



Bio information: **THUMBSCREW [MARY HALVORSON / MICHAEL FORMANEK / TOMAS FUJIWARA]**
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Self-Titled Debut Album *Thumbscrew* Introduces a Well-Calibrated, High Powered Collective Composed of 3 Master American Composers/Improvisers/Bandleaders: Mary Halvorson, Michael Formanek & Tomas Fujiwara

The band's name might conjure a fearsome image, but **Thumbscrew** makes inviting music full of wonder and discovery. A recently formed collective of improvisational masters, the trio features guitarist **Mary Halvorson** and drummer **Tomas Fujiwara**, who can often be found working together in an array of arresting settings, and bassist **Michael Formanek**, a creative catalyst on jazz's adventurous frontiers for more than three decades. Slated for release by **Cuneiform** on **January 21, 2014**, Thumbscrew's eponymous debut album documents the group's commitment to new music created specifically for the ensemble.

Formanek, Halvorson and Fujiwara are all known for their prodigious capabilities in free improv settings, but Thumbscrew is more of a composer's vehicle. While many cooperative bands draw on material recycled from other projects, "one of the things we said at the beginning is let's just write music for Thumbscrew and it will *only* be Thumbscrew music," says Formanek. "It really is a three-composer trio, and all of our tunes have our basic aesthetics attached. But we want everybody to have input. Nobody's afraid to make a decision. It's one of the first co-ops I've been in where everyone's really willing to take control at any given moment."

With each musician contributing three tunes, the album encompasses an array of textures and strategies, while maintaining a consistently open and transparent sound. Generating tremendous intensity without necessarily increasing volume or density, Thumbscrew buzzes and crackles, burns and croons. Part of what makes the band's music so engaging is that they draw widely and deeply from any number of sonic sources. Fujiwara composed the self-mockingly titled opening track, "**Cheap Knock Off**," inspired by the music of Formanek's stellar **Small Places** quartet with altoist **Tim Berne**, pianist **Craig Taborn**, and drummer **Gerald Cleaver**. Angular and insistently rhythmic, the tune doesn't mimic or mirror a Small Places piece so much as adopt a set of musical priorities.

"In terms of reflecting influence or inspiration, it's about as non-literal as you can get," Fujiwara says. "They both have odd meters that change bar to bar, but other than that I wasn't taking Mike's tune and flipping it upside down. It involves a lot of things that Thumbscrew does, exploring structure and how to expand on it and be free with it. All the improvising is within one of a number of forms, and there's no part where it's completely free."

Fujiwara's textural acuity and Formanek's melodic inventiveness undergird a group concept in which distinctions between soloist and accompanist often disappear. Which isn't to say there are no solos. On Formanek's "**Buzzard's Breath**" he provides the band with a harmonic structure built on bass notes, an AABA form that leads to a gently squally Halvorson passage that could effectively serve as a soundtrack for a Hubble Telescope photo montage. "It's about as close to a traditional jazz tune as it can possibly be," Formanek says, "but not played that way at all."

"A lot of my writing, especially for musicians I'm close to and have respect for, stems from me wondering what they would sound like playing something," Formanek continues. "I know they would sound great doing X Y Z, but I don't think I've heard them playing L M N O P before, so let me write something like that. With Mary and Tomas, I'm constantly surprised and inspired."

Halvorson's pieces tend to be almost through-composed. On her episodic "**Fluid Hills In Pink**," the album's longest track, what starts as a loping trio sojourn gradually turns into a beautifully detailed bass/drum excursion. By the time she re-enters, the landscape has shifted, and her twangy, off-kilter arpeggios lead the trio up and down another series of knolls and valleys. While she was skeptical about presenting Fujiwara with a notated drum part, "Tomas was like 'this is great, you should write more drum parts,'" Halvorson says. "I wanted the piece to provide an interesting platform, and I left space for the bass/drums duo. I tend to write multi-section things, pieces leading into different parts without going back."

Part of the trio's strength flows from the deep interconnecting bonds they've forged. Halvorson and Fujiwara first started playing together in cornetist **Taylor Ho Bynum's Sextet**. They also work together in the collective quartet **Reverse Blue** with **Chris Speed** and **Eivind Opsvik**, and **Mike Reed's** fascinating **Sun Ra**-inspired ensemble **Living By Lanterns** (which released an acclaimed album on Cuneiform in 2012, *Old Myth, New Science*).

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Halvorson and Fujiwara first worked with Formanek when he subbed in Bynum's band in 2011, and the chemistry was so readily apparent they immediately started looking into performance opportunities as a trio. Since then their paths have continued to intersect in various settings. Formanek has performed with **Tomas Fujiwara and The Hook Up** (which also features Halvorson), and Halvorson and Fujiwara perform with **Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus**. "It really feels like a community," Halvorson says. "You see a lot of recycling of personnel, and lot of overlap. You get to know someone musically, and it leads to other things. Formanek subbed in my trio once, and he played that music. Tomas and I played in Formanek's big band."

MARY HALVORSON

<http://www.maryhalvorson.com/>

Thumbscrew is just the latest galvanizing ensemble in which Halvorson plays a key role. Recognized as one of the most important and resourceful new voices on guitar to emerge in the past decade, she's a doggedly idiosyncratic artist who "can define the character of an entire band's tonal makeup without have to scream for attention," says S. Victor Aaron.

Raised in Boston and based in Brooklyn, she spent three formative years at Wesleyan University studying and playing with visionary composer and saxophonist **Anthony Braxton**, eventually performing on six of his recordings. Since graduating from Wesleyan in 2002, she's become a ubiquitous presence in the circles where left-field jazz and improvised music intersect. An invaluable collaborator, bandleaders such as **Tim Berne**, **Curtis Hasselbring**, **Myra Melford**, **Jason Moran**, **Joe Morris**, **Tom Rainey**, **Marc Ribot**, and **Trevor Dunn** have sought her out.

She's equally prolific as a bandleader in her own right. She leads a combustible trio with bassist **John Hebert** and drummer **Ches Smith**, and her muscular quintet adds trumpeter **Jonathan Finlayson** and alto saxophonist **Jon Irabagon** to the mix. More recently she expanded the quintet to a septet with tenor saxophonist **Ingrid Laubrock** and trombonist **Jacob Garchik**, a group featured on her 2013 release *Illusionary Sea*. She also collaborates with violist **Jessica Pavone** in a tough, sonically expansive duo.

TOMAS FUJIWARA

<http://tomasfujiwara.com/>

Fujiwara is attracted to similarly polymorphous configurations. Born and raised in Boston, he spent his formative years studying with drum legend **Alan Dawson**. Since moving to New York City at 17 to study at the New School, he's become one of the leading drummers of his generation. He gained widespread attention via collaborations with **Taylor Ho Bynum**, including a high-wire duo, **Bynum's Sextet**, and the avant Afro-Caribbean little big band **Positive Catastrophe**. He's also a founding member of the Indo-funk brass band **Red Baraat**, and baritone saxophonist **Josh Sinton's Ideal Bread**, a quartet devoted to the music of **Steve Lacy**. Increasingly gaining attention as an inspired bandleader with his powerhouse quintet **The Hook Up** and a new band, **The Tomas Fujiwara Trio** with **Ralph Alessi** and **Brandon Seabrook**, Fujiwara continues to work with veteran masters such as **Anthony Braxton**, **Roswell Rudd**, **Nicole Mitchell**, **Tim Berne**, and **Formanek**.

MICHAEL FORMANEK

<http://www.michaelformanek.com/>

One of jazz's definitive bassists, Formanek has been a formidable presence on the American scene since the 1980s. Born in San Francisco, Formanek first gained attention at 18 through his work with **Tony Williams Lifetime**, and spent much of the 1980s as a sideman with heavyweights such as **Freddie Hubbard**, **Joe Henderson**, **Stan Getz**, **Dave Liebman**, **Fred Hersch**, and **Attila Zoller**. A 2013 *DownBeat* cover feature on Formanek by **Kevin Whitehead** identified the bassist as a "Natural Player," echoing a Halvorson comment, and noted "Folks who play once with Formanek want more." Highly sought after by a broad spectrum of jazz masters desiring to play with an equal, he has also made major contributions as a bandleader, composer and educator. Formanek made his recording debut as a leader in 1990 with *Wide Open Spaces*, an acclaimed album featuring saxophonist **Greg Osby**, violinist **Mark Feldman**, guitarist **Wayne Krantz** and drummer **Jeff Hirshfield**.

He spent much of the 1990s in various collaborations with **Tim Berne**, first recording on the 1992 trio session with Hirshfield, *Loose Cannon*. Formanek toured and recorded widely with the Berne's band **Bloodcount**, while also leading his own septet with Berne, **Dave Douglas**, **Marty Ehrlich**, **Kuumba Frank Lacy**, **Marvin "Smitty" Smith** and **Salvatore Bonafede**. In addition to his work as a bandleader, Formanek has recorded prolifically as an accompanist on albums by **Jane Ira Bloom**, **Uri Caine**, **James Emery**, **Lee Konitz**, **Kevin Mahogany**, and the **Mingus Big Band**. Based in Baltimore for the past decade, he is the director of the **Peabody Jazz Orchestra** and the jazz bass instructor at the prestigious **Peabody Conservatory of Music**.

Most recently, Formanek has been in the international spotlight for several recordings released under his own name. Signing to the German label **ECM**, he released two albums on that label, *The Rub and Spare Change* (2010) and *Small Places* (2012). Both albums received **5-star reviews by DownBeat**, 5-stars is *DownBeat's* highest rating and one that it rarely gives out.

In one sense, Thumbscrew can be seen as a nexus between a mid-career master and two rising powers. It's a collaboration that works beautifully, producing music greater than the sum of its parts. Watching one of the trio's early Baltimore performances, Whitehead noted in *DownBeat* that Thumbscrew's "bonds are already strong. No one needs to be loudest. ... Formanek and Fujiwara both write pieces whose rhythms ebb and flow, and they really hook up as bassist and drummer when the pace surges ahead, falls back or jogs sideway – even when they're in 4/4. Formanek's bass is Thumbscrew's spine and heartbeat, and he's acutely sensitive to textural changes. ...When [Halvorson] kicked in a doubled, reverb-drenched tone, Formanek immediately shadowed her a fraction behind, increasing the blur." Halvorson calls Formanek "one of my all-time favorite bass players. Playing together was very easy because I knew his style: a great attack, a real organic, physical sound on bass. He's such a natural player. His music can change meter at every bar, but it sounds really natural and organic, not cut up"

For more information on Thumbscrew:

www.thumbscrew.net - www.cuneiformrecords.com