

Jazz road music, inspired by Richard Hugo



July 17, 2015 / By Cory Walsh

In an essay called "Writing Off the Subject," Richard Hugo advises against staying too true to a subject of a poem, since it could become an impediment. Instead, writers should choose "truth over music."

"He uses music as a way to kind of talk about how language should work, so obviously that appealed to me immediately," said jazz composer and pianist Wayne Horvitz. Horvitz followed that sentiment in "Some Places Are Forever Afternoon," a collection of instrumentals based on the Northwest icon's poems and predilection for writing about small Montana towns. (It's subtitled "11 Places for Richard Hugo.")

Last summer, Horvitz, 59, took a two-week road trip through Montana from his home base in Seattle for inspiration for the album, which was released last week. Horvitz steers a septet through moody and beautiful chamber-jazz with flourishes of country, blues and occasional flights of dissonance.

Horvitz is no stranger to Missoula or Montana. He wrote a classical piece, "The Heartsong of Charging Elk," with a libretto based on James Welch's novel. It was performed at the Festival of the Book in 2012, and he's served as a composer-in-residence at the University of Montana. He and his daughter Nica, a photographer, visited many sites important to Hugo's work and life. They hit Philipsburg, of course, the subject of "Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg," and stopped by the blue house that figures in "Cataldo Mission."

And, of course, they went to Harold's Club, the setting of "The Milltown Union Bar." "It was a little early in the day for us to start drinking," he said. (They had a round of Cokes.) They also drove through Browning and stayed at the family cabin of Ripley Schemm Hugo, the poet's wife. Schemm's mother, Mildred Walker Schemm, was a famous novelist and the cabin a regular writer's retreat, one visited by A.B. Guthrie and James and Lois Welch. Horvitz spent two nights at the 1920s-style hunting cabin, which was stocked with signed books by famous names.

It had an outhouse and no running water, but it did have electricity. "All the beds had reading lamps," Horvitz said. They were "a bunch of people who love to fish, drink and read."

In the liner notes, the full poems are paired with Nica's color photographs of landscapes and buildings, such as Club Moderne in Anaconda and JD's Wildlife Sanctuary, a watering hole in Bynum. For his song titles, Horvitz plucked out evocative lines like "The Car that Brought You Here Still Runs," "All Weather is Yours No Matter How Vulgar," and "You Must Have Stayed Hours," to cite a few. It's fun to read along with the CD, and read along you must: Horvitz decided against setting the words to music.

"I really wanted it to be instrumental," Horvitz said. "And I knew Hugo was a jazz fan, so I thought that that was appropriate." He cited the references Hugo makes to jazz and classical in his poems. "Driving Montana," for one, mentions hearing on the radio "unlikely Mozart from Belgrade."

Horvitz wrote most of the compositions at a residency in the Bay Area. Some of the pieces developed out of the architecture of the poem, he said, while others drew most heavily on a single line, such as the title track, taken from "West Marginal Way." The songs are just as diverse in tone as Hugo's poems. "Those Who Remain are the Worst (The Only Bar in Dixon)" has somber harmonies, while "All Weather is Yours No Matter How Vulgar (Fairfield)" has a rollicking blues feel that complements the narrator's visit through a small town, which he finds happier than he'd expected.

Horvitz merged two of his working groups, Sweeter Than the Day and the Gravitas Quartet, into a septet for the recording. He said he's more interested in the musicians than their respective instruments. "You want to play with the people whose playing you love," he said.

[Hugo's catalog now available via e-book](#)

Until this spring, only a single title by Richard Hugo was available in electronic edition. [Read more](#)

MORE INFORMATION

Jazz composer Wayne Horvitz's "Some Places are Forever Afternoon (11 Places for Richard Hugo)" is out now on Songline Recordings. On Friday, Oct. 2, Horvitz will perform the album with spoken-word accompaniment at the Top Hat Lounge.

In this case, the unusual group comprises Horvitz (piano, Hammond B-3, electronics), Ron Miles (cornet), Sara Schoenbeck (bassoon), Peggy Lee (cello), Tim Young (guitar), Keith Lowe (bass) and Eric Eagle (drums). Horvitz said the bassoon and cello, the least common of those instruments in a jazz setting, are versatile and can complement the piano and also serve bass-like functions.

Listeners shouldn't expect a solo-centric jazz album. The final arrangements are heavier on intricate chamber-jazz interplay than improvisation. Horvitz said he "really did see them as songs, just without words," he said. There are inspired moments of improv, such as one of Horvitz's favorite on the record, a free section at the end of "The Car that Drove You Here Still Runs" between the piano and cello.

Miles, too, has many solo features, and is perhaps the perfect trumpeter for the project. As a native of Denver, Colorado, he's well attuned to jazz on the coasts and the Americana that Horvitz mines here. He's recorded numerous albums with Bill Frisell, a Horvitz collaborator who's made country-and-folk-flecked jazz guitar his life's work.

Later this fall, Horvitz will adapt two themes from the album into "Those Who Remain," a 15-minute composition for the Seattle Symphony with Frisell as the featured soloist. He's also taking the band Horvitz to Montana, where the Hugo pieces will be performed with a live reading of the texts. Most of the stops are at arts centers, except for the Missoula one, which will be at the Top Hat, which he felt was appropriate. It's Hugo, and it's Missoula, and people can get a beer and listen along.