

**Trombonist Steve Swell's journey of personal growth has taken him from commercial ballroom gigs to the inner circle of New York's avant-garde jazz scene. Three new albums under his leadership signal his arrival at the next level. Story by Ed Hazell. Photos by Michael Galinsky.**

# WHERE DREAMS TAKE WING

**L**ate one night in the mid-'70s at St. James Infirmary, a basement jazz club near Leroy Street and Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village, the musicians on stage could hear the sound of a lone trombone wafting down from the street. Whoever was up there was playing along with the guys on stage. And whoever was up there was sure to attract the local police, who were already in the habit of dropping in at the request of neighbors to tell the band to keep the noise down. Trombonist Roswell Rudd, whose wife was a co-owner of the club, went upstairs to see who the phantom trombonist was. He found a young man in his early twenties. Rudd invited him to sit in with the band. The kid demurred; he wasn't good enough to play with musicians at their level. Rudd insisted—partly because he didn't want more complaints from neighbors—if he won't come in and play, at least he could come in and listen. "I think that was the first time I met Steve Swell," Rudd says.

More than thirty years have passed and Steve Swell is no longer a reluctant trombonist. Now 52 years old, the self-described "very shy, quiet kid" has matured into one of the most adventurous and prolific members of the New York free-jazz community. In the past few months, Swell has added his first album as a big band leader, *Declaration of Interdependence* (Ayer), and *Remember Now* (NotTwo) the second release by his quartet Slammin' the Infinite featuring reed player Sabir Mateen, bassist Matt Heyner, and drummer Klaus Kugel, to a growing discography that includes more than 20 albums as a leader or co-leader and over 75 as a sideman. Another stellar release, *Swimming in a Galaxy of Goodwill and Sorrow* by Fire into Music, a quartet project with Jemeel Moondoc, William Parker, and Hamid Drake, is due from Rogue Art later this spring. The three albums signal a new level of maturity for Swell as a leader and

player. He has arrived at a new awareness of himself as a person and an artist, and it has translated into some of his most assured music to date.

"I finally discovered what it is I need in a band," Swell says, interviewed at his New York apartment. "At my age, I just want people who can play. It's nice to try to teach people, bring them along, but I realized that I have to play with people who I like, who I get along with, and who can support me emotionally, or give me whatever I need, instead of trying to do everything myself all the time."

The path to this current plateau of creativity has been anything but straight. But it's possible to see signposts, some of them planted years ago, which pointed him in his current direction. For instance, like many musicians his age, Swell gained valuable early experience in big bands. He worked in the large ensembles of Buddy Rich, Barry Harris, and Lionel Hampton, and in Jaki Byard's Apollo Stompers. This laid the foundation for later work with William Parker's Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra, Alan Silva's Celestial Communications Orchestra, Jemeel Moondoc's Jus Grew Orchestra, and various Cecil Taylor big bands. All these gigs inform the musical language of Swell's own big band, The Nation of We.

"I've always had a place in my musical heart and mind that was large-ensemble oriented," Swell says. "I was in Hampton's band for a whole year and we'd do two sets a night, sometimes two-and-a-half-hour sets. Even though there were charts and arrangements, there would be a lot of spontaneity. I try to bring the same kind of spontaneity to the Nation of We, to create excitement and some interesting and joyous music. Maybe it doesn't make sense—Lionel Hampton and avant-garde jazz big band—but I see a direct correlation. I just love all the tones and colors, and explosions, and things happening here, things

happening there. It becomes like a Jackson Pollack painting with all this color jumping out at you and splashes of sound. I love that. Out of that there's this incredibly beautiful order that sounds so right."

There is something Pollack-like in the energy and scale of *Declaration of Interdependence*. Recorded in January 2006, the performance is the second of only four gigs the orchestra has done—all at the Bowery Poetry Club. The ensemble includes New York free jazz regulars like Rob Brown, Sabir Mateen, Roy Campbell, Flip Barnes, Dave Taylor, and Jackson Krall, as well as post-bop fellow traveler trombonist Dick Griffin. Everyone knows each other, so despite the lack of work, and the divergent styles represented in the band, the 17-member band marshals impressive power on a composition of heroic proportions. At over an hour in length, the epic musical canvas allows the soloists maximum freedom to steer the music in personal directions as well as ample opportunity to respond to Swell's melodies, backing riffs, and orchestrations. The improvisations interweave and collide with Swell's writing to generate a complex skein of color and line. With music this democratic in spirit, it's unfair to single out particular soloists; everyone contributes equally to an overall performance that is cohesive and characterized by unstinting honesty and commitment all around. The piece takes on a life of its own, it surges and retreats, rise and falls with an independent will—a fine example of music that creates itself as it is played.

"Steve writes good music," Mateen observes. "Some composers write too much and there's nothing left to play on. His compositions keep you going, they give you a lot to play."

"I just try to remind myself as a composer, that I'm also an improviser," Swell says. "I try to follow the old Duke Ellington concept of remembering who you're writing for



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**"A piece of music comes out of a particular experience, but it's both personal and universal, just expressed in a personal way. It opens something inside of you, the listener, that helps you find your self, too. And therein lies the importance of artists and writers and painters and musicians and free thinkers." Steve Swell**

opposite and previous: Steve Swell in New York City, December 2006

When I was a younger writer, I would write something and give to some one who's improvising I liked, but who didn't match my writing. I had to really switch that around. That realization comes with doing it a lot and maturing a bit and really understanding who the musicians are you're playing with."

The title of the album—*Declaration of Interdependence*—suggests an essential element of Swell's performing, band leading, and composing—interaction and dialogue. "You have to think about the concept of freedom," Swell says. "Some people think 'free' means not having any consideration or sensitivity for the musicians around you. That's not what it is. Freedom is really, to quote a book, 'the wisdom of no escape.' You can be free, but still you have to respond to what somebody else is giving you. The back and forth, the dialog you create, whether it's four people or twenty, makes one voice. And that's the magic of it."

"It's not just being a one-man show, you're with other people and you have to respond to that. You're interdependent on that. It makes you a better player. Sometimes when somebody gives you that little support, that addition to your vocabulary, that conversational back-and-forth will push you in another direction, make what you play more interesting and take it to a higher level that you could take it on your own."

For Mateen, who is in both the Nation of We and Slammin' the Infinite, Swell's respect for those he works with makes him both a good leader and bandmate (Swell is likewise in Mateen's Shapes, Textures, and Sound Ensemble). "Steve understands that the music is not about me, me, me," Mateen says. "He knows there's no me, me, me without them, them, them. I think he understands that if you have original voices in your band, it makes you sound more original yourself. The nice thing about Slammin' is everyone is a leader, no one is a follower, we accompany each other. It's not a situation where you're there to just back up the front man."

The four personalities in Slammin' the Infinite mesh into one of the most powerful collective sounds in jazz right now. Drummer Klaus Kugel, who's comfortable in settings from European chamber improv to fusion to post-Ornette swing, sounds absolutely intoxicated by the freedom he's offered in the group; he plays with energy and joy on every track. Bassist Matt Heyner provides a clear and powerful bottom. His playing is uncluttered, precise, propulsive and always in tune with whatever is unfolding around him. Mateen is simply one of the deepest players working in the free jazz idiom today. He pours out torrents of sound

and feeling that scour away whatever is superfluous and false. Despite the emotional intensity, there's a profound logic to his best solos; they have the rhetorical power of a great sermon or poem.

It's company that brings out the best in Swell on their new album, *Remember Now*. Swell communicates so powerfully and naturally using the untempered sounds, extended timbral palette, and wildly stretched melodic contours of free jazz that his solos often have the feel of something played in tempo over changes—a curious confluence of old and new. On "MB-1 (for Marion Brown)," he sustains long passages in the upper register of his horn (a range he seems especially comfortably in) as he varies the contours and colors in his line. Then he rockets from one end of trombone's range to the other creating a warped see-saw effect that's oddly unHINGED and exhilarating. "Patient Explorer" features some of his most colorful playing on the disc, a lexicon of growls and shouts ripped by their roots from the origins of jazz and transplanted to the new soil of free jazz. His sound—bright and centered with a dark undercurrent—also calls to mind the lineage of the horn in jazz.

The band's name neatly describes its dense, street-wise cosmic vitality, but the title of the new album also resonates with some of Swell's central metaphysical concerns. "The music is all about being in the present moment—it happens right now," he says. "In order to be spontaneous, you have to be in that moment, in that 'now.' That's a Buddhist thing; it's a Hindu thing; it's really a Christian and Jewish thing, but we've lost some of that over the centuries. If you're playing music, if you're more fully engaged in that moment and everybody is on that same page with you, the music is going to be better, it's going to be more real, spontaneous. It's not always easy to do. You can train yourself to do it more. I'm not an enlightened person or anything, but I do try to bring myself to that moment and try to be mindful of that. I think we need to be reminded of the concept of 'now,' so the title is a reminder to be aware of it."

Swell sees this mindfulness as something that's important not just for musicians, but for all people. He sees that common human bond and that common human need to be fully present in the "now" as linking the audience and musician. "In our essential nature, we are timeless," he says. "The only thing we really own, we really have, is right now, this moment. We can't own what's going to happen tomorrow. Most of us sit around and think and worry about it, and we lose what's happening right now, right here. The more technology that gets

heaped on us, the more media that we have to deal with, the more we lose that. But if the music takes you to the ideal spot, all that shit just disappears and you're right there in that moment in time. You're you, you're found yourself. I believe that is equally true for player and listener."

Swell has toured with Slammin' the Infinite as well as the Steve Swell-Gebhard Ullman quartet with Hill Greene, and Barry Altschul. "Slammin' the Infinite has done three tours and we're going to do two more this year," he says. "The quartet with Gebhard just did our second tour and the level of music just went way up. Now I see what it is to have a steady band."

It's been more difficult to corral Jemeel Moondoc, William Parker, and Hamid Drake—the members of Fire into Music—for extended tours. "I love all the players, but the problem is getting together on any regular basis. We had our first tour in September 2004 and the band just had some great, great nights. I just want to be with these guys working 12 nights in two weeks and see what happens. That's really the excitement for me right now."

Despite Swell's dissatisfaction with the amount of work he can arrange for Fire into Music, their debut CD, *Swimming in a Galaxy of Goodwill and Sorrow* (Rogue Art) displays plenty of the emotional heat and musical dialog that mark his best projects. The band emphasizes line and rhythm—melody and swing are the order of the day, but they often modulate, modify, distort and otherwise play with the material as they get the music to lift off. The over all sound is airier and less dense than Slammin' the Infinite, but the band generates emotional power through its focus on linear variations and dancing rhythms.

The interactions between Moondoc and Swell form one important locus of creative activity, as they methodically explore different ways to pair off: parallel improvisations, call and response, tossing ideas back and forth between them. "I think Jemeel is one of the most interesting saxophonists in New York, by far," Swell says. "The challenge is for me to figure out what to do around him, but I like challenges like that, if it's a really great player like Jemeel."

The band's other primary source of creative power is the incomparable teamwork of Drake and Parker, who at this point seem to act not as individuals, but as parts of a single compound personality. "The combination of William and Hamid is just so amazing," Swell continues. "William came up with this one base line, on the last tune, 'Planet Hopping on a Thursday Afternoon.' I didn't have any bass line for the tune, so I asked him to come up with one, and he did



it, like, wham. Amazing. We did a concert about a month later up in Montreal, and I said, do you remember the bass line you came up with, and he went right into it."

Swell took up the trombone (it was the only instrument available) in elementary school in Newark, N.J., but he didn't fall in love with it until he was 15 and heard Roswell Rudd on the radio. After that, Swell began steeping himself in the great bop and hard bop trombonists like J.J. Johnson, Jimmy Cleveland, Grachan Moncur III, Curtis Fuller, and Jimmy Knepper (he'd eventually go on to study with the last three).

After graduating from high school and spending a year in college, he got the chance to study with his hero, Rudd, who was teaching in federally funded jazz program on Saturdays at a public school on the upper West Side. "Sometimes it was just me—because I made it every time—other times, there would be nine other trombone players," Swell recalls. "That went on for two years, maybe longer. I was like 19 years old and I'd been listening to Roswell Rudd since I was 15 so this was amazing. He was doing crazy things, teaching us not technical stuff, but sound stuff, listening. It was wonderful. We got to know each other a little bit."

At the time, Swell was a working musician, but he wasn't focused on creative music. He frequented the Lower East Side lofts, but mainly as a listener. For most of the '70s, he made his living in commercial music. "I worked at Roseland Ballroom, and the music was the worst in the world, it made Guy Lombardo look like a genius," he says. "Broadway shows, jingles, you name it. I started to see what it takes to survive in those cliques and I just didn't have what it took. I mean I could have faked it for a few more years, I just didn't have what they had, which was a certain amount of ... well, shallowness. It was just destined not to happen."

By the mid '80s, he was not only maintaining a grueling freelance commercial-music schedule, he was also beginning to travel in some of New York's elite jazz circles. However, his interest in creative music and the demands of his commercial-music schedule were pulling him in two directions at once. Something had to give. For some time, Swell had been rehearsing with Makanda Ken McIntyre's ensemble on Sunday afternoons at his loft on West

Broadway and occasionally playing concerts and clubs with them. After one gig, McIntyre asked him, "Do you want to make money or make music?"

"It was the very right thing to say at the very right time," says Swell. "I was still drinking and smoking pot, and I was still trying to make a million dollars doing \$25 society gigs; I was trying to do everything. What he said really got me to think about what I was doing. So it was good that I met him and worked with him and that he said that to me. He said a lot of worse things than that to me, which got me to think, too. That's the kind of guy he was and I appreciate that. I got it and stayed and kept playing and thought about it. And I don't do those commercial gigs any more."

Swell threw himself into New York's creative music scene with a vengeance. From working commercial gigs for so long, he had excellent survival skills. He could sight read well, and he quickly grasped the requirements of a composition. In short order, he became one of the most in-demand sidemen in New York, working in an astonishingly broad range of the city's diverse avant garde. Between 1992 and 1994 alone, he performed and recorded with Phillip Johnston's Big Trouble, Joey Baron's BaronDown trio with Ellery Eskelin, Tim Berne's Caos Totale, and became a charter member of William Parker's Little Huey Creative Music Orchestra. As the increasingly personal nature of his musical quest gained the upper hand, he found himself drawn more and more into the circle of free jazz musicians like Mateen, Parker, Cecil Taylor, and other like minded improvisers. In 1996, he began recording under his own name, making the first of 15 albums he would record as a leader or coleader for either CIMP or Cadence Jazz.

One of those early CIMP albums, *Out and About* (1996), marked Roswell Rudd's return to recording and performing creative music. "Steve kept in touch through the years after he came to my classes," Rudd says. "Sometimes, he'd call when he was getting ready to leave to go on a tour, just to talk. At first I think he had some trepidation about going whole hog into playing jazz. I mean, it's hard to make ends meet in this music. I wasn't able to do it, but Steve already had a 360 degree exposure to music, to a whole variety of situations, and it helped him. When he called me to do *Out and About*, I said yes, of course. It's

what got me back out and about. And now, I see how active he is, I mean, just look at his recorded legacy—in a few years, he's done more than I have in a lifetime. I think he's been able to organize his life so he can devote it all to music. For him, it's essential for his personal growth."

And for Swell, the journey of personal growth is paramount. In New York's free jazz circles, networking and technical ability will only get you so far. The commitment to investigating the larger spiritual issues raised by the music inevitably take on greater importance than the technical and the purely aesthetic aspects.

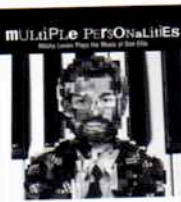
"There's a wonderful book by Thich Nhat Hanh called *The Blooming of the Lotus*. In it, he says you have to keep one foot in the divine and one in the corporeal," Swell says. "I think if you keep a balance like that, you can start to improve your own lot, which will start to improve the lot next door. It takes time. I read in a science magazine that the human species wants to develop to a higher level always. We're just wired that way to do it. A piece of music comes out of a particular experience, but it's both personal and universal, just expressed in a personal way. It opens something inside of you, the listener, that helps you find your self, too. And therein lies the importance of artists and writers and painters and musicians and free thinkers."

As Swell sees it, his music, as the title of a suite he recorded on CIMP puts it, is for "player, listeners, and other dreamers." "It's important to dream. It's part of the way I live my life and play my music," he says. "We all need dreams and hopes. For me, the music put me in another mind space, whether that's looking out the classroom window and daydreaming about Roswell Rudd as a kid, or dreaming about a better world, about what could be, as an adult. It's not necessarily a philosophy; it's just there for me."

"But it's one thing to dream, but it's another thing to really believe in your dreams, to take responsibility. As an artist, that's what you have to do, you have to see it all the way through. You have to go all the way to really understand what that really is. And take responsibility." ■

*Ed Hazell lives in Somerville, MA where he writes for the Boston Phoenix. He wrote about Joe McPhee in STN#39.*

multiple personalities



## Multiple Personalities

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