

Fantastic Merlins

Nathan Hanson, tenor saxophone

Brian Roessler, bass

Peter Hennig, drums

Matt Turner, cello

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“The opening moments of Look Around evoke multiple landscapes, layers of sonic possibility that are then realized throughout this superb and surprisingly adventurous disc. Transcending post-modern superficiality to create a convincing stylistic blend. It will be fascinating to see down which avenue of discovery the quartet chooses to lope, jump or run.”

--Signal to Noise Magazine (Marc Medwin)

“Fantastic Merlins make improvised music with the spirit that’s the impetus behind the best jazz. They might not have chord progressions, they may not “blow” the way that Charlie Parker did, but they capture the intensity, freedom and flat-out beauty of some of John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders and Albert Ayler.”

--Pulse Magazine (Steve McPherson)

“It’s refreshing when a band like Fantastic Merlins comes along and is able to truly push the limits of jazz improvisation, pulling in a variety of genre-bending elements while maintaining enough familiarity and melodic substance to captivate the listener...They are a band for bored ears.”

--How Was the Show (Andrea Myers)

“These people know what they’re doing; desolate themes, vigorous lines and engaging improvisations are intertwined with delicate concentration and a masterful pacing of every section, the tension/release ratio remaining at a constantly balanced grade. On top of everything, the musicians look for a collective coherence rather than straining themselves to put their excellent technical value in front of the listener, which is a major plus...”

--Touching Extremes (Massimo Ricci)

“I also recommend hearing Fantastic Merlins...They’re working on the fertile turbulent boundaries of many musical categories, setting their classical training and adventurous spirits on jazz bedrock--definitely a way to get the Paul Seal of Approval...you’d best get out and hear them in person!”

--Minnesota Public Radio (Paul Cantrell)

“Bringing together an unconventional mix of instruments and a shared penchant for experimentation, Fantastic Merlins make music that’s unpredictable and steeped in emotion. Alternately upbeat and meditative, the cello, bass, sax and drum interplay make for a sound that’s part avant-garde jazz, part chamber music, part boundary-breaking sonic journey.”

-- Mliwaukee Shepherd Express

A mysterious blend of jazz and chamber music brings together the visceral power of Charles Mingus and the sparse textures of Steve Reich through original compositions and improvised pieces - producing sounds that are intriguing, energetic, and positive.

2004

Fantastic Merlins begins as the trio of Nathan Hanson saxophone, Jacqueline Ultan cello, and Brian Roessler bass at the Clown Lounge, St. Paul, MN

2005

The band becomes a quartet with the addition of Federico Ughi drums. Look Around is recorded.

2007

Look Around released by Innova Records

2008

Peter Hennig joins the group on drums, replacing Federico Ughi. A Handful of Earth is recorded.

2009

A Handful of Earth is released. How the Light Gets In, a collection of songs by Leonard Cohen arranged by Fantastic Merlins, is recorded with Matt Turner replacing Jacqueline Ultan on cello, and Darren Jackson aka Kid Dakota on vocals.

2010

How the Light Gets In will be released in conjunction with a special performance by Fantastic Merlins and Kid Dakota at the Sons d'Hiver Festival in Paris.

Listening to Fantastic Merlins is like walking down an alley in a film noir: shadowy characters, ambiguous motives, and cliffhanger moments abound. Both dissonant and resonant, Fantastic Merlins effortlessly weave together the dark and the light, the dangerous and innocent. Their cinematic sound coalesces organically in an exquisite tension between jazz and chamber music, surprising listeners as often as it soothes.

Fantastic Merlins' balance between highly orchestrated passages and improvisational flights of fancy creates a constant process of discovery. It keeps the Fantastic Merlins' sound fresh — delighting both listeners and band members themselves. This process produces momentary mysteries, too: discerning the difference between dramatically different instruments can be nearly impossible.

Fantastic Merlins' previous album, Look Around, creates a swirling tension just underneath the surface, which keeps listeners under its spell from beginning to end. Moody and gorgeous, it is an album-length siren song and was chosen as a semi-finalist for the 2007 Grammys in the Best Jazz Instrumental category.

Fantastic Merlins' newest release, A Handful of Earth, has been gestating for a couple of years; instead of a mere follow-up to their acclaimed debut, they've delivered a decisive artistic leap forward. Without sacrificing their adventurous spirit, the Merlins have tactically embraced simplicity and outright lyricism. They've opened their blend of jazz, classical, and improv to more possibilities in order to deliver memorable surprises. Discovery is key to the Merlins' music. A Handful of Earth features a procession of fantastical alleys, fields, and groves awaiting your exploration.

Saxophonist **Nathan Hanson** has performed with legends such as Dizzy Gillespie, Cecil Taylor, Mark Dresser, and Douglas Ewart, as well as rising stars including Chris Potter, Tony Malaby and Liberty Ellman. He has been called “probing” (Jazziz), “an extraordinary performer, with a beautiful tone and concept” (Cadence), and “unexpectedly tasteful and dignified” (ImproJazz-France).

Bassist **Brian Roessler** expresses his musical versatility on electric and double bass. He has studied with French double-bass virtuoso Francois Rabbath and James Clute of the Minnesota Orchestra. One of Roessler’s compositions, Returning to Silence, was chosen as the subject of a master class with Henry Threadgill at MacPhail Center for Music. Roessler has also recorded with artists ranging from jazz visionary Carei Thomas to indie rocker Kid Dakota to Spymob, who signed to Epic in 1998.

Drummer **Peter Hennig** is a graduate of McNally Smith College of Music who has studied under Dave King (The Bad Plus). He has performed alongside vocalists Renee Austin, Debbie Duncan, and Sophia Shorai, as well as with the Atlantis Quartet, Greybox, and Charlie Devanna.

Matt Turner is regarded as one of the world’s leading improvising cellists. Also a highly accomplished pianist, Turner performs everything from jazz standards and twentieth century new music to alternative rock and improvised avant-garde. Turner completed his undergraduate studies at Lawrence University and his Master of Music degree in Third Stream Studies at the New England Conservatory of Music. There he studied with Dave Holland, Geri Allen and Joe Maneri and was the recipient of a Distinction in Performance award. Turner has performed at several music festivals including the JVC Jazz Festival, Nancy Jazz Pulsations, Avignon Jazz Festival, Festival en Haute-Garonne, and with CUBE, Present Music, and Dadadah.