



Mark Dresser

by Sean Fitzell

It started as a three-week vacation to New York City in 1975, but turned into two years. Despite his car's rear-window being smashed the first day, bassist Mark Dresser knew the city was the place for him. "There's no reason to go back to San Diego," he remembers thinking, "there's stuff happening here."

But now there is a reason. After making a home in NYC and contributing enormously to the jazz and new music scene for close to 20 years, Dresser is returning to the west coast. Stepping in for his retired mentor, bassist Bertram Turetzky, he will assume a full professorship at his alma mater, the University of California at San Diego (UCSD).

The move marks another stage in the evolution of Dresser's already storied career. From his early days with the San Diego Symphony and his role in the development of the Downtown jazz scene (playing alongside the likes of saxophonists Tim Berne, John Zorn and many others) to his compositions for classic silent films and his personal lexicon for the bass, Dresser has made an indelible mark on modern music. Appearing on more than 100 recordings, he still strives creatively to advance the music.

"I was committed to playing 'new music', whatever that meant," Dresser says. "My understanding was you were to create your own sound, your own music, and define yourself - in the tradition of the innovators." Now 51, the Los Angeles native began playing bass when he was 10, after starting piano at five. He explored diverse musical situations including classical, rock and even folk.

But he was drawn to the experimental, including the music of innovators like guitarist Jimi Hendrix and bassists Charles Mingus, Wilbur Ware and Ray Brown. In his early 20s, while in the symphony, Dresser was gigging with now-critic Stanley Crouch's Black Music Infinity, which included flutist James Newton, saxophonists David Murray and Arthur Blythe and veteran cornetist Bobby Bradford, the group's "mentor".

During that first fateful trip to NYC, Dresser met trombonist Ray Anderson, drummer Gerry Hemingway, flutist Robert Dick and bassist Mark Helias, all of whom would become important musical partners through the years. "You're attracted to like minds, and in a place like New York you will find those people," he says.

After two years, Dresser left for school, studied with Turetzky and was exposed to contemporary composition. He later earned a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Italy with visionary bassist Franco Petracchi. In Rome, Dresser was called in to finish a European tour with the incomparable Anthony

Braxton. Soon after, he joined the quartet, Braxton's longest-running ensemble. After completing his Master's degree and earning the Braxton gig, Dresser settled in NYC in 1986.

He reconnected with Anderson and others in the burgeoning Downtown scene, and formed two collectives: Tambastics with Hemingway, Dick, and pianist Denman Maroney; and Arcado with violinist Mark Feldman and cellist Hank Roberts (later Ernst Reijseger). Arcado gained notoriety, toured extensively and produced four recordings together, plus a fifth that paired them with the Trio du Clarinettes. Dresser was also in demand as a sideman, performing with an array of artists interested in pushing the boundaries of jazz and modern music.

Dresser earned a reputation as an exceptional and original performer capable of pulling a spectrum of sounds from the bass, playing both pizzicato and arco, using extended techniques, and detuning the instrument. Despite his high level of achievement, Dresser found it difficult to tour with his new group, Force Green. "It was quite challenging to get a profile as a leader, especially with a quintet," he says.

It wasn't until he decided to score the classic silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* with trumpeter Dave Douglas and Maroney that Dresser found an outlet for touring. Compositionally, the project sparked his interest in incorporating narrative structures and ideas into his music. He explored the ideas further on *Eye'll Be Seeing You* (Knitting Factory 1998), composing music for the surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou*.

But Dresser also wanted to work with living artists. He got his chance when video artist Tom Leiser approached him about producing a video for his solo piece "Subtonium". The project grew into a trilogy; the second part features Dresser's trio with flutist Matthias Ziegler and Maroney, and the third part is in development. Dresser also worked with animator Sarah Jane Lapp, creating solo bass music for her story and images. "I think collaboration is one of the aspects of music that I really enjoy the most," he says.

Beyond film, Dresser was commissioned by sculptor Robert Taplin to score his work "The Five Outer Planets", a conception of the Greek Titans as middle-aged dudes. A version of this music is featured on *Nine Songs Together* (CIMP, 2004) with Anderson. Taplin was attracted to Dresser's sonic textures.

For the last two years, Dresser has been using a customized pickup system for acoustic bass, which he helped develop over 20 years. The pickup amplifies many of the harmonics and buzzes from the instrument typically lost in group settings. It allows Dresser more pitch and timbre per note, enabling him

to articulate more complex sounds.


Designing this system was a facet of developing his voice - instrumentally and compositionally - for a more personal statement. "Even in his contemporary language, there is soulfulness and folk inside that touches our hearts," says drummer Susie Ibarra, who has performed for several years and recorded the duet CD *Tone Time* (Wobbly Rail, 2003) with Dresser. "Playing duo with Mark is a very effortless and intuitive experience," she adds.

Maroney, a longtime Dresser associate, echoes this sentiment: "We got to a point where one of us could drop a hint of a tune and, boom, we'd be doing it." Such close listening and quick reaction was evident during Dresser's recent live performance at Barbès with trumpeter Herb Robertson, drummer Jay Rosen and Berne. Throughout the improvised set, he often mirrored phrases played by Berne or Robertson, providing a platform for their improvisation.

"I feel very privileged to be busy doing this kind of stuff, it's fantastic," Dresser says. And he plans to stay busy. In addition to his trio with Ziegler and Maroney, his duos with Ibarra and Anderson, and his many sessions, Dresser has another trio with Maroney and drummer Michael Sarin, a collaborative trio with multi-reedist Marty Ehrlich and drummer Andrew Cyrille, and the Marks Brothers duo with Helias. Dresser and Maroney also recorded a CD set for release in early 2005 on Cryptogramophone. He also intends to develop more music for solo contrabass.

Then there is the new gig at UCSD. Dresser has given lessons and always encouraged younger players, and in recent years he taught at New School University and Hampshire College. He designs courses to be enjoyable and offers students his practical insight as a working musician. Dresser teaches ear training and acoustic concepts, and urges students to explore and utilize the sounds of their environment to develop their sound lexicon.

Though the move back west will seemingly complete a circle for Dresser, he expects to perform in NYC often, and his future remains open to possibilities. For now, he is throwing a "farewell" musical celebration on August 15th at Tonic. It boasts a rotating cast of his many collaborators, including Helias; saxophonists Ehrlich, Jane Ira Bloom and Ned Rothenberg; pianists Maroney and Diane Moser; and drummers Ibarra, Sarin, Hemingway, Cyrille and Tom Rainey. Expect many combinations and some surprise guest performers.

"That'll be the hardest thing in leaving New York - the community of musicians," Dresser muses. "There's a certain kind of respect that's there for anyone who's here dealing. It's inherently supportive and I dig it." 

For more information, visit www.mark-dresser.com. Dresser is at CB's Lounge Aug. 1st with Brian Allen and Ellery Eskelin, and Tonic Aug. 6th with Dave Douglas, the Aug. 15th "Farewell Show", and Aug. 18th with Herb Robertson. See calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Arcado String Trio (JMT-Winter&Winter, 1989)
- Anthony Braxton - *Willisau* (Quartet) 1991 (hatART, 1991)
- Gerry Hemingway - *Down to the Wire* (hatART, 1991)
- Mark Dresser/Frances-Marie Uitti - *Sonomondo* (Cryptogramophone, 2000)
- Mark Dresser - *Aquifer* (Cryptogramophone, 2002)
- Mark Dresser/Ray Anderson - *Nine Songs Together* (CIMP, 2004)