures, how lines work, how to improvise, how to communicate improvisationally with other people—while also figuring out how to find my own guitar voice."

One change is less reliance on Hunter's trademark B-3 effect. "I don't need to rely on having the guitar imitate an organ," he said. "I'm using that less and less." He laughed and added, "In fact, I'm thinking of ditching that box because it's the biggest and heaviest of my effects to carry around."

The second disc of the Thirsty Ear Groundtruth trilogy, *Longitude*, was released in 2005, with DJ Logic as the guest. While the album is characterized by its rockiness, Hunter and Previte also point out that it's a giant step ahead for the project. "This is quite a leap from *Red Dog*," Previte said. "It makes more sense than *Latitude*

because of its inner logic and integrity. It's more fully realized."

"I love it, especially Bobby's editing," Hunter said. "We all went in and instead of throwing down a one-hour gig, we threw down eight hours that Bobby then created the 12 pieces from. It was total improvisation and total Pro Tools editing."

"The album has the feel of the freshness of creation, but with tightly knit sound structures," Previte said. "That way you can keep the thrill of improvisation in it."

Still, Previte feels that even favorable reviews of *Longitude* are missing the point. "This isn't a guitar-drum duo with some DJ for exotic sounds," he said. "No one seems to understand the nature of what makes this music different. They don't get the electronic component to what I am doing. [They think] it's all about 'my beats.' I detest all this 'drummer' crap. The record says electronics, but they all assume that just means electronic drum sounds. Not at all the case."

The final Groundtruther installment, *Altitude*, scheduled for an October release by Thirsty Ear, will feature DJ Olive. The trio has been recording live dates that Hunter says "have some great moments." He adds that Olive's contributions have transformed the band even further. "Olive fits in with our goal of having someone fill the spaces," Hunter said. "He's not a regular DJ doing DJ stuff. He plays soundscapes. He's helping us to further distance ourselves from sounding like another jazz band. We have our own projects that touch on that enough. Olive is helping us to take this group to go somewhere else and be something else."

As for the unusual name of the group, Previte is the one who came up with Groundtruther. He was on-line and reading about how the entire globe is being mapped by satellite. "But a lot of times, the mappers see a satellite picture where they don't really know what's on the ground," he said. "It appears to be something, but they're not sure. So they send people out in jeeps to literally truth the ground. Yes, that's a rock; yes, those are two trees."

In essence, that's what Groundtruther is doing: finding the truth of a musical moment—not making do with what's supposed to happen in a jazz setting. It's a radical gesture that has political overtones. It's not preaching or proselytizing, but playing with integrity.

Hunter sees it as a quest. "I grew up in Berkeley, Calif., hearing all kinds of political propaganda," he said. "Likewise, so many people have lost their way playing music because of another kind of propaganda. They've become part of the problem with the recording industry. The best thing I can do—and we can do—is be a part of the solution. And that means doing what we're doing with honesty and continuing our journeys as musicians, improvisers and composers. It will make us all think differently and not lose our way."

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