

Overtone Quartet on Display at Kennedy Center

By [Franz A. Matzner](#)
October 10, 2009

The Overtone Quartet played together as a group for the first time in Washington, DC at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater Saturday. The four musicians--[Dave Holland](#), [Jason Moran](#), [Chris Potter](#), and [Eric Harland](#)--each took the stage as a master of his art, and the quartet featured musical compositions by each.



Assuming the role of the senior musician, Dave Holland introduced his colleagues at the opening of the show and provided the names of each song as the set progressed. Holland made clear, however, that he is not the group's leader; this group has no band-leader, and instead functions as a collective, coming together around the shared goals of challenging each other to greater and more subtle composition and performance.

The audience was treated to a series of dramatically different songs, each a platform for the individual musicians to display their unique voices, as well as the band's ability to execute a wide spectrum of musical territory.

The group began with "Treachery," an up-tempo composition by Harland built on a pulsating beat. Moran took the first solo, riding atop the wave-like groove, alternately skipping across the crests and plunging into the troughs to create a rhythmically spirited effect. Taking a different tack altogether, Potter seemed to cut directly across the groove with a rising torrent of notes that drove the band to an energetic crescendo.

The band turned next to Potter's aptly titled "Minotaur," a funky maze of rhythmic twists forming a hybrid tune that though never seeming to settle on a completed form, clearly provided a welcome challenge to Harland, Potter, and Moran (now on organ) as they navigated their way through its complex turns and varied textures.

The third tune "Blue Blocks" exhibited both Moran's insightful composing and his nuanced soloing capabilities. From the solo piano intro to the powerful exchanges with Potter, to a tender solo by Holland, this slow blues proved one of the evening's highlights. Moran took advantage of the tune's catchy, tripling rhythm to display his signature ability to blend classical, blues, pop, and jazz forms, folding the various components of his solos like an origami master to form unexpected contradictions and intellectually challenging shapes of surprising emotive clarity.

Following another Potter composition, the jaunty "Outsiders," the group turned to the second peak of the set, Holland's "Veil of Tears." Centered on Holland's middle-eastern themed bass lines, "Veil of Tears" was the most unusual composition of the evening, and the one on which the band most completely coalesced to deliver an integrated sound built on but subsuming their individualism. On electric organ, Moran encased the whole in a constantly shifting curtain of atmospherics, while Potter, alternating between tenor and soprano sax, delivered one startling solo after another, seeming to transform the distinct sound of his horn into that of traditional Arabic woodwinds or the cry of the muezzin. The band received the night's most effusive audience response for this evocative piece of unusual character.

Inverting moods completely, the band closed out the set with a second, older Holland composition, the up-tempo "Interception." An exuberant freestyle designed to give each player a run for their money, the tune quickly turned into a serious burner as each soloist drove the next to ever more dexterous and rapid-fire heights. Potter particularly shined with a series of breakneck runs delivered in his inimitable style, as did Harland for a closing solo equally impressive for its unusual tonal diversity, dynamic range, and extended intricate structure.

Performed in sequence, with no patter or chit-chat between tunes, the evening's display had the feel of entering a fine arts gallery to view the works of established master craftsmen where the show is not tied to any single theme, personality, stylistic continuity, or artistic vision. Instead, the element binding together the six pieces was their consummate execution and the audience's enjoyment of witnessing four contemporary artists at the peak of their abilities.

The Overtone Quartet is a new force on the scene, designed as an artistic playground for its members where they can push and pull each other in new directions. The results are eminently satisfying and it certainly will be intriguing to see what the Quartet provides its audiences next.



The Overtone Quartet In Concert: A New Band Hits Its Stride

By: Walter Ray Watson
October 22, 2009

There's a certain thrill in being an early adopter of a new band that's hitting its stride. You know, to have stood in line in the rain to hear U2 or R.E.M. in a dive bar or nightclub in the early '80s — and later, being able to say, "I remember when ..."

Jazz also has thrilling new bands which engender that "Man, I was there!" feeling right from their first gigs. Right now, there's an aura of excitement around the supergroup The Overtone Quartet. Bassist Dave Holland, pianist Jason Moran, drummer Eric Harland and saxophonist Chris Potter had an audience whooping and hollering on Saturday, Oct. 10 at the Kennedy Center *before* the first note of their second set was played. "Now that's what I call a welcome," Holland said to the exuberant crowd, which greeted the group early and often.

When they got underway, with Holland's "Step To It," it was as if a sudden musical wind had taken the room, each player swirling and building and making offerings to the gods. A slow, rising bass groove, a kicky backbeat, a sinuous sax line combined to create raucous, samba dance music. At the far end of the stage the piano was hanging back, not catching fire from the insistent, head-bobbing commotion.

I am myself an early adopter of the Overtone Quartet. As a unit, it's only existed on an intermittent tour for the last six weeks, but I happened to catch its very first set last month at the Blue Note in New York. Turns out that *The New York Times'* [Nate Chinen](#) [witnessed](#) it too.

They carried around lead sheets for the music then, and did again on this October night. But they weren't sight-reading as much as their first gig. The charts seemed more like reminders of the set list, with more eye contact between musicians and less glaring at music stands. Tunes themselves came from all the different band members, making for a veritable composers' showcase. The compositions were actually strong pieces. They weren't rote chord changes from which to hang solos, but complex, even asymmetrical works: Moran's "Gummy Moon," for instance, or Potter's anthemic closer "Ask Me Why." (The crowd went giddy for Potter's muscular, bluesy tenor lines on his song — especially on its chorus.) And the deeper the band roamed into its bag of tunes, the more colors they all let fly, some subtle and somber, others bright as a kids' playroom. Moran switched from grand piano to electric piano; he created a palette that ranged from meditative and popsicle-cool to haunting but rousing.

But brothers and sisters, I must report that the show was stolen by the virtuoso beats, clicks, biff-bams and pops of Eric Harland. His kickdrum pedal banged away at a cowbell throughout the entire night. He made it work, like a spice that adds just the right flavor. Clonk, clonk, clonk went that cowbell, and Harland made superhuman magic from that simplicity, building his solos while keeping all manner of paradiddles and samba beats, and braving at least 4/4, 6/8 and maybe a third time signature all at once.

Whether playing a gorgeous ballad or a down-home shuffle beat, the musicians charmed like a group with many years under their belt. Call them old souls or fellow travelers. But for me, the real surprise remains the unit's tight fit, their integration in such a brief amount of time.

Of course, three of the players (minus Moran) played together in a similar quartet called the Monterey Quartet, a group I also got to hear at the Newport Jazz Festival in 2008. I was there as a spectator, but NPR Music recorded them too: [Newport Jazz 2008: The Monterey Quartet](#).

Back then, the pianist was Cuban-born keyboard sensation Gonzalo Rubalcaba. He played an incredible set, but a very different affair from the discreet, church-y, groovy and avant-garde musings of Moran. Rubalcaba's playing suggested classical filigree and folkloric song forms; they were dense and passionate, and from another time. Moran's restraint made his solos sparkle: his solos delivered through glancing flurries of fire and pelting sleet.

I share all this intel because it's a band you'll likely hear more about. Right now, the Overtone Quartet is abuzz largely via word of mouth, but rest assured: their legend is in the making. I'm sure you may have your own memories of hot new bands tearing it up, either recently or from long ago. I can't wait to hear your comments about Overtone, or any such group, in this space.

An Experienced Leader Brings Out a Collectivist Spirit

By: Nate Chinen
September 9, 2009

There are few musicians in jazz with a more untroubled sense of leadership than the bassist Dave Holland. Since the first recordings made under his name, in the early 1970s, Mr. Holland has expressed his point of view with gracious clarity, drawing out the best from his partners while keeping a firm hand on the tiller. But he's after a greater spirit of collectivism with the Overtone Quartet, which made its first public appearance at the Blue Note on Tuesday night before a handful of tour dates this fall.



The group, with the saxophonist Chris Potter, the pianist Jason Moran and the drummer Eric Harland — musicians born in the 1970s — shares most of its DNA with the Monterey Quartet, which was convened in 2007 for that year's Monterey Jazz Festival. (A sharp live album was released a couple of weeks ago on the festival's label, licensed to Concord.) The crucial difference is in the piano chair: the Monterey Quartet featured Gonzalo Rubalcaba, a player of drier touch and steelier temperament than Mr. Moran.

The change registers at almost every level. Throughout the first set on Tuesday, Mr. Moran was far more than a different piece of the puzzle: his rumbling cadences and insinuating voicings took their place at the core of the band, inspiring a more elastic interaction from the others, particularly Mr. Harland. The only person who seemed not to yield to any shift was Mr. Holland, holding down a series of syncopated vamps with his usual definitive aplomb.

Every member of the group had at least one composition in play, and their selections were characteristic. Mr. Moran's was "Blue Blocks," a tune with a cascading line and flickers of gospel consonance; it brought out Mr. Potter's soulful, pithy side. "Treachery," by Mr. Harland, opened the set on a radiant note, with rhythmic jolts and a fanfare-like melody. "The Outsiders," by Mr. Potter, was a heady contraption, home to enough moving parts and somber harmony to suggest the influence of chamber music.

Because this is the sort of group that can feel overstocked with poise, there was an important place for ballads in the set. "Maiden," by Mr. Harland, readily fit the bill, sounding at times like a lullaby. "Walking the Walk," by Mr. Holland, was more of a border case, with a serpentine bass line in 10/8 meter. What brought it into ballad territory was the tone struck by Mr. Moran, on Fender Rhodes electric piano. Apart from some small discursive tangents, his solo revolved around two notes, and he made this feel like a product of deep focus.

After so much new music Mr. Holland placed a chestnut at set's end: "Interception," from his landmark 1973 album, "Conference of the Birds." With its asymmetrical rhythmic pulse it sounded strikingly contemporary — and the musicians, straining brightly against tempo and tonality, managed to strengthen that impression, all together.

Best Music of 2009: Concerts and Books

By Stephen Kimball

2009 has created somewhat of a musical dilemma for me as far as my annual best-of list goes. In the past, I have picked 10 top albums of the year and 10 songs. This year, I'm not sure if I have 10 top releases of 2009. The year in recordings certainly started slowly for me. It wasn't until spring, when Wilco put out its eponymous album that I even had a current recording that got me excited.

That said, there was certainly a lot of music that I liked this year, but it was often a few songs off a record. Even one of my favorite bands, Pearl Jam, put out a record, "Backspacer," with only three songs that I really dug. But Pearl Jam's record did contain one of my favorite songs of the year, the truly lovely "Just Breathe." This scenario held true for Ben Harper as well.

So what did I listen to a lot this past year? A whole lot of jazz and classical music. Jazz for me is really always the genre that I feel I most connect with. And exploring classical music in a more in-depth way has really provided me with a great deal of pleasure. By using the play count feature on iTunes I can definitively say that John Coltrane's magnum opus, "A Love Supreme," was what I listened to most in 2009. Aren't computers cool? If you've never explored this recording, it is one of the most amazing and important in all of jazz. It is Coltrane at one of his spiritual and musical highpoints.

Other jazz artists I listened to



Photo provided

Dave Holland's performance at Cornell was a highlight of 2009

this year include Dave Holland, who I had the pleasure of interviewing. Also, Thelonious Monk, especially "The Thelonious Monk Orchestra at Town Hall," and his live Carnegie Hall recording with John Coltrane. As a complete sidebar, this recording is special, in part, because the master tapes were literally discovered in a cardboard box at the Library of Congress and released in 2005. It's an amazing record.

In addition to listening to a lot of recorded music by the acoustic bass player Dave Holland, his Cornell Concert Series performance with the Overtone Quartet

was by far my favorite show of the year. This stellar band is composed of Chris Potter on tenor and soprano saxophone, Steve Nelson on vibraphone, and Eric Harland playing the drums. While Holland is the leader of the band, and a musical legend to boot, the rest of the musicians were truly masters of their instruments.

It is so amazing to see the way a musician of this caliber can play and translate his ideas into a performance. And the way the band played together was what the best jazz should be, a democratic conversation between equals. As you can tell, to say this show left me blown away is an understatement. Dave Holland and company have made the shortlist of the best concerts — of any genre — that I've ever attended. Thanks Cornell Concert Series for bring them to town.

The Juilliard String Quartet performance that took place on Feb. 8 at Bailey Hall is the other concert that has really stayed with me this year. The quartet, founded in 1946, is one of the premier string groups performing today. The group performed four of Franz Joseph Haydn's Op. 20 "Sun" Quartets. Written in 1772, these works helped earn Haydn the title of "Father of the String Quartet."

Additionally, while writing these quartets the composer was very influenced by the philosopher Jean Paul Rousseau and other thinkers of his time, making these pieces a fascinating testament to the period of history in

which they were written. I really love chamber music, so this was such a treat to see one of the great string quartets playing today.

In addition to concerts, there were a couple of great music books that came out this year. The first, "Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age" is an in-depth examination of the recorded music industry since the 1970s through the advent of the digital music technology that we take for granted today.

This book provided me with a great understanding of how an industry that once swam in money completely missed the technological changes coming at them and has struggled ever since.

The other book that I loved is "Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original" by Robin Kelley. Professor Kelley takes on one of the music's most important voices and innovators. Monk, as he is often referred to, was also one of the most mythical figures in jazz.

The writing in this book is strong and gets to the heart of its subject. This is of course the goal of all biographies, but they are often not as successful as this book. I highly recommend this not only for jazz fans, but also for anyone who wants to understand the life behind one of the 20th century's most important musicians.

Next week, I will present my list of my favorites albums and songs of 2009, including some great local releases.