

Fringe Beat **Elastic Time**

By Josef Woodard, April 6, 2006

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FRINGE PRODUCT: Paul Motian, the masterful drummer/composer/leader who turned 75 last month, has quietly waged a private, peaceable musical revolution. It has happened mostly out of sight and sound from the mainstream quarters of jazz, but that doesn't diminish the importance of its legacy.

Never mind that his cult following is modest, if impassioned: Motian is a true-blue, American jazz hero, who deserves our love, ears, and souls. Never mind his stints playing with **Bill Evans**, **Keith Jarrett**, and others. Motian's real significance is as a thinker/leader. He has been recording fascinating and experimental, yet also invariably lyrical, albums for smallish labels for the past 25 years, and has worked with his various bands — including the sax 'n' electric guitar love fest formerly known as the **Electric Bebop Band** and now just as the **Paul Motian Band**, as well as his poetic bass-less trio, with tenor saxist **Joe Lovano** and guitarist **Bill Frisell**.

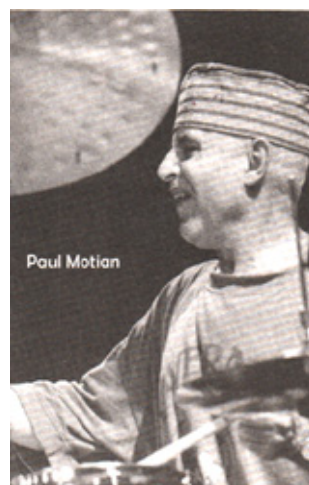
What is it that makes Motian one of the greatest, and more individualistic, jazz musicians alive at this moment? It's partly his complex relationship with time and his chosen language. Like other visionary jazz musicians — especially drummers — Motian has a quixotic way of massaging time and rhythm. He can make time float, seemingly dislodged from ideas of beat or pulse, but his rhythmic ideas are never inert or idle. He also has a knack for penning simple, memorable tunes, with a mix of folkish directness and experimental verve tempting comparisons to **Ornette Coleman**.

All of these above virtues surface in Motian's latest album, *Garden of Eden*, part of his heralded return to the ECM label after recording for JMT, Winter & Winter, and other small labels (generally German ones). The album's sequence is tellingly framed by covers by some of his heroes: two **Mingus** tunes, "Pithecanthropus Erectus" and "Goodbye Porkpie Hat," and, on the tail end, **Monk's** "Evidence" and **Charlie Parker's** "Cheryl." In between come several examples of Motian's inventive writing, all played with seductively focused looseness.

If you buy only 10 jazz albums this year, make sure this is one of them. It's feisty, swinging, and introspective, and full of ensemble elasticity, not to mention time turned to dreamy rubber. This is what jazz should sound like in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, Motian won't be coming to the Lobero or other venues near you soon. Motian has decided to retire from the road and work strictly around his hometown of N.Y.C. Now, we'll have to go check out Mohammad on his mountain. It's a worthy cause.

TO-DOINGS: **John Pizzarelli's** father, the famed **Bucky**, was part of an early wave of jazz guitarists who helped make the electric guitar more than a tool of simpletons. John, who will turn 46 today — just in time for tonight's return to the Lobero Theatre — tends to look backward more than forward, and he's in good company. At the risk of generalizing, jazz is in a phase when audiences are soaking up conservative values and the crossover appeal of sweetly sung items from the Great American Songbook menu.



As a singer, Pizzarelli tends to stick to the melodies — often time-honored ones, like “How Long Has This Been Going On?” from his latest album, *Knowing You*, and the song set on his forthcoming and inevitable **Sinatra** tribute, out this summer. As a guitarist, Pizzarelli stretches into interesting corners, showing considerable bravura, but with taste as his guide. As a well-packaged entertainer, Pizzarelli has the goods to woo listeners of a certain age, on down to the neo-standards gang.

MAMBAZO ALERT: Few band names inspire a warm rush like that of the South African a cappella masters **Ladysmith Black Mambazo**, whose return to Campbell Hall, tonight, is creating happy havoc at the UCSB box office. Mere mention of the name invokes images of honeycomb vocal harmonies and the spirit of optimism even amid horrific social circumstances. We need more of the same. (Got e? Email fringebeat@aol.com.)