

Chicago pianist Dennis Luxion bops hard this weekend at Club Blujazz

May 20, 6:41 PM · Neil Tesser - Chicago Jazz Music Examiner



Chicago pianist Dennis Luxion channels his inner French impressionist.

Ask any jazz musician in Chicago about the city's top pianists, and **Dennis Luxion's** name comes up pretty quickly.

Luxion is a scary-smart musician, and his cerebral analysis informs every phase of his musicianship – as a gifted accompanist, a sometimes startling soloist, and an always inventive arranger. “Smart” doesn’t mean “cold”; Luxion’s playing has its share of romance. But he never abuses the piano with empty flamboyance. Instead, he seems to partner with the instrument, making it an extraordinarily efficient tool for expressing his wide-ranging artistry.

Luxion keeps busy, but his relatively low profile stems from the fact that he has largely defined himself through his collaborations with others. He’s a longstanding part of violinist [Diane Delin's various projects](#), and also holds down the piano chair for the [Green Mill's](#) Saturday morning (1-4 AM) jam sessions. These days, he also performs with his trio Sunday nights at [Club Blujazz](#).

But Luxion steps firmly into the spotlight this weekend, leading a promising quintet in a program dedicated to a couple of [hard-bop](#) pioneers, drummer [Art Blakey](#) and pianist/composer [Horace Silver](#). Aside from their individual gifts, both Blakey and Silver are revered for the bands they led,

which served as long-running “finishing schools” for several generations of jazz musicians.

Blakey and Silver teamed up in 1954 to form the first edition of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers, still among the most famous brands in jazz; Silver left a few years later to lead his own groups. Each enjoyed decades of success through a combination of crisp musicality, crowd-pleasing repertoire, finger-popping swing, and a steady succession of young lions, who cut their teeth in these bands before moving out on their own.

The list of their combined alumni reads like an all-star lineup of jazz artists from the 50s to the 80s, including Wayne Shorter, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Timmons, Benny Golson, Lee Morgan, Joe Henderson, Blue Mitchell, Art Farmer, Mulgrew Miller, Terence Blanchard, Mike and Randy Brecker, Woody Shaw, Chuck Mangione, and Keith Jarrett.

Luxion’s own band has a mix of Chicago veterans – drummer **Michael Raynor** and saxist **Greg Fishman** – and highly touted newcomers **John Tate** on bass and **Marquis Hill** on trumpet. They play Club Blujazz both Friday and Saturday, with sets at 8 and 9:45.

Luxion took a few minutes from transcribing and arranging for the gig to speak with your Chicago Jazz Examiner.

Why Blakey & Silver? What is it about their music that impelled you to focus on their repertoire?

For me, that’s sort of the core of classic jazz writing. And it’s a very different kind of approach from what we do each week in the trio. We do a lot of these same tunes, but we’re very open with them in the trio setting. The Blakey-Silver approach was a quite controlled environment, very arranged, almost like a little big band. I always liked that – the discipline, and the writing and arranging.



Jazz historian [Martin Williams wrote](#) that Horace Silver's compositions were so tightly constructed that if a soloist simply follows the path each song lays out, he's almost guaranteed to play a passable solo. Do you agree?

Oh yes. I think that with Horace, the idea of writing and playing really blended together. A lot of his own solos have this feeling of being composed. And there's a certain element of that in what I believe he'd tell his musicians; I don't know that the solos would change totally from time to time. If a soloist found something that really worked [for a particular song], he'd stay with it. You hear that in multiple takes of other musicians, such as Charlie Parker, who might keep a certain blues lick in his solo with each take. Everything doesn't have to be new all the time.

Do you also follow that advice?

Not in the same sense, exactly. But when I improvise, I like to take an initial idea and work with that through the whole solo.



Youngblood trumpeter Marquis Hill

Art Blakey didn't compose; he always left that to the members of his band. But Horace Silver wrote almost every tune his bands played. So how have you divided things up?

Most of the songs we're playing are Horace's tunes; there are only a few Messengers tunes. And of course there's some overlap, since they started together in the same band – a tune like "Nica's Dream," which Horace wrote but first recorded with Blakey. The other Blakey tunes are a couple that [pianist] Bobby Timmons wrote: "Moanin'," and "Dis Here."

You're not playing any of the later tunes in Blakey's book, by such famous jazz composers as Wayne Shorter, Freddie Hubbard, Cedar Walton, Bobby Watson, to name a few. Why not?

I was thinking about doing some of those, but I'll save it for the next time. With a lot of those later songs, I would have to change the arrangements, because they were for a sextet, including trombone, and we're using a quintet. And I didn't want to do that; I wanted these to be faithful to the original arrangements. A lot of these songs, people learn them from fake books, but those leave out cool interludes, or certain written parts, from the original recordings.

So in a way, your performances this weekend will be sort of educational for those in the audience?

It's an education not only for the listeners but also for the musicians, which is important. Most younger musicians coming up don't have chance to play with big bands, or even with a band like the Messengers, which used to be the training schools for young players. They're playing with other younger players – which is not really getting an education.

And it's an education for *me*, listening to all this stuff again, trying to re-create from the records, as much as possible, all the original scores, the voicings, the bass parts – it's been great research for me.

The Dennis Luxion Quintet plays Club Blujazz, 1540 W. North, Friday and Saturday (8 and 9:45). For reservations [e-mail the club](#) or call 773-360-8046.

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