

David Binney

The Time Verses

Jacob Sacks
Eivind Opsvik
Dan Weiss



Criss Cross Jazz 1392

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Around the beginning of 2016, **David Binney** decided to build his next recording around the musicians who regularly play with him at the 55 Bar, the low-ceilinged ex-speakeasy on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village where, when not on the road, the alto saxophonist-composer has performed on Tuesdays since 2000, a year before he recorded the first of nine CDs that he has led or co-led for **Criss Cross**.

Even before launching his Tuesday night sinecure, Binney was using the 55 Bar as a place to workshop music and develop new bands, sharing the cramped back corner “bandstand” with a who’s who of contemporary improvisers, among them, pianists Uri Caine, Edward Simon, Craig Taborn, David Virelles, John Escreet and Matt Mitchell; trumpeters Alex Sipiagin and Ambrose Akinmusire; tenor saxophonists Chris Potter, Donny McCaslin and Mark Turner; guitarists Adam Rogers, Ben Monder, and Wayne Krantz; bassists Scott Colley, Tim Lefebvre and Thomas Morgan; and drummers Brian Blade, Kenny Wolleson, Jim Black, Jeff Hirschfield and Tyshawn Sorey. But more often than not during the past seven years, Binney has functioned with a rhythm section comprising pianist **Jacob Sacks**, bassist **Eivind Opsvik** and drummer **Dan Weiss** (first documented as a unit on his 2009 CD **Aliso** [Criss 1322]), who perform Binney’s nine original pieces—augmented and knit together by five Binney-generated post-production interludes—with exemplary intention and creative focus.

“The band has been together for a long time and developed

a unique sound,” Binney says. “There’s nothing that pigeonholes it into a certain style or scene. Whatever sounds need to be made, will happen, and the energy can go from unbelievably soft to completely nuts, from swinging to whatever. I feel lucky to have a regular gig with a regular band to develop music—especially improvised music. There’s a long history of that in jazz, and it doesn’t happen much any more.”

To be specific, in 2001, Binney recruited Sacks, Weiss and Thomas Morgan, each in their early twenties then, as his go-to band not long after encountering them on a three-week European tour with trombonist Christoph Schweizer. He first documented their simpatico on his 2004 **Criss Cross** debut, **Bastion of Sanity** [Criss 1261]. Weiss has remained for the duration. Except for a four-year hiatus, so has Sacks. Around 2006, as Morgan became one of New York’s busiest bassists, Binney recruited Opsvik, himself a well-regarded leader and a member of Binney’s outstanding mid-’00s quartet with Taborn and Blade and his self-documented *Out Of Airplanes* project.

“Dan is my favorite drummer to play with because he’s so elastic,” Binney says. “He goes with whatever is happening, everything is wide-open, and it can be anything at any time. I love his choices and the energy he brings. He plays phrases, not the rhythm behind something; he plays the song as well. Eivind is super-solid, has great time, is really creative, takes amazing solos that are beautiful to listen to. He and Dan work great

together, and their connection with Jacob—who’s a great improviser—is unbelievably strong.”

Binney took full advantage of that *simpatico* when composing the repertoire during the fortnight before the February 17th recording date, which, he remarks, “gave me a good excuse to write new quartet music for us to play live.” He adds: “We were really on top of everything, and I wanted to document the group again. It would be very difficult music for a lot of people, but for these guys it was medium-hard. Everything went smoothly—I think we were in and out of the studio in 6 or 7 hours.”

Although the titles imply a suite whose programmatic narrative tracks the diurnal cycle, Binney—himself a card-carrying night creature—states that the pieces were “just written as music.” He adds: “The titles came afterward, especially when I started doing the interludes, which set the tone with intros and outros that created a world and made all the songs relate to each other. I’ve been reading a lot about time as a commodity—what everyone is going to run out of and what we’re all trying to get. I live inexpensively, in a cheap apartment, but that allows me to have a great deal of time. In a way, I based the titles on that idea.”

After a half-minute prologue, ***Dawn***, the band enters the mix on ***Walk***, a “very involved,” through-composed, 11-minute epic. Binney attributes the name to an anchoring, “almost kind of walking bass line even

though it’s not a swing tune” and from the notion that the piece “signifies that there’s time—it’s like something done slowly, often.” After fluid solos by Sacks and Binney, Opsvik contributes a haunting arco statement against sampled voice interpolations, before a characteristically turbulent, full-bodied concluding solo by the leader.

“We never go back to anything that happened before,” Binney remarks. “A few things loop for solos and so on, but once they’re done, it moves on to something else. For me, getting away from the song format is sort of important, although there are pieces on this date that have song formats. But the way I like to write now is to have things unfold as perhaps in classical music, and yet within that to have solos and things we’re used to hearing in a jazz format.”

When composing ***Arc***, which follows, Binney’s intention was to write “a beautiful ballad,” an aspiration that he upholds in the opening and closing sections, but countersignifies upon with, as he puts it, a “busy solo section that builds in energy, with a lot of chord changes that are not the same harmony as the melodies.”

After another interlude ***Morning Tide***, the quartet takes on ***Strange Animal***, a mysterious piece comprising passages that stop for a measure, then resume, as the dynamic range switches off between pianissimo and fortissimo. “The melody is simple, but the piano parts

are quite involved,” says Binney, noting that Sacks incorporates the brief breaks—punctuated by Weiss’ highly musical fills—into the flow of his erudite solo, followed by Binney’s episodic declamation, delivered with tart, gorgeous tonality and thematic cogency. The title comes from a remark by Binney’s girlfriend that the “song sounds like a strange animal.”

Although Binney sings intermittently through **The Time Verses**, the haunting, luminous soprano voice on **Seen** belongs to sui generis singer **Jen Shyu**, who heard it years ago as an instrumental dubbed *Simple Vibe*, was deeply moved, and asked permission to write lyrics to it. Sacks and Binney cosign the emotions contained therein. “Every recording since then, we’ve said, ‘Oh, we should record it,’ but we never did,” Binney says. “When this record came up, Eivind, who remembers all the different things we’ve been playing, suggested we record it. I called Jen, and she was around.”

Binney describes the gnarly, anthemic **The Reason to Return** as “a hard tune, with tricky chord changes that come in at different spots.” He recalls writing it when the death of his 18-year-old cat brought home the realization that he no longer had the responsibility to “come back to my apartment from the road or a gig to feed and take care of her.” He continues: “We’d been doing it for maybe a year before this record. Live, I’d play it free, not over the form, but on the date I played over the form, which is difficult.”

Electronica enters the mix on the airy, rubato **Time Takes Its Time**, titled for a vignette written by the Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Hughes Galeano in *Voices of Time: A Life in Stories*. It begins: “He is one of the phantoms. That’s what the people of Sainte Elie call the handful of old men, knee-deep in the mud, grinding stones and scraping sand in the abandoned mine that doesn’t have a cemetery because even the dead don’t want to stick around.”

“This is a series of written sections that don’t repeat; we stay open for everyone to play a 30-second solo,” Binney says. “For instance, Dan takes the first one, playing lightly on the cymbals, and then cues into another written section. I placed the solo into a transcription program called Melodyne, changed it to MIDI information, and then assigned these exact transcriptions to trigger electronic sounds from the synthesizer.” When the synth is done, Binney sums up with a searing statement.

After another interlude, the quartet takes on another Binney epic, **Where Worlds Collide**, on which 22-year-old **Shai Golan** plays second alto on the theme statement. “We’ve been playing this every week,” Binney says, noting that the vamp in the B-section and head-solo-head format resemble his earlier process more than other songs on **The Time Verses**. “It’s difficult, with a lot of time signature changes and a lot of chord changes, and it’s fun to play.”

As you might expect, **55**, a brisk, straight-up, Wayne Shorter-esque swinger, references the 55-Bar, where, Binney observes, “we play a lot of swing.” After he reprises a portion of **Arc** on keyboard, and a final interlude called **Dusk**, the diurnal cycle is done, leaving Binney ready for his next step, whatever that may be.

“I really love this record,” he concludes. “It’s maybe my favorite one that I’ve made.”

Ted Panken