# Wayne Shorter

## Negotiating with the Unexpected

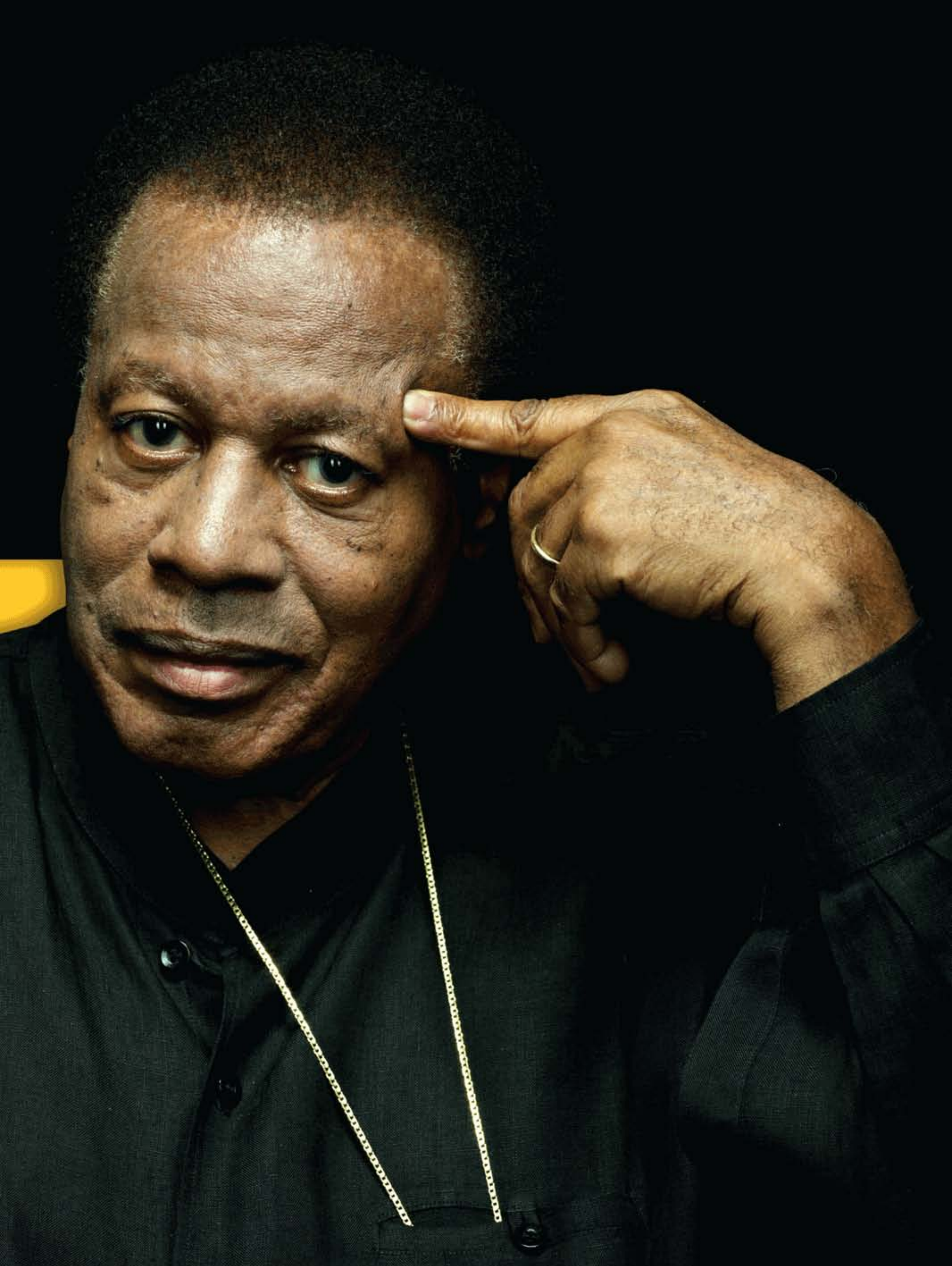
By Josef Woodard /// Photo by Robert Ascroft

Rain was coming down hard, 'round midnight at Belgium's Gent Jazz Festival last July, but those under the massive festival tent didn't seem to mind the stormy weather, considering that the mighty, enigmatic Wayne Shorter was heating up the performance zone. The saxophonist was in fine, venturesome form on this night.

Right before the stage was passed to Shorter and his band, with pianist Danilo Pérez and bassist John Patitucci (and, on this night, Jorge Rossy substituting for drummer Brian Blade), the project co-led by Dave Douglas and Joe Lovano, Sound Prints, served up its Shorter-influenced songbook. Musically and in their between-song comments, the Sound Prints players paid homage to the man coming up next, who, on a night like this, is a hard act to precede *or* follow.

Consensus opinion, informal and otherwise, had it that Shorter's fiery set, by turns structured and free—moment to moment and module to module—was the Gent Festival's highlight.

Clearly, something is happening lately in the long, wandering musical life of Shorter, whose striking concert album, *Without A Net* (Blue Note), is his first new release in eight years and his strongest recorded statement yet with this unique quartet, a highly skilled laboratory and interactive team of heroes. The past dozen years have seen moments when a concert might strain under the ambiguous "Where's Wayne?" syndrome, but Shorter and his band now have reached a new ensemble understanding and sharpness of being. The leader continues honing his blend of improvisation and composition, keeping his bandmates, his listeners and himself ever on their toes.



Shorter, 79, has certainly earned his stripes as one of the undeniable jazz greats of the past 50 years. He hit the scene boldly as a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, and released his leader debut in 1959. Shorter was a crucial figure in the classic Miles Davis Quintet of the second half of the '60s, and then co-founded the Promethean musical vehicle that was Weather Report—the best and most artistically inclined thing that ever happened in the fusion realm. Between and after his high-profile band settings, Shorter has built up an intriguing, if sometimes erratic, solo career as a leader, and has winked at the pop world with solos on records by admirers Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell. His influence looms large over jazz of the past half century.

Even so, he remains a mysterious traveler of a jazz musician—one who never fit neatly into any single category and who has consistently heeded the poetic path of the searcher. With his distinctive voice on tenor and soprano saxophone, he remains one of the great composers in jazz history. Despite the mystery that surrounds him (or perhaps because of it), Shorter has a huge following and can sell out concert halls around the globe. In the 2012 DownBeat Readers Poll, he topped both the Soprano Saxophone and Composer categories.

Shorter's singularity and refusal to play by pat rules, of whatever system or scene, goes back to his childhood in Newark, N. J., when he was known as "Weird Wayne." (Details on this and other intriguing aspects of his life are examined in Michelle Mercer's excellent 2004 biography, *Footprints: The Life and Work of Wayne Shorter*.)

It's more than just record company hype that *Without A Net* is Shorter's first album for Blue Note in 43 years. His 11 official albums for Blue Note during the '60s—from 1964's *Night Dreamer* through 1970's *Odyssey Of Iska*—amount to a powerful body of work and an original songbook that has fueled the *Real Book* repertoire and set a template for successive waves of neo-hard-bop musicians to this day. *Without A Net* fills in some blanks and touches on many aspects of his musical sensibility. In addition to newer tunes, from his Weather Report days we hear a fresh take of the song "Plaza Real." The sole "standard" is "Flying Down To Rio," though that is hardly a standard. Reflecting Shorter's growing recent interest in "chamber jazz" and classical music, the album includes a live recording, from Disney Hall in Los Angeles, of the 23-minute piece "Pegasus," written for his quartet and the contemporary wind ensemble Imani Winds—a fruitful collaboration and hint of things to come in Shorter's musical output.

Shorter has suffered his share of personal tragedy, including the death of his daughter Iska at age 14 in 1986. A decade later, his wife, Ana Maria, and his niece Dalila Lucien died in the crash of TWA Flight 800 on July 17, 1996.

At the time, he had recently released the Grammy-winning album *High Life* (Verve), his last foray into synthesizers and groove-lined music. Change was in the air and in his life:


Wayne Shorter onstage in 1988

JIMI FERSSON

Shorter reconnected with Herbie Hancock, his friend, musical comrade and fellow practitioner of the Nichiren Buddhist practice. Shorter relocated from his longtime home in Los Angeles to Florida, and launched his current acoustic quartet in 2000. He returned to Los Angeles six years ago and currently lives there with his wife, Carolina, in a house perched in the twining streets high above Sunset Boulevard.

Visitors are greeted by a stunning view of the city below and the Pacific Ocean beyond. Seated in his living room, Shorter offered a generous and typically nonlinear interview.

**DownBeat: You tend to be plugged into the real world and keep tabs on current events, while simultaneously existing in your own poetic alternative world. Do you see it as two interactive layers of existence?**

**Wayne Shorter:** Yeah, it's like not keeping a blind eye and having your own world, your so-called artsy-fartsy world. To be removed from that, to be too ethereal for that kind of stuff, isn't right. You've got to get right in the middle of it, and when you're doing what you're doing, you can make a response to it.

Lately, I've been talking to kids about, "What do you think about after the music lessons?" I always try to tell them to play what you wish for—not the notes, but what you wish for. In the pop world, they're always writing those songs about finding the girl and wishing for this and that, moon spoon and all of that.

But how about wishing for what you would like the world to be like? And then it would be not like, "I know music, I know bebop, I know progressive, I know my chord changes." You'd be coming up with something that sounds like, "I wish for courage, for fearlessness and to be noble."

**You're back on the Blue Note label now, four-plus decades after those classic '60s albums. Do you reflect back on them now?**

The Monk Institute is now at UCLA, and I was part of a master class there last week. When something like that happens, I go back, but in general, when I'm around here, I don't go over things. I have some collections downstairs, with all those—I don't like the word "tunes"—but

all those musical pieces lined up in alphabetical order. Occasionally, I'll go in there a look at things, and say, "What happened over here? What was that? Did it go like that?" But I'm not really attached. You've got to be attached in the businesslike way, but to only be sentimental is not healthy.

**Where did the notion of making music your life enter your life's story?**

I had no thought to be a musician. I was an art major. In fact, there's a thing I did back here. [*He gets up and returns with a sculptural bust.*] When I was 15, in high school, I did a sculpture. It's Nefertiti as a young woman. I spent the rest of the time playing hooky.

But that's how I got into music class. This teacher was a disciplinarian, Achilles D'Amico. He tried to adopt me. It was like Music 101 or whatever. He had three records on his desk. He said, "Music is going to go in three directions." He held up the album called [*Voice Of The*] *Xtabay* by Yma Sumac. The second one was *Le Sacre du Printemps* [*The Rite Of Spring*, by Stravinsky], and the third one was by Charlie Parker. He said these were the three directions music was going in, with the Latin, the classical and the jazz. It was going that way, but for us kids, it was an awakening.

When I look back on it, people ask why I talk about classical music. I say Mozart was jazz. He had the cymbal beat going [*sings the theme from Symphony No. 40*]. To me, the meaning of jazz is "I dare you." It doesn't say, "How dare you." Some people try to convince me to come back into the fold and say, "How dare you."

**Those three records represent three strains of your work from early on until now.**

Actually, I was listening to the radio a lot. Before I got into his class, I was thinking about Charlie Parker and Bud Powell and this thing called bebop. When my father came home, every night around 7:30, he'd put the radio on and there was Martin Block's "Make Believe Ballroom." [On one show] Martin Block said, "We're going to try something different tonight. This is called bebop. Write in to us and let us know what you think about it." He played Charlie Parker, "Now's The Time," and then Monk and then Charlie and Dizzy and a Dizzy big band thing.

My mother and grandmother spent money to get me a clarinet. I still have it. I used to hang out in the library, reading about Chopin, George Sands and Beethoven. That was formulating. Now, I look back about music and bebop and the stuff that Shostakovich and Debussy and everybody did, and the way Art Tatum played [*sings a fast trill*] and taking chances and feeling really good about yourself. It's that daredevil stuff.

They surprised you. That was teaching me that you can't stereotype nothing. It's always … *surprise*.

**One comment you made at UCLA had to do with blending the roles of composer, soloist and bandmate in a unified situation. Is that a core concept in your present band?**

Yeah, that's something we've been working on. We're in that kind of territory, but not making that the goal. Otherwise, we could get stuck in that, and it would be expected. It would be an instituted behavior pattern that's expected. So no one has to know what's *not* coming [*laughs*].

But I think negotiating with the unexpected in other aspects of life could be a first-time thing for people who are used to being followers. They're going to have to step up and become leaders for the first time. I think the whole of humanity is going to be faced with negotiating, as individuals and as leaders, and realizing that being the leader, you have to be fortified with the training that's needed to respect other people—so that leaders will be respecting leaders instead of fulfilling the lie that too many cooks in the kitchen will spoil the soup.

**This new record seems like a progress report on the evolution of your group over a dozen years. Do you view it in those terms?**

Yeah, because when I listen to the stuff from one place or another and arrived at what we have here, right now, I had to [include] that 2009 performance that we did at Disney Hall, "Pegasus." I said, "Wow." Rob Griffin, who did the sound stuff


Miles Davis (left) and Shorter in Berlin, Sept. 25, 1964

and the engineering, said, "Do it, man. Let's not worry about the levels from one cut to another."

**Do you ever get frustrated by the level of non-understanding or awareness of jazz in mainstream America? Or is that just something you're resigned to?**

No, I'm not resigned. You see the workings of what conditioning does. You don't have to use a lot of strategy and all of that to get people to repel anything with depth. A nudge here and there, but constant nudging, that conditioning of anti-medicinal feeding of the thing that sustains the act of being hijacked from the cradle. We were all hijacked, but not completely, because our grandfathers and grandmothers passed on things to us proving they were not entirely hijacked.

It's time for this singularity, which is, to me, the meaning of the Mayan calendar. It's another first, which is born of the inconspicuous nature, which forces, for the first time in human history, the human being who has evolved—it's not a physical evolvement, but what in Buddhism we call doing "human revolution," which is a task. We revolute to the place where each individual can stand alone in the continuing eternal journey of this ultimate journey or adventure in life. We need these moments of absolute awe.

**To wake us up?**

Yeah, because when we're kids, we open our eyes and we're seeing but we don't know that we see. Now, if something happens in singularity, that eye opens up on that other level, and knowing that you see.

**Your music, especially with this band, is experimental, but it also hits you in the heart. Is that a conscious matter for you, seeking out that balance?**

Well, life does that, too. Life is still a mystery. How do you knock the hell out of life? Sometimes, if somebody writes a song and it's going to maybe sell, I might tell them, "This song doesn't want to sound like that." They say, "What are you talking about?" "This song has feelings. It can't do it itself. Can't you give it more dignity? Can't you hear it crying, man? Listen to it."

**Are there constantly songs, or characters as songs, running through your head?**

There's an example on *Without A Net*. There is this thing called "sheets of sound," like when Trane would play those sheets of sounds. The challenge with playing a lot of notes is to get away from the music lessons and sounding like you're doing musical calisthenics. But it can be done in way where it's a flurry of notes that take on the quality of sentences.

The last piece on the album is called "UFO"—unidentified flying objects. The unidentified objects are the notes. So like [*sings a burst of notes*] is "Where you gonna go?" Or [*sings another part*] is "Let's go!" That's the cape we all have. Most peoples' capes are in the cleaners.

**Let's talk about "Pegasus." Your work with the Imani Winds seems like near-perfect blending of your improvisational instincts and your more structured, compositional work. There were those moments in concert when you sat down in the wind section, so you were integrating and reading parts with them, between freer sections.**

You have to be in the good fight, reading notes and playing what's behind the notes, and then going off and flying around like an astronaut … . I have just finished doing an orchestral version of "Pegasus." It's extended. There's going to be a lot of flying around for the orchestra. We'll see how that goes.

**Your past keeps popping up on the musical landscape, as on the new Miles Davis Quintet box set *Live In Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol. 2*. This set features Miles' band with yourself, Chick Corea, Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland. What are you memories or reflections on that period?**

That was around the time I was leaving. Miles said, "Why don't you get your own band?" Then, before he passed away [in 1991], he was saying, "You know, I was thinking, what would it be like if we all got together?" This was at Montreux. He was actually talking about us getting [back] together … . I was wondering what that would sound like. Herbie would bring all his experience with the Headhunters and all that, and I had some of that Weather Report sound. It wouldn't be like we would play as if that stuff never happened, and went back to where "On Green Dolphin Street" was [*laughs*].

**You are working on a new piece, *Gaia*, commissioned by the L.A. Philharmonic, and *Lotus*, for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. Are these larger projects and orchestral works a fulfillment of a dream you've always had?**

Yeah, because when I went to NYU, as a major in music education, I had the audacity to bring a piece of music in there, to a concert band rehearsal. I called it "Universe," or something like that. It was for all brass. The music director had me conduct it. It got all tangled up. I said, "OK, OK, that's enough." It was just horns, with a canon kind of thing, but then it got off track, "Whoa … ." I'm going to dig it out sometime. What saves it is that nothing is ever finished. We have all the time in the world. Being in the moment is quite a practice.

**Now you have your first album out since 2005. Is it a big deal for you, or just one step along the long creative path?**

It's another step. It's a continuation. Here it comes now, we'll do it now. But I'm not huffing and puffing and thinking, "Gotta do another one!" We are going to do another one. We're working on a larger project, with more instruments and more colors. I like to fulfill that thing that Bird and Trane were working on. They wanted to do something larger, with oboes, say.

Miles used to talk about that. He said, "You know, in jazz, small groups are OK, but you don't have enough colors in there. They thought synthesizers would do it, but synthesizers won't do that shit [*laughs*]."

**You do a version of your old Weather Report song "Plaza Real" on your new album. It's an exercise in tension—building and releasing and building again. But you leave off the resolving, relaxed melody of the Weather Report rendition. Is that a case of rethinking an old idea?**

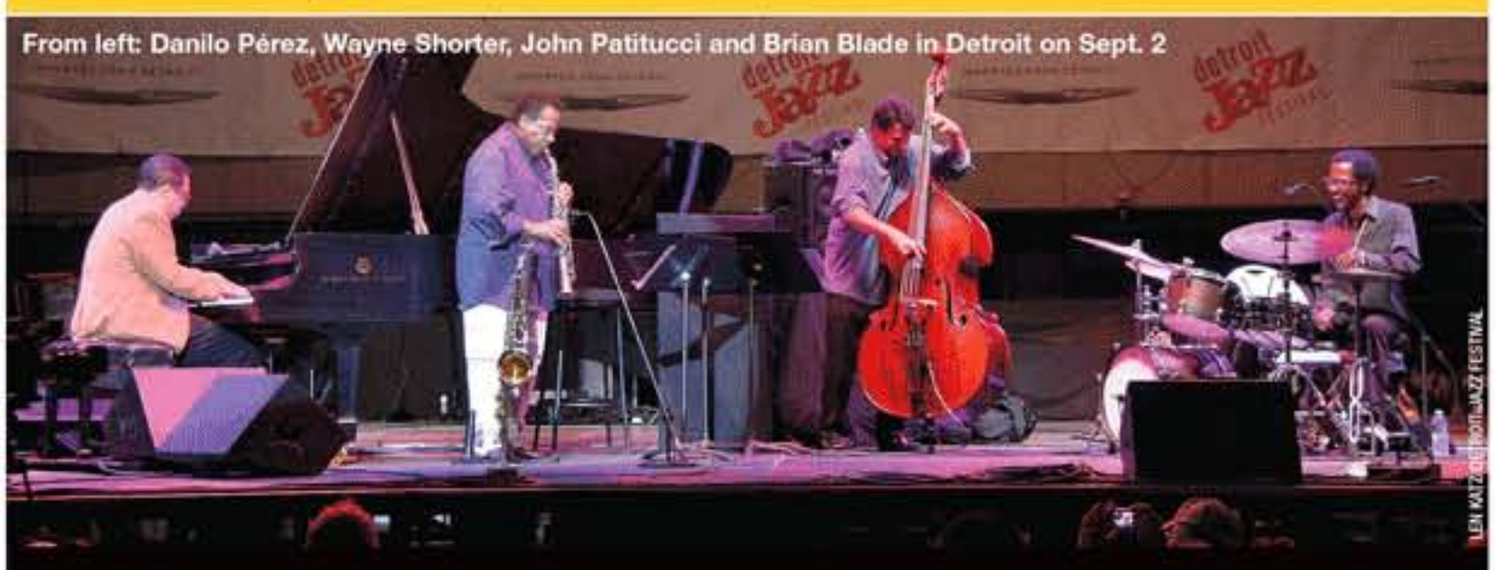
Oh, yeah. There's going to be another departure. I'm going to work this thing with an orchestra and have it grow. My whole idea is that there's no such thing as something that is begun or finished.

It's a challenge to play that stuff. Everything we're talking about, it doesn't go away. Kids say, "Where do our words go?" People argue about the chicken and the egg, or how do things begin? What was before the beginning? Is there such a thing as a beginning? For me, now, it's convenient to say that before there is the beginning of anything, there is potential. When a kid isn't doing so well in school, one teacher says, "You're not using the brains that God gave you." Another teacher says, "You're not using your full potential." I choose number two. At least that can hint that you have more time to develop things.

**It seems that you, as an artist, are always interested in the "what's next?" factor.**

Yeah. And potential is a better mystery than what came before the beginning. **DB**

# Making the Invisible Visible


From left: Danilo Pérez, Wayne Shorter, John Patitucci and Brian Blade in Detroit on Sept. 2

It's a paradox that the man often called the greatest living composer in jazz—who has written dozens of genre-expanding pieces for groups large and small, including many standards—prefers to go onstage and just wing it. According to members of the Wayne Shorter Quartet, that's because the theme of love and connection to others has become so central to his music. By definition, he can't create this music alone.

Fans who flock to see Shorter in concert do not expect to hear faithful renditions of familiar tunes. "Sometimes it's even difficult to remember what we played after a show," bassist John Patitucci says, "because there's so much improvising going on. Any one of us can cue one of Wayne's pieces. They have such beautiful themes, but he never wants us to play the piece strictly as written. He always wants us to expound on it."

Performing "without a net," as the title of the group's new album puts it, is "exciting and scary," pianist Danilo Pérez says. "I still feel on the edge … it never feels safe." Pérez calls this way of working "comprovisation."

Adds Patitucci, "We're improvising, but we're also developing themes, harmonies and rhythms together in real time. We're trying to blur the line between written and improvised music. This is something that Wayne has wanted to do for years."

It can be risky, of course. "We're flying by the seat of our pants," Patitucci says. "When you're willing to risk it all, the magic can happen. If you don't risk anything, you don't get the magic."

"Wayne taught us to be vulnerable," Pérez explains. "He says, 'Play as if you were practicing onstage; they are the same. If you are playing a solo and someone else comes in with an idea, it is not an interruption—it is a constant dialogue.' He told me, 'Don't let all the rules you have learned be a false witness to the celebration onstage. Let's celebrate life to music.' That for me was scary—like throwing yourself in a pool [and] not knowing if there's water in it. It takes courage."

Being in the quartet has changed their lives, the players attest. "After the immeasurable time we have spent together, listening, laughing and traveling, the relationships have grown deeper, and the music has as well," drummer Brian Blade says. "I believe that the trust between us outweighs any notion of having to prove something. When you know you have that kind of love on your side, there's nothing you can't play."

Before they perform, Shorter and his band members join together in a circle and literally put their heads together. Says Pérez, "We've done that now before all the gigs for the last 12 years. It's like we are trying to connect our brains on a cellular level."

Pérez says he has complicated feelings toward Shorter—"like a son, like a brother, like an apprentice. I feel very emotional about it. The invisible thing has become visible for me. And I think that's the magic of the quartet. We make invisible stuff become visible."

Patitucci agrees: "It's not just about the music. It's way more than that. I love them. They're my family." The music serves a greater purpose, he says. "Jazz—improvised music in a group setting—is for me, spiritually, the way I wish the whole world functioned: trusting each other, being selfless and ... creating something as a community that is much more powerful than what each of us could come up with alone.

"Wayne wants not only to create new music every night, but to create cinematic experiences, to take people places. The music makes them dream and think and react in different ways. He wants to change people's hearts and inspire people. And when people share like that onstage, and you can't believe the things that happen, it's [only] an arrogant person who thinks, 'Well, you know *I* did that.' I think it's more like, 'We were part of it.' And so was the audience." —*Allen Morrison*