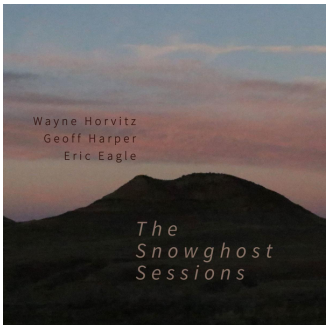
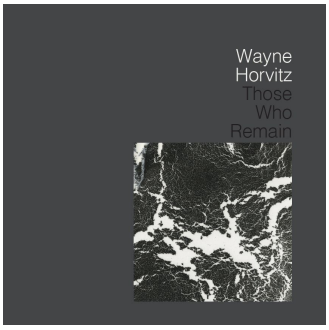
Missoulian

Pianist, composer Wayne Horvitz embarks on another Montana road trip

By CORY WALSH Sep 28, 2018





Wayne Horvitz deserves some sort of honorary Montana residency.

The composer and pianist burst onto the national scene in the 1980s alongside innovative, open-minded jazz musicians like John Zorn and Bill Frisell in New York City. He's been based in Seattle for decades now, and Montana has been a source of inspiration, particularly writers like James Welch and Richard Hugo.

For his latest album, "The SnowGhost Sessions," (Oct. 9, Songlines) Horvitz recorded at the audiophile studio SnowGhost in Whitefish. He's bringing the material home with a Montana tour, including a stop at the Missoula Art Museum on First Friday. The concerts feature the trio for one set, and then another set with his longtime collaborator Naomi Moon Siegel, a Missoula transplant from Seattle, on trombone.

Ahead of the concert, Horvitz spoke by phone about the trio record, a new orchestral piece with Frisell as soloist, and his tour.

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"The SnowGhost Sessions" were more free-form than his usual recording process. Horvitz typically maps out his projects carefully. The studio is run by Brett Allen, one of the most serious

audiophiles Horvitz has ever met. Allen offered him a weeklong residency with recording time and so he grabbed a handful of musical sketches and ideas, not proper tunes, and recruited longtime collaborators bassist Geoff Harper and drummer Eric Eagle for the trip. It was only after the fact that he realized he was working in a particular tradition.

"Once we started doing it, I started to realize, oh this is a piano trio, you know? I'm up against the history of piano trios, which is pretty deep," he said.

Not that the "SnowGhost" music is traditional. It's spacious and modern, and "sounds simple, fairly quiet and it's not wildly technical," he said. One additional twist changes everything though, and "turns out to be some of the hardest music I've ever played live."

He electronically processes his acoustic piano in real time, adding layers of altered sound, some of it resembling guitar feedback — Horvitz grew up on improv-friendly 1960s rock like Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead.

Listeners can expect to hear those effects live on this tour.

Each tour stop, he and the trio will play a set of the "SnowGhost" material. Then, they'll be joined by Siegel on trombone.

The musician, who's been featured in DownBeat magazine, played with Horvitz in her former home of Seattle before moving to Missoula, where she's been active as a player and an organizer through her LakeBottom Sound Concert Series.

"She has been a really important musical partner for me in last five years," Horvitz said. He admires the social-political issues she addresses and "the way she presents herself. She's got a very strong intention, but also a light touch in all that, that I think is very persuasive."

"As a musician she's just a blast. She's very rhythmic. She's got great ideas. She's got a lot of chops but she doesn't play in the way that people do sometimes where it's all about exhibiting their chops. She's not a show-off at all. And as strong a soloist as she is, she's also got a great ear for playing [in an] ensemble, for playing music as a group, not just being the person out front while the group supports her. And that's something I always look for in musicians," he said.

That's not always a comment trait in a genre that prizes soloing and technical skill. "Not that long ago, I went to see an extremely accomplished jazz player — I won't name names. The rest of the band just sat around and looked bored while they took turns taking solos. I mean, to me, that's not using the potential of the group to constantly make creative decisions," he said.

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Horvitz is also continuing a small body work inspired by Hugo, the celebrated poet who called Missoula home. The author liked taking road trips around Montana to spur his imagination, and Horvitz did the same. He took a three-week tour with his daughter, visiting sites that Hugo wrote about. The music on 2015's "Some Places Are Forever Afternoon (11 Places for Richard Hugo)" freely incorporates jazz, classical, folk and rock in a way that Hugo might admire — he wrote about flipping through radio stations while driving.

Hugo looms over yet another new album, "Those Who Remain" (National Sawdust Tracks, Oct. 12).

Horvitz wrote his first concerto during a monthlong residency at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming. He expanded several tunes from "Some Places" into two movements with an electric guitar as the solo instrument. It was premiered by the Seattle Symphony with guitar legend Frisell, whom Horvitz had in mind as he wrote. (The studio recording features the Northwest Sinfonia.)

While classical concertos feature soloists playing written parts, Horvitz wanted his featured musician to have room to improvise, a practice that was more common in classical music centuries ago.

Frisell, who records in a variety of genres, was Horvitz's ideal soloist from the beginning.

"When I started writing it, I would say the sections where he improvises are very oriented to things I thought Bill would really love, that he would love to play on top of," he said.

As you'd expect from Frisell, he plays both with melodic care, somewhere between country and jazz. The second, more tumultuous movement is one that Horvitz said he "wanted to write for myself, but I knew Bill would play some awesome stuff on."

Horvitz said he's excited about the Montana tour, with stops in Helena, Butte, Bozeman and more, and the trio record itself. It's subtle, and nuances reveal themselves on repeated listens.

"I'm even finding new things, and I made it," he said.