

# Fantastic Merlins

Nathan Hanson, tenor saxophone  
Jacqueline Ferrier-Ultan, cello  
Brian Roessler, bass  
Federico Ughi, drums

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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)

“Today’s multi-stylistic jazz groups are often ignored not only by young music bloggers, but also by old-guard jazz fans reluctant to embrace anything outside traditional bebop. Creative musicians can’t win. But open-minded listeners can’t lose with Fantastic Merlins. Cellist Jacqueline Ferrier-Ultan and bassist Brian Roessler lay down an abundance of cinematic and spooky low-end grooves. Over that mix, saxophonist Nathan Hanson and percussionist Federico Ughi weave and moan. But throughout this smoldering set, instruments veer in and out of each other’s tonal range for a exploration that’s often solemn and organically psychedelic.”

--Minnesota Monthly Magazine (Jim Meyer)

“Although Fantastic Merlins are mostly based in Minnesota, they do include former downtown saxist, Nathan Hanson, and current downtown drum wiz & label-head Federico Ughi. Although I am not familiar with the other two members of this quartet, each time I've played this disc, I've been blown away, as have the half dozen customers who have grabbed copies in the store. What is so fantastic about them?!? This is not just another swell improv disc, you can tell that a good deal of preparation and writing has gone into this gem. Both strings often sound marvelous and magical when they are bowing together and creating incredible harmonies with the sax.”

--Downtown Music Gallery (Bruce Gallanter)

“A band with vision that is literally part NYC, part Minneapolis, and spiritually part free jazz and part string quartet, the Merlins make magic with a power and precision that is at times awesome, at other times inspirational. Their blend of cello, bass, drums and sax is wide enough to give each member a chance to inhale the melody and take it to varying heights, but to always return to the heated center.”

--Foxy Digitalis (Mike Wood)

“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)

“Although some incontrovertible influences are caught here and there – Curlew circa Tom Cora, to name one – 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, New York and Minneapolis based combo 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

Top Ten CDs of 2005, #7 (Live EP)

--Steve McPherson, Pulse Magazine

Best Live Shows of 2006, Honorable Mention

--MinneapolisMusic for Rift Magazine

“Really very beautiful!”

--John Ziegler, Program Director, KUMD Radio, Duluth

Intensely cinematic and entirely unique, the rare beauty of New York and Minneapolis based instrumental combo Fantastic Merlins begins with the group's unusual blend of cello, bass, saxophone, and drums. Replete with stunning dynamics and melodies that range from playful to mournful, the resulting style encompasses avant-garde jazz and chamber music alike, as well as everything in between: classical-yet-contemporary experimentalism, complex rhythms, and breathtaking improvisation.

For Rome-to-NYC transplant Federico Ughi (drums), even the ideas he commits to memory or shares in rehearsal are ultimately “a ramp to this improvisation,” and saxophonist Nathan Hanson insists the structural flexibility suits the group just fine: “Some pieces are very similar from one performance to the next; some are never the same twice.”

While this kind of genre-bending anti-pop typically caters to the jazz or classical crowd, Brian Roessler (bass) has noticed Fantastic Merlins are already attracting a widely diverse audience. “A lot of people out there seem to be hungry for the kind of thing we’re doing. Our goal is to connect with these people.”

Fantastic Merlins formed in early 2005 as the result of a couple of informal playing sessions: The previous summer, Roessler recruited longtime friend and collaborator Hanson and Minneapolis cellist Jacqueline Ferrier-Ultan to play a few gigs as a trio. Agreeing they were on to something special, Hanson called on Ughi to complete the group, and everyone rendezvoused in Minneapolis to play some shows and track a record.

Since the foursome came together on the strength of artistic reputation and shared interest with little regard for the breakdown of instrumentation, the sound that emerged was a discovery in its own right. “People have commented on the auspicious interaction between cello and saxophone, or between cello and bass,” says Ferrier-Ultan. “Their timbres blend so beautifully you can’t always tell which instrument is playing what.”

According to Roessler, this kind of seamless acoustic integration is precisely what Fantastic Merlins are after. “We all seem to have a unified vision of what kind of textures and feelings we want to create, without ever having to talk about it.” In the end, the music says more than enough.

## Nathan Hanson

Nathan Hanson is a tenor saxophonist and composer, recently relocated to Saint Paul from New York City, who specializes in improvised music. Current projects include a solo recording on Sugarstyles Media entitled "Letting Go", concerts in the US and Europe with Options, a group led by drummer Federico Ughi. He has performed with Cecil Taylor, Douglas Ewart, Dizzy Gillespie, Mark Dresser, Carei Thomas, Liberty Ellman, Elliot Humberto Kavee, Trevor Dunn, Tony Malaby, Daniel Carter, Sabir Mateen, Matt Glassmeyer, Sean Moran, Dan Fabricatore, Bruce Eisenbeil, Kevin Schmidt, Jay Rosen, Francis Wong and many others.

"...unexpectedly tasteful and dignified..."

–Marc Chaloin, improjazz (France)

"...hear something new, some combination of sounds that you've never heard. Musicians who can pull that off are a rare breed."

–Ryan Kallberg, Minnesota Daily

"Probing...it's the closest thing music in the 90's has gotten to something truly psychedelic."

–Michael Bieber, JAZZIZ magazine

## Jacqueline Ferrier–Ultan

Inspired in childhood by visionaries such as Isadora Duncan, Jane Goodall, and her own father, composer/philosopher Lloyd Ultan, cellist Jacqueline Ferrier–Ultan seeks out unique and varied contexts in which to express her passion. Jacqueline's versatility allows her to comfortably slide into the music of Bach, Coltrane, Led Zeppelin, and Sun Ra, as well as creating her own compositions.

After graduating with a Master's Degree from Yale University, Jacqueline's creative interests have led her to collaborations with world renowned artists including Anthony Cox; Bill Carrothers; George Cartwright; Didier Petit; Andrew Broder (The Fog); Carei Thomas; Chan Poling and many others. Currently, Jacqueline can be heard performing in several diverse projects including 'Jelloslave', a drum and cello ensemble (who's debut CD will be available February 18, 2006); 'Anti–Gravity', a free improvisation collaboration; and Fantastic Merlins, a chamber/jazz group. Fantastic Merlins recently completed two CD's including a live self-titled EP CD, and the debut studio CD "Look Around".

Jacqueline is also a dedicated teacher and is on the faculty of the Macphail Center for Music and the Minneapolis Community and Technical College. Jacqueline has a passion for carrying heavy things on her back...if it's not her cello, then it's a 50 lb backpack while hiking the wilds of the north shore's magical Superior Hiking Trail.

## Brian Roessler

Brian Roessler is a bassist and composer. Whether he's quietly working out the details of a new composition, shaking the ground in a late night rock club, or executing delicately textured new double bass music, Brian's rhythmic precision and wide-ranging musical fluency has allowed him to thrive in a variety of settings. As a teenager Brian dedicated himself to prog rock odysseys, but by the time he finished college he had composed an hour long film score incorporating string quartets, pieces for small jazz combos, and sequenced MIDI. His 1995 piece *Returning to Silence* was chosen by the Macphail Center for Music as the subject of a master class with composer Henry Threadgill. Improvisational structures and works for solo instruments and small ensembles continue to be Brian's compositional focus.

On electric bass Brian has been featured live and on recordings by acclaimed artists such as Storyhill, Alva Star, Brenda Weiler, and most notably Spymob – his longtime band that signed with Epic records in 1998.

Brian's exploration of the double bass has been inspired and guided by two crucial mentors. James Clute of the Minnesota Orchestra taught him the intricacies of orchestral repertoire and shared decades of experience at the forefront of the American symphonic scene. Brian's study intensified in 2002 with his move to Paris to work with François Rabbath, one of the instrument's great virtuosos and pedagogues. Back at home in St. Paul his apprenticeship with Rabbath continues today, bringing deep inspiration to all aspects of Brian's musical life.

Bassist Brian Roessler has performed and recorded with artists as diverse as indie rock darling Kid Dakota and jazz great Carei Thomas. He is principal bass of the St. Cloud Symphony Orchestra (Minnesota) and has served as a substitute in the bass section of the Minnesota Orchestra.

## Federico Ughi

Federico Ughi is an artist based in New York with a particular interest in improvisation. He has performed or recorded as a composer, drummer, and electronic musician with such artists as: Daniel Carter, Steve Swell, Steve Dalachinsky, Andrea Parkins, Steve Gauci, Tom Abbs, Matt Lavelle, Jaime Fennelly, Nathan Hanson, Matt Glassmeyer, Sean Moran, Dan Fabricatore, Reuben Radding, Sayuri Goto, Marco Cappelli, Michael Evans in New York and Geoff Simkins, Steve Buckley, Rhodri Davies, Phil Durrant, Cinematic Orchestra (Ninja Tune), Roberto Bellatalla, Carl Orr and Bloody Riot in London, UK and Italy.

Current projects include:

\*"Options", a group led by Ughi featuring Nathan Hanson, Sean Moran, Dan

Fabricatore.

\*"Carter, Swell, Ughi" (trio with Daniel Carter and Steve Swell).

\*Duo with Steve Dalachinsky, with whom he performs on the release 'I thought it was the end of the world then the end of the world happened again'.

\*Duo with Daniel Carter, with whom he recorded 'Astonishment'.

Ughi has toured throughout NYC, Europe and UK performing in many festivals and venues including: Vision Festival NYC, Improvised & Otherwise Festival NYC, CBGB, Copenhagen Jazz Festival, Brighton Jazz Bop Festival, Relay 1998 UK, Total Eclipse Festival UK, The Knitting Factory and Cornelia Street Cafe.

From 1994 - 1999, he was based in London, and performed in many venues and festivals. He co-lead the acoustic quartet 'After Breakfast' which toured throughout Europe, and was awarded a grant from Jazz Services for the "After Breakfast UK Autumn Tour 1998". He moved to New York in early 2000, inspired by Paul Bley, with whom he studied.

Prior to 1994, he was based in Rome, where he studied music at UM (Universita' della Musica), and worked as a drummer and band leader in bands covering diverse styles from jazz to crossover funk to rock to hard-core punk (Bloody Riot).