CONSISTENCY, CHANGE, & THE PRIME DIRECTIVE

Bassist Dave Holland just keeps growing, in and out of the limelight. And now, he's even having fun at it.

By Josef Woodard

Washington D.C.'s Blues Alley offers a vision of the jazz club as a nurturing space off the beaten track of mass culture. Situated literally in an alleyway, it's a warm-spirited, brick-lined womb of a place. It's the kind of room that, when the music is good and the musicians are engaged in meaningful conversation, seems like a world unto itself, far from the petty concerns and peccadilloes of the real one outside, and seemingly complete.

Last fall, Dave Holland's newest group landed in this alley, and the music was good, indeed. Holland is a jazz musician who has plugged away in the famous basements and alleys of jazz for decades. But even though he is respected mightily within the jazz world, he is hardly a household name outside of those circles.

Holland was in Georgetown that week, ostensibly promoting the newly released ECM album, *Point of View*, but that album's band had already evolved a bit. Joining trombonist Robin Eubanks (a returnee from Holland's celebrated '80s quintet), drummer Billy Kilson, and vibist Steve Nelson, was saxist Chris Potter, who replaced the album's Steve Wilson. The ensemble chemistry in what may be Holland's best group yet — by turns fiery, organically funky, and introspective — was still in flux, and the group was using this tour to hone new songs to record in December.

Stoic, bearded, yet still boyish at 53, Holland is a tall, mild-mannered virtuoso with closely cropped hair and attentive sensors onstage. He smiles freely in the heat of group interaction, but flashes an occasional grimace during his own solos when a phrase fails to meet muster or his intonation is less than pristine by his own stern standards. Blessed with fearsome chops, a broad-minded sense of musicality, and a yen for personal growth, he's a complete, mature package — yet still a talent deserving wider recognition.

Not that Holland didn't get some early and important recognition, of course: The venturesome Brit was pushed into global scrutiny when he got a phone call from Miles Davis in 1968. Davis had caught the bassist at Ronnie Scott's in London and had liked what he heard. He offered Holland, then a gifted 22-year-old studying at the Guildhall School of Music, a plane ticket and a gig.

Preferring to remain unplugged and to steer clear of simple ostinatos, Holland got off the electric-Miles bus in the early '70s, however, then spent many years tilting toward the avant-garde in groups like the free-minded Circle (with Chick Corea, Anthony Braxton, and Barry Altschul) and later with Sam Rivers. In the midst of his '70s free era, he explored the folk-tinged jazz aesthetics of the Gateway Trio with guitarist John Abercrombie and drummer Jack DeJohnette (the group reunited in the '90s for a couple of albums). In the '80s, with the aptly titled *Jumpin' In* (ECM), Holland emerged as an inspired composer and leader of a potent band, a quintet with trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, saxist Steve Coleman, trombonists Julian Priester or Robin Eubanks, and drummers Steve Ellington or Marvin "Smitty" Smith.

All along, Holland has brought invention and grace to many a rhythmic section. Listen, for example, to his empathic trio rapport with Joe Henderson and drummer Al Foster. And then there is the ongoing German connection: Holland has been a coveted sideman on many a project for his longtime label home, ECM, a role that has taken him in various directions; in the past year, he's played on Charles Lloyd's latest, alongside his crony John Abercrombie and drummer Billy Higgins, and on a recording by Tunisian oud player Anouar Brahem.

But clearly the focus is this new band, which leads us back to Blues Alley. After his set, Holland settled down in a nook backstage, nursing a Beck's and talking about his current mission to make the best of a band with great potential.

WOODARD: Is this current group an extension of your bass playing or something different from it altogether?

HOLLAND: I don't know if it's because I'm a bass player, but I'm very intrigued by group interaction. That's something I always loved, right from the beginning, about Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson, and Mingus with his bands, and Scott Lafaro with Bill Evans. So many of the things that drew me into this music had to do with the dialogue and interaction within a group.

As a bass player, the dialogue gives you a chance to really get in there and be involved in more than just the role-playing in the music, but actually be involved in commenting and discussing, having a conversation musically. That musical conversation is something I've always felt was an important element, musically, but also socially. I feel like there's a communion possible in music that is special on a human level, of being able to move beyond your own part and your own playing and your own ego in what you're trying to make happen, and see the greater picture of all music.

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WOODARD: Is that an aesthetic specific to jazz?

HOLLAND: No, it relates to music on many levels. But in improvised music, it's something special because it allows you to grasp the moment in a way that through-written music doesn't. It's achievable in a string quartet or other groups, but the improvised form is, of course, the spontaneous one and allows much more scope for dialogue and development and surprise. I don't know what you're

photo: jose manuel

going to play in response to what I'm going to play, so my response to your response is unknown to me until I make it.

I've just been touring with a Tunisian musician, the oud player Anouar Brahem, who has this element of improvisation and being in the moment, of spontaneity and responding to whatever was played. You can sense when there is something special happening, when sparks are flying between musicians. It's a human thing.

WOODARD: Tonight, in the first set, there was a tune which broke down to a duet with you and Chris. It suddenly departed sharply from the form of the tune and turned into a pretty "outside" exchange, but an energy was conveyed to the audience. They might not have accepted a whole evening of that, but, in the context, they were right there with you.

HOLLAND: Yes, they were ready to hear it in that context. Again, that's a big part of presenting this music — presenting it in a way where it gives people a context. They can accept a lot of things that might not necessarily be accepted.

One of the things I see is this idea of having simplicity and sophistication going on at the same time. Duke Ellington had that so wonderfully in his music. We can play with a great deal of complexity in the music and it can be carried to even the novice listener through the other things that are happening around it, such as melodies that are singable and rhythms which are danceable.

These are all things that Duke did right from the beginning. You listen to his music closely and it's as complex as any music you've heard in the 20th century, some of the suites and so on. But it never intimidated people because it had these other elements which related directly to people's emotions, through the rhythms and the beautiful melodies that he wrote.

WOODARD: This is definitely a band that finds a way to make accessible music with... I don't want to say "odd" meters because they're not inherently odd, but meters outside of the traditional usage, let's say.

HOLLAND: That has always interested me. During the '80s, when I had the quintet with Kenny Wheeler, Julian Priester, Steve Coleman, and Smitty Smith, between the music I was writing and that Steve Coleman was writing and the concepts that were floating around in the band, it allowed us to go deeper into that idea, seeing what we could do with rhythmic structures — and compositional structures, too. We were working with compositional structures that didn't only give you the symmetrical forms of four and eight and 12 bars, but gave you three-bar or five-bar phrases, which would create phrase lengths.

It continues to be an interest for me because it's an area of music that allows a lot of possibilities for exploration. It gets my juices flowing, creatively. It also means I have to do some serious hard work to learn how to play these things. There is a unique position that the composer-improvisor has, which is that you're able to write music for yourself and the players who are with you that challenges yourself in certain ways. A great example of that was John Coltrane. When he wrote "Giant Steps," it came out of the work he was doing in his practicing and the harmonic relationships that he was working on. So he put them into a song that he could then develop and play on the gig with his band and work on. In doing that, his playing developed, which took him into other areas.

This is the kind of symbiotic relationship that happens, I think, with the composer-improvisor. Your writing helps you develop your playing which helps you develop your writing which helps you develop your playing. There's a kind of a cyclic event that happens, which, hopefully, in the best of situations, feeds itself and keeps expanding. It keeps pushing you into new areas as a player and a writer.

At this point now, the group has an identity, so I'm writing music that is absolutely written for these players and this group, the way they play and the instrumentation. That's the luxury of having a working band, that you can start to really tailor-make the music.

WOODARD: During the '70s, when Miles was in his electric phase and other groups were indulging in plugged-in music, you appeared estranged from that R&B or funk. With *Jumpin' In*, you seemed to weave in elements from the M-BASE circle of music. And drummer Billy Kilson and this current band seem to bring that influence to bear, too. When did you move in this direction?

HOLLAND: Where did the funk come from? From the players I was playing with. Even music that was not written in that direction took on those elements because of the way we were playing it.

photo: enid farber

Some of that is a generational thing. This generation of musicians has been very influenced by James Brown and other music they grew up listening to. So that element tends to be in this generation's playing, and you can hear it in the playing of Robin [Eubanks] and Steve Coleman.

I think that's one thing that has been very interesting in the development of some new feels in jazz. New advancements in music are always accompanied in a parallel way by rhythmic developments. Think of the Miles Davis group with Tony Williams, Coltrane's group with Elvin, or Ornette with Ed Blackwell. There is always a rhythmic development that goes along with other concepts that are happening.

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I think that's one of the key elements that has changed my music because funk swings like crazy. It's a jazz thing, in terms of the feel. There is a definite meeting point between those musics. I like having that as an element in the group.

With that *Jumpin' In* band, I was listening to what was going on in the group. This is something that I learned from Miles: You listen to the guys you play with. He'd play his thing and then go offstage very often, but he'd sit at the side of the stage and listen to the band. While he was listening, he was thinking about something. The next thing you'd know, he'd write something that would incorporate what he had heard. That's what this music is about. It's not just about one musician having a single idea and having everybody do it — pulling the strings. It's about taking a group and thinking about what its strengths and its direction and tendencies are, and using that.

WOODARD: So it was a natural development?

HOLLAND: Some of it came out of that, and some of it came out of me deciding that I was going to play all the music that I enjoyed. During the late '60s and through the '70s, there was a kind of narrowness in my approach that was necessary for what I was trying to do. I'd compartmentalized things. I'd have the Gateway Trio and we'd do certain things with that group. There would be certain things with this group and certain things with that one. Then I did some things with Hank Jones and Billy Higgins.

Then I realized that I enjoyed all these things. Why don't I do it all in my group, instead of having this idea that I have to play in just a certain way? It was a freeing-up, a liberating realization. It has liberated both my writing and playing because I'm not suppressing certain things. I'm saying, "It's all right to let it all out." I can be sentimental if I want. I can play something people could dance to. I enjoy all of that. Why not have fun?

We do a tune called "Prime Directive" now. The title came from a joke. I was saying to the guys when I was putting the band together, "I've decided that from now on, we have a prime directive in the group — to have fun. If we're not having fun, it don't count."

I don't mean that in a frivolous way. What I mean is that we need to enjoy ourselves. This has to be a joyful music. It doesn't mean we can't portray sadness or longing, or whatever the emotions are, but it's going to be done in a way that we enjoy. It's not going to be painful or something we're going to be uptight about.

WOODARD: I know you've been in a lot of more purely improvised settings in the past, but you don't do that so much anymore, do you?

HOLLAND: Well, I had a change in the way I was thinking. I spent a large part of the '60s and '70s in open-form playing — that's what I like to call it. I did it in many different contexts, from the structuralism of Anthony Braxton's music and that challenge to the challenge of playing completely open form with Sam Rivers for many years without any written music. Those were great times and great opportunities for me.

But what happened to me during the '80s, when I started my own band, was that I started to recognize the usefulness of forms as well. You could improvise open-form music for a hundred years and never improvise "Giant Steps" because it needed to be written. There is an application of form to improvising that allows you to open some windows into some other things that you can do. So I became intrigued again by that during the '80s.

What I'm doing now is trying to incorporate both elements at once. In other words, the closed forms are open enough so that we can take enormous liberties with them and even leave the form at times — like we did in the piece that you mentioned — and approach them in a very open way.

There are other things that I want to discover about what we're doing at the moment and where this music is taking us. But where it will lead, I don't know. Over the years, I've learned that your musical needs change over time.

WOODARD: Yes, although yours has sounded like a natural evolution, it doesn't seem that you stayed in one place very long.

HOLLAND: I do have a certain restlessness. My wife jokes about it. She says, if I get too comfortable, I have to start moving. Once things start to feel familiar, I get a sense of needing to change something.

Josef Woodard takes every opportunity to visit jazz's outposts, however subterranean or well-hidden.

Dave Holland Quintet *Point of View* (ECM)