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## NATHAN EKLUND: BUILDING A MUSICAL LIFE ONE DAY AT A TIME BY THOMAS ERDMANN

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# NATHAN EKLUND: BUILDING A MUSICAL LIFE ONE DAY AT A TIME

BY THOMAS ERDMANN

**T**he story is the one we all preach; if you work very hard you can begin your career with a splash. The only problem is that very few students work really hard, and of those very few who do, even fewer make that splash. One who has is trumpeter, flugelhornist, engineer, and composer Nathan Eklund. The critical praise for Eklund is outstanding. *JazzTimes* wrote, "Eklund's second quintet album first attracts attention for the warmth of his distinctive modernist compositions and the appealing good nature of the ensemble... (then) the quality of the soloists really starts to come forward." The *Rochester City News* seconded that, "Eklund will be a force to contend with."

Born in 1978 in Everett, Washington, Eklund began musical training on the piano at the age of six before picking up the trumpet at eleven. College studies started at Central Washington University, studying classical trumpet with Thomas Gause, before transferring to William Paterson Uni-

versity in New Jersey. After earning his bachelor's degree Eklund went on to receive a master's degree from New Jersey City University. His New York-based trumpet teachers have included Scott Wendholt, Joe Magnarelli, Rich DeRosa, and John Mosca, to name a few.

Today, Eklund leads his own groups, works with Richie Cole, with Craig Yaremkov's quartet, and in Mariel Berger's Obsidian Nonet. A few of the artists Eklund has previously worked with include heavy hitters Joe Lovano, Claudio Roditi, and Eddie Daniels, as well as time spent recording with giants in the smooth jazz field like Spyro Gyra, Chuck Loeb, and Gerald Veasley. In the little off-time Eklund has, he works as an adjunct professor at New Jersey City University. For this trumpeter the future is bright... and it's happened to an artist whom teachers can refer their students to and say, "If you work hard, one day this could be you."

**Erdmann:** *How did you come to begin your musical studies on the piano at the age of six?*

**Eklund:** My parents always had music going on in the house as I was growing up. They made the decision to get their kids involved in music studies; they thought it was an important aspect of our lives from an early age, so they started all of us on the piano when we were young.

**Erdmann:** *Your grandfather was a big band and military trumpeter. How did he inspire you to take up the trumpet?*

**Eklund:** He wasn't playing by the time I was born. He played throughout the war, but set it down before my mom was born as my grandparents started to raise a family. There are no recordings of his playing so I never actually heard him play, but growing up I felt very connected to my grandparents and always looked up to them. The idea of doing something that they had done was an inspiring idea for me.

**Erdmann:** *Many times when we're young there is a teacher who inspires us to make music a career. Was there someone like that for you?*

**Eklund:** I've had a lot of people along the way who have done that for me. The first time I really experienced something like that was my high school band director, Gary Evans. I actually started doing some studying with him when I was in eighth grade, before I got to the high school. He had such an apparent love for music and such a strong desire for students to gain whatever they could from the musical experience. His influence was huge in terms of my desire to want to be involved in the music world.

**Erdmann:** *Why did you, initially, choose Central Washington University (CWU) for your undergraduate studies?*

**Eklund:** It was highly recommended to me. Gary Evans had gone there, as well as my high school trumpet teacher, Jake Bergevin. The school has a strong reputation in the greater Seattle area, where I grew up. I wanted to still be relatively

close to home and that seemed like the logical place. When I went there and saw the quality of the department and saw the diversity, in terms of having access to playing in an orchestra, big band, and wind ensemble, all of that made it a pretty easy choice.

**Erdmann:** *What did your studies with the late Thomas Gause at CWU entail?*

**Eklund:** They were, first and foremost, studying the trumpet and learning to play it. I always knew, from an early age, that I really liked playing jazz, and had a general love for that style of music. We would incorporate that into the lessons, but it was a secondary purpose. He was a fantastic legit, as well as jazz, player. He had a lot to offer in both respects. He made it clear from day one that his style was learning to play the trumpet well, regardless of what genre you chose to be a part of. That was the foundation of his teaching.

**Erdmann:** *Why did you transfer to William Paterson in order to study jazz, as opposed to somewhere else?*

**Eklund:** I actually started my first year at William Paterson on a national student exchange. Because both William Paterson and Central Washington are state schools, they had an exchange program that allowed me to change locations for a year. About halfway through my sophomore year at Central I felt like focusing more on jazz than what CWU had to offer. They had jazz elements as a part of the program, but you couldn't get a degree in jazz. Also, their focus was not on small group stuff, and I wanted to experience more of that. It wasn't until February or March of my sophomore year that I had that realization, and it was too late to apply for a full transfer to somewhere else. A friend of mine suggested the student exchange. I had heard of William Paterson and knew it was in the New York area, which was where I wanted to be. My first year was as part of the exchange, and then after being out here for half of a school year I decided I wanted to make the switch.

**Erdmann:** *What was the experience like for you there?*

**Eklund:** It was incredibly exciting. The only time I'd been to New York, up to that time, was on a layover on an airplane ride. I was excited to be out in the area, and excited to be in a community with really serious and talented musicians around me. There were so many musicians who I felt were better than me that it inspired me to want to continue playing and pursue this profession. I studied trumpet with Dave Rogers, who is an incredible lead player and has played Broadway for a long time. He's actually a really solid jazz player, though he'd never tell you that. He's a fantastic musician, and his lessons continued to promote the idea of being a great trumpet player. I was so happy to study with him because everything I was doing in school was jazz related. I was in jazz arranging, jazz ear training, improv, combos, etc., all of which were inundating me with jazz stuff. So, to have private lessons where we did discuss jazz but the primary focus was on figuring out the trumpet, that was refreshing and very helpful in terms of stepping forward and improving myself as a musician. Obviously there are lots of people along the way who have helped me, but Dave was the most influential in terms of helping me develop my trumpet playing through everything he had to offer.

**Erdmann:** *Did you go right on for your master's degree upon graduation?*

**Eklund:** No, I took three years off. When I finished my bachelor's degree I knew I didn't want to return to school right away. I had received so much information at WPU and I felt I hadn't even started to digest most of it, so I really wanted some time to try and do some work, some playing, some teaching, and to process through the information I had received.

**Erdmann:** *How did you transition into the New York scene?*

**Eklund:** It's been a slow, steady process. There are such an incredible number of great musicians in the area. I'm always amazed when I play gigs, because I'll always meet people who I've never met or even heard of before who I think are just incredible players. It hasn't been easy. It's taken a lot of patience and a lot of perseverance. What I do find is that every year I'm making the steady progression I'd always hoped for.

**Erdmann:** *With all of your playing going on, why did you decide to do a master's degree and why New Jersey City University (NJCU)?*

**Eklund:** I decided to head back to school because I felt I was ready to start studying more intently again. I also felt like I wanted to have the option, down the road, to do some college teaching. With where the market is today with universities, you pretty much have to have a doctorate if you want a solid full-time teaching gig. I felt that when I'm forty I might want to do that, and at that point in my life I don't want to have to go back and get two degrees. NJCU was a logical choice because I was offered an assistantship, so I could go without paying, and because the adjunct faculty they have there are incredible. I studied trumpet with Joe Magnarelli, and Tim Horner (drums), Andy

Eulau (bass), Allen Farnham (piano), Joel Weiskopf (piano), Bill Kirchner (history), and Pete McGuinness (arranging) teach there as well, all of whom I got the opportunity to work with during my studies there. It's a pretty small department, so I felt like I got significant time with all of those great musicians. I chose NJCU even though it wasn't the biggest name school, but the quality of what I got out of my education made it the best choice.

**Erdmann:** *What was it like to study with Joe?*

**Eklund:** It was a really great learning experience and a lot of fun, too. He articulates his knowledge incredibly well. His ability to communicate ideas and give constructive criticism is really great, but at the same time he's such a relaxed person that it felt like we were just hanging. When we would get done with the lesson, I would know what I needed to work on and prepare for the next one. The vibe was relaxed because that's who Joe is, but I never felt like we didn't get anything done; he gave me tons of stuff to work on every week.

**Erdmann:** *There is no way we could cover all of the great artists you've worked with, but I was wondering if we could cover a few and have you tell the readers what you learned in working with these artists. The first is Richie Cole.*

**Eklund:** He's obviously a slightly older generation jazz player, and one of the few I've had the opportunity to work with on a somewhat regular basis. From him I learned about how to commit to the world of jazz. For certain people the world of jazz just takes over your life and consumes your whole existence. He's one of those people who will play as long as he can physically put the saxophone in his mouth and play. That's just the way he is.

**Erdmann:** *Eddie Daniels.*

**Eklund:** His technical abilities on the clarinet are amazing, but he has an ability to be incredibly musical with them. I remember my first experience hearing him play from the early Thad Jones/Mel Lewis records. One of his only clarinet solos with that band was on the live version of Little Pixie and he played great. Today he sounds like the same person, but he made it apparent how much an artist can develop even after



Nathan Eklund



25  $F\Delta$

27  $E7_{ALT}$   $A-7$

30  $F\#7_{ALT}$   $B-7$

33  $G\Delta$

36  $G/A$   $B$   $C/B$

39  $B$   $B/A$   $E-7/G$

43  $G7$

45  $F\#$   $G/F\#$   $G/F\#$

**B-7 (SECOND CHORUS)**

**F#** **E-7**

48

**F#7** **GΔ**

51

**BΔ** **GΔ**

53

**F#7** **E-7**

56

**G#87** **C#7ALT** **F#** **F#** **G/F#**

59

**F#** **G/F#**

63

**F#** **G/F#**

65

**F#** **F#7ALT** **FΔ** **F#7ALT**

67

**E7ALT**

70

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is written in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It consists of ten staves of music. The first staff (measures 48-50) features a melodic line with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a tempo marking of 4/4. The second staff (measures 51-52) continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff (measures 53-54) shows a change in rhythm with a dotted quarter note and an eighth note. The fourth staff (measures 55-58) includes a triplet of eighth notes and a half note. The fifth staff (measures 59-62) features a series of eighth notes with a triplet of eighth notes. The sixth staff (measures 63-64) continues with eighth notes and a triplet. The seventh staff (measures 65-66) shows a melodic line with a key signature change to two sharps (F# and C#). The eighth staff (measures 67-69) includes a trill marked 'tr' and a triplet of eighth notes. The ninth staff (measures 70-71) concludes the piece with a melodic line.

A-7

72  $F\#7_{ALT}$   $B-7$   $GA$

74  $G/A_3$

78  $B$   $C/B$

81  $B/A$   $E-7/G$

83  $G7$

86  $F\#$   $G/F\#$   $F\#$

89

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### As A Leader

*The Crooked Line* (Jazz Excursion, 2007)

*The View From Afar* (Nathan Eklund, 2006)

### With Others

With Richie Cole

*Rises's Rose Garden* (Jazz Excursion, 2006)

*Back On Top* (Jazz Excursion, 2005)

With Brandon Hans

*One Hit Is All I Need* (Dreamscapes Music, 2007)

With David Noland

*Nomad* (Jazz Excursion, 2007)

With Spyro Gyra

*Wrapped In A Dream* (Heads Up, 2006)

With Suede

*Dangerous Mood* (Easily Suede Music, 2008)

With Gerald Veasley

*Your Move* (Heads Up, 2008)

With Craig Yaremkó

*Sync* (Jazz Excursion, 2007)

*Persistence* (Independent, 2004)

## EQUIPMENT

Trumpet: 1952 New York Bach with a standard 37 bell and a Greg Black 3C mouthpiece with a 5 backbore  
Flugelhorn: Kanstul 1525 with a red brass finish and a Bach 3C flugelhorn mouthpiece

they reach the highest level.

**Erdmann:** *Joe Lovano.*

**Eklund:** Joe is another of those people who has such a relaxed vibe, yet his energy when he plays is never lacking. The couple things I've done with him have been incredible in terms of his creativity. There's such openness to his approach in regard to both rhythm and harmony. When he wants to, he'll be right in the pocket but he can move outside of it as well. Joe is one of my favorite present day saxophonists.

**Erdmann:** *When you were young, how did you work on improvisation?*

**Eklund:** When I was at William Paterson I would try to play with other people as much as possible. I think I understood the foundation of what improvising was about, but I couldn't fully translate that into my playing. I felt like what I needed to do was spend as much time with other people who were either trying to do the same thing I was or who were a step ahead of me already doing that. I definitely spent a lot of time in the practice room. I've also transcribed a lot of solos. At first I started out writing them down, but as I've done more of them, I began memorizing and internalizing them immediately. I never try to take a solo I've transcribed and use it directly, but transcribing has definitely helped me to build my vocabulary. When I find musicians I like who have elements to their playing that I want to emulate, transcribing really helps with that. After I finished my undergraduate work, I started to do a lot more analyzing of the music specifically. I still transcribe full solos, but more often now I find myself lis-

tening to music and trying to see if there is a single idea that I like, and then transcribing that and figuring out the harmonic context it's within and how it functions. For me I'm really trying to focus on building a solo as opposed to playing over the changes, which I see as two very different things. I feel that my vocabulary is always going to need to get better and hopefully it will continue to strengthen, but working on improvisation now is starting to become more of a conceptual approach, in terms of how do I want to sound, and not what can I do over the changes.

**Erdmann:** *You received great critical praise for your solo work with Spyro Gyra on their Wrapped In A Dream CD, as well as having done other smooth jazz work with Gerald Veasley and Chuck Loeb. You also play a lot of straight-ahead jazz, including both of your CDs as a leader which are in that style. Do you approach soloing differently when you work in a smooth jazz con-*

*text as opposed to straight-ahead situations?*

**Eklund:** Yes and no. You have to, because of the difference in the style, but for me, I am who I am in terms of my personality and if I'm truly improvising it's always going to come out, to some

**"I'm really trying to focus on building a solo as opposed to playing over the changes, which I see as two very different things."**

degree, as me. I expect that, and I hope the people who hire me expect that as well. I understand that no matter what style of music I'm playing, I'm going to come out sounding like Nathan Eklund. But obviously the structure of the sound, in terms of what you hear behind you, is different when you're playing smooth jazz and that's going to influence the way you play.

**Erdmann:** *What advice do you have for young students who are learning improvisation?*

**Eklund:** The first thing I always tell my students is that you have to like jazz, preferably love it, and be willing to listen to it. With where our education situation is today, there are so many resources in terms of books and CDs as well as actual

programs in universities, high schools, and middle schools. They offer you so much education on the mechanics of jazz. But what has the potential to be lost through all of this is what jazz was all about, and that's the interaction and playing from inside of yourself. For so many years through the history of jazz, before the education was in place, the way people learned to play was through experiencing the music and listening. They basically just internalized the music in that manner. When I work with younger students or talk to people who are early on in the world of jazz, I want them to feel excited about the music and try to get them inside the music. That is what, I believe, creates the true jazz spirit inside your playing.

**Erdmann:** *You've given a number of clinics to high school students through-*



Nathan Eklund

out the country. Is there an overriding concept you like to leave the students with?

**Eklund:** I think it depends on the age of the kids I work with. My overall goal, whether it's private instruction, clinics, or the sectionals I run, is to try to create an enthusiasm for the music; to try to get the students I'm interacting with to feel excited about what they're doing and find energy in doing it. I think a lot of kids may start to play jazz because they don't know what else to do or it's what their friends are doing. But to be able to really get into the music you have to have energy from inside of you. Obviously there are always going to be, depending on what I'm working on in the clinic, different suggestions on how to do this or that, but I always try to demonstrate to them the energy that I want them to have for jazz. That can be really hard if you're just doing a single clinic and trying to get that out of kids once because they will be very tentative at the start. For the last two years I've taught at the William Paterson Summer Jazz Workshop, which is for high school aged kids. Each year I've run a combo, in addition to other classes, during the six-day camp. It's amazing how the students transform from the first day to the last. A lot of the kids play in their high school jazz band, but they haven't improvised very much, and that's a great deal of the focus of this camp. They come in, on the first day, playing really tentatively and not wanting to take a solo. It's almost comical, from my standpoint, because I know where they're going to end up six days later. Watching their growing excitement about what they're doing as the days progress is great because by the end of the week they're completely different people. They find a competence in an area they may have thought they had none in and hopefully that will transcend to other aspects of their lives.

**Erdmann:** *I want to change gears for a second and ask about your quintet. I read this description of the ensemble, "The music is intended to give a great deal of interpretative responsibility and freedom to each member of the group." There has been great critical praise with regards to your compositions, as well as your improvisatory abilities, and rightfully so. Can you describe the concept of your quintet?*

**Eklund:** Obviously, at least I hope from what I've already talked about, I really believe strongly in the interaction process, of music in general but especially in the world of jazz. I believe that is what makes this art form so special. We all study to understand the language of jazz, but the best part about speaking a language is being able to use it to interact with others. Improvisation allows us to converse with other musicians, whether we've met them before or not. That being said, I do believe that you can

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“...to really get into the music you have to have energy from inside of you.”

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strengthen that interaction by playing regularly with the same musicians. When I write a piece, my expectation is that the music will adapt or morph from the time I write it to when it's performed because of the musicians around me. I rely heavily on their creative energy to help create the music I write. I think they do it willingly and that is part of the reason why it's as successful as it is, or why, to me, it feels like it works well.

**Erdmann:** *You used to be a part of a group called We Three, which was just trumpet, keyboard and drums. By working in that kind of a setting, without a bass and in just a trio, what did you learn about yourself as an improviser?*



Nathan Eklund

**Eklund:** First and foremost it exposed a lot of deficiencies in my playing. I became aware of elements in my playing that were not nearly as strong as I thought they were or I wanted them to be because suddenly a voice I was used to having, the bass, the bottom and stability of the band, was no longer there. As a trumpet player I'm never going to be able to recreate that, but I still have to hold that function inside of me because the bass player isn't there to rely upon. I know some people don't like to mess with removing the bass because of the stability they provide, but I like the idea of mixing things up in order to experience something new. The experience definitely changed my overall approach to playing and it also changed the way in which I interacted with the others. I think We

Three created an even more interactive setting just because there were only three of us. It allowed all of us to really engage each other more directly and respond more directly to what each person played.

**Erdmann:** *You have a new band you're leading, and you're getting ready to record with them for the first time. Can you tell the readers about this band?*

**Eklund:** I've been working with drummer Tim Horner, Bill Moring on bass, and John Hart on guitar. I've also recently added Donny McCaslin on tenor. Donny is one of my favorite

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“...I like the idea of mixing things up in order to experience something new.”

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tenor players out there right now as his creativity is at the highest level. His concept for motivic development through a solo is incredible, something that I'm still trying to improve upon. Tim and I met at NJCU and we've gotten to do some playing. He, Bill, and John have all played together for a long time, so they have a connectedness that is great. The first time I played with them I was scared about whether I would fit in because they have such a bond. I was wondering if, because they have this bond, it would end up sounding like them with me along for the ride. But they were very willing to add me to the circle, so to speak, and I felt like the energy and creativity was very high from the start. That's part of why I knew I wanted to record with them and why I'm so looking forward to it.

**Erdmann:** *You're also playing in a quartet led by saxophonist Craig Yaremkó that doesn't utilize a chordal instrument. Can you describe this group?*

**Eklund:** There are two horns, bass, and drums. As I play in different ensembles there are certain people I find who, with me, tend to phrase things in a similar manner, as well as approach articulation and the other musical elements in similar ways. I experience that with many people, but with Craig, he and I seem to be even more in sync than that. I don't think we solo in the same way, which I feel is a plus because we play together so often, but in everything else we find ourselves thinking in a similar style and approach. This makes playing with him easy. The chordless quartet allows for a lot of interaction, and we find ourselves comping behind each other's solos, instead of a guitarist or keyboardist, which creates a different feel to the interaction. For me, playing in this group is a nice change of pace from the things I do with others, as this group gives me a lot of freedom to manipulate things a little differently than I might elsewhere. I don't see it as better or worse, just different.

**Erdmann:** *You've also worked as a recording engineer. How did this come about?*

**Eklund:** I have done some of that in the past, although with everything else that's going on right now, I haven't done too much of that recently. It started when I got to know someone who was working at a church and had a small recording project going on. I found out about his project, and he gave me the opportunity to do some recording for him. He also allowed me to record my music and in return I helped with a lot of other recording projects he was doing where he taught me the process. It's not something I do much of anymore, but for me it's been really helpful as I go to do my own recordings. That experience helped me to really understand the procedures and the process well, and that, in turn, helped me understand the capabilities of today's technology. It's a challenge to determine which of the new technologies I want to take advantage of and which ones I want to leave alone as I try to keep the human element present in my music.

**Erdmann:** *As busy as you are, do you still find time to practice?*

**Eklund:** Yes, although recently it's been a lot less than it used to be. I wish I was practicing a lot more than I am. I've had to cut my practice time because I've really wanted to write every day. I write at the beginning of every day because I've found

my creative energy is better in the morning, even if I'm half-asleep, than at the end of the day. Creating a routine has been helpful, even if my ever-changing schedule doesn't allow me to stick to it completely. So I start out the day by walking down

to my basement and sitting down at my (Fender) Rhodes to compose for 30 to 60 minutes. After I'm done with that I'll start my practicing. When it comes to the trumpet, I still believe your improvising can only be as good as your technique, so technical studies are my main focus. I find that

on a daily basis I always do one, or a combination of, flow studies, Clarke studies, and a new book entitled *Flexus*, put together by Laurie Frink and John McNeil. I've found a lot of great benefit from that book. It's set up and designed to improve the technique and facility specifically for the modern day trumpeter. The Clarke Studies, the first seven sets, are my default technique studies. I also take the etudes in that book and try to play them in all twelve keys. For some of them this is not possible due to register problems. In the second etude, for example, you can get through about eight keys before you get yourself into scary territory. I don't do the Clarke every day, but I try to touch on those several days every week. The flow studies I try to do three or four times a week. I also mix the Caruso studies in to try and keep lip strength up, but there isn't enough time in the day to do all of it.

**Erdmann:** *What advice do you have for young trumpet players?*

**Eklund:** Whatever you do, whatever style of music you choose to be involved in, find a consistency in how you practice and how you approach the trumpet, and be patient.

*About the author:* Thomas Erdmann is director of the symphony orchestra and professor of music at Elon University. Erdmann has had four books and over 100 articles published in journals as diverse as *Currents in Musical Thought*, *Journal of the Conductors' Guild*, *Women Of Note Quarterly*, *Saxophone Journal*, *Jazz Player*, and the *ITG Journal*.



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