

## **Thrills and Spills with Bristle**

From an early age, Randy McKean has been surrounded by music. At age 6, he was sneaking into the family basement to listen to his brother Curt's 10-piece band rehearse Blood, Sweat & Tears tunes. In grade school, 8-track tapes of the Beatles jangling away on the home console accompanied his labors on jigsaw puzzles. He loved performing in saxophone quartets in junior high. In high school, he got a Telecaster so he could play along with favorites like XTC and the Who. A music nerd through and through. But, if pressed, he confesses there was one thing he loved more than music: comic books.

Fantastic visuals, complicated storylines, a world where anything could happen. "I was into the more off-beat titles like Mr. Miracle and Dr. Strange, or any book where heroes teamed up: the Fantastic Four, X-Men, Justice League of America." Music eventually dictated his path of study, saxophone and jazz in college, clarinets and composition in grad school, but he was never able to completely shake the world of heroes.

"For me, the pantheon of musical figures I studied and listened to—from Monk to Coltrane to Stockhausen—all had this mythic quality. They were people of titanic achievements that I could never imagine myself matching." Teachers like trumpeter Paul Smoker and composer/multi-reedist Anthony Braxton inspired him and encouraged him to join their ranks.

A subsequent move to New York in the 90's felt like entering an ongoing issue of Marvel Team-Up. "Great players everywhere, performing in all kinds of configurations. More competition, sure, but also more opportunity to find like-minded souls." One of them was Cory Wright, another multi-reed player and composer. "In his playing and writing, you could hear the whole jazz tradition, with these unique, modernist stretches. Cory could play anything you put in front of him, of any genre, and put his personal spin on it. For my music, I wanted players comfortable with improvising but able to negotiate intricate written parts as well. Cory was always my first choice."

McKean moved to Grass Valley, in Northern California's Sierra Nevada foothills in 2002. "I had stopped playing a few years before, but started up again when my family relocated. I was composing with the local Nevada County Composers Cooperative, and playing sideman gigs. The more I did, the more I missed having my own band, being able to present the best version of myself."

By this time, Wright was living in the Bay Area. McKean went to see his trio Green Mitchell perform. "Super swinging, with these quirky, unique tunes. And the bass player, Lisa Mezzacappa, was great: very inventive, big sound, amazing technique, and a sense of play that came through on the bandstand." Mezzacappa and McKean met up again when bands they were playing with shared a double bill in Sacramento. She proposed a session with mutual friend Wright, out of which Bristle was born.

"The first thing we tried was my piece 'Butts Up.' It's a crazy concept: the group starts at the bottom of the page with this quick unison vamp, then, cue by cue, adds a line until it reaches the top. They got it right away. It was great fun, and sounded amazing." Wright contributed his own equally-idiosyncratic compositions. After a first gig as a trio, they felt the need for a fourth member to fill out the sound.

"[Nevada County resident] Murray Campbell, violinist and oboe player, had played on some pieces I'd written for NCCC, and we were gigging weekly with Beaucoup Chapeaux,

Maggie McKaig and Luke Wilson's European café band. Murray's so versatile, can sight-read anything, and is somewhat fearless—he's equally comfortable playing fiddle at the Celtic Festival or double reeds with the local symphony." Campbell accepted an invitation to join, and his unique skill set cemented Bristle's signature reeds and strings chamber sound.

With four busy members, each of them with their own bands—Mezzacappa's Bait and Switch has appeared at the Monterrey Jazz Festival and Yoshi's, Wright recently toured Italy with the Industrial Jazz Workshop, Campbell and McKean are one-half of Nevada City's Beaucoup Chapeaux—Bristle feels a bit like the Avengers, the all-star Marvel comic. But for McKean, the closest parallel is the Challengers of the Unknown. "It's an early Jack Kirby creation, four daredevils who took on space aliens, giant robots, sea creatures, you name it. Bristle gets into the same fantastic situations: as a group, we're maneuvering through charts, one like a giant palindrome, one with arrows pointing backwards and forwards, a third adding measures of improvisation as we read down the page. Someone brings in an idea, no matter how far-fetched or absurd, and the group just digs in."

Whether you're a music lover or comic book fan or both, McKean encourages everyone to come hear Bristle. He thinks you'll find enough adventure to keep you on the edge of your seat.