

Devin Gray's *Dirigo Rataplan*

Ellery Eskelin | Dave Ballou | Michael Formanek



Skirl Records Artist

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Dirigo Rataplan Bio

Devin Gray's *Dirigo Rataplan* connects musical generations while enhancing the dialogue of knowledge, experience, and honesty in jazz. Each composition unearths new possibilities enhancing each member of the quartets lifelong contributions to one of America's original art forms. This project uniquely represents three musical generations of experiences, perceptions, and conclusions with emphasis on Gray's generation as the composer and bandleader.

Established musicians (Ellery Eskelin, Dave Ballou, Michael Formanek) share a wealth of varied musical experiences. Jazz listeners and fans aware of these names will quickly learn about Gray as an emerging composer and performer. At 29 years old he is bursting into the New York City jazz community as a strong leader. These compositions are current pieces written specifically for this group with each member in mind. *"Working with these giants is always a unique, rewarding, and invaluable for me. Every experience with them helps me forward knowledge to my generation and those to come."* (Gray)

The group originally started as a trio with a weekly door gig in Baltimore, Maryland in 2004 at a coffee house called Xando's. The trio (Dave, Michael, and Devin) was a collective that rehearsed once a week to exchange ideas and explore each member's new music. Two unreleased studio recordings and one live recording were created in 2005. In 2006, Gray relocated from Baltimore to New York City, and the band began traveling between these two cities to perform and have continued to do so. As a reflection of the vibrant New York and Baltimore jazz scenes, the group continues its creative goal of merging generational approaches with modern improvisation and composition and can be seen performing regularly.



Tracks: 1 Quadrphonically 2 Cancel the Cancel 3 Down Time 4 Prospect Park in the Dark (for Charles Ives) 5 Otaku 6 Talking with Hands 7 Thickets (for Gerald Cleaver) 8 Katahdin devingraymusic.bandcamp.com

Devin Gray's Biography

An artist interested in multiple musical directions and one who strives for quality and sincerity in his work. His exciting energy has compelled him towards many different musical directions and projects. Considered by his contemporaries as cutting edge, Gray shows promise as an artist that will not only move the music forward, but one who will share his unique musical vision with the world of music.

Devin Gray's fresh approach to modern drumming has enabled him to play with many of America's great jazz musicians. He has performed and recorded with innovative musicians of contrasting styles and backgrounds such as: Tony Malaby, Gary Thomas, Ingrid Jensen, Dave Burrell, Dave Ballou, Michael Formanek, George Garzone, Chris Speed, Sam Rivers, John O'Gallagher, Ellery Eskelin, Ted Rosenthal, Dave Liebman, Andrew D'Angelo, Vardan Ovsepian, Bill McHenry as well as many others.

Devin has been fortunate to perform in many places around the globe and continues to make peace with his audiences. He is a top call young drummer in many modern jazz circles in New York City as well as multiple cities on the East Coast of America. He is currently living, playing, and composing in Brooklyn, New York.

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Dirigo Rataplan Press Quotes

“Aside from striking musical gold coming out of Italy and Germany on an all most monthly basis, the New York scene is where I focus a great deal of my attention and Dirigo Rataplan is perhaps the prime example as to why” @criticaljazz

“Intelligent without becoming intellectual or cerebral: this music is all about soul, with technical skills and finesse fully at the service of the end result, full of surprises, emotion and a deep-rooted sense of pulse” **Stef, Free Jazz Blog**

“Gray’s approach to directing a band from behind a trap-set avoids the typical pitfalls that hamper many similar drummer-led efforts. Devoid of pyrotechnic flash, Gray’s sensitivity to tone, texture and nuance is one of his greatest assets.” **Troy Collins, Point of Departure**

“It is still rare to encounter a drummer with this level of compositional skill. His playing is also very much part of the group’s character. Beautiful playing by the quartet, especially the interweaving and unison of the horns. If you enjoy creative improv that doesn’t hit you over the head, this is for you.” **Tintle, WRUV**

“I couldn’t quite hear the underlying structure until I listened more closely and took the time to notice the way things worked. Rather hypnotic in its own way.” **Bruce Lee Gallanter, Downtown Music Gallery**

“Possibly one of the best debut albums in years, and by an artist with strong musical vision and maturity despite his young age, and with a musical quality that is consistent throughout the album.” **Stef, Free Jazz Blog**

“Slapping the avant grade or free jazz label on an open ended hard bop exploratory would be inherently unfair...a stunning release with an all most three dimensional sonic depth of field.” @criticaljazz

“a great quartet sound, bold and striking but also very organic and unforced.” **Zookeeper Online - Stanford University**

“I would be the first to admit that free jazz is not really my strong suit. My tastes tend to run more toward straight ahead or vocally-driven jazz. However, anytime I’ve dabbled in what you might consider “avant garde”, it always seems to come back to drummer-driven music. (Think Jack DeJohnette, etc.) So it’s surprising and not at all surprising that I’ve been seriously enjoying NYC drummer Devin Gray’s debut album (as a leader, anyway).” **Mark Sanderlin Arts America Blogs**

“From the very first notes, you can hear that this is a percussion-led quartet, with the rhythms setting the scene for musical complexities and arrangements that are an absolute treat.” **Stef, Free Jazz Blog**

Dirigo Rataplan Press Reviews



Credit must go to the Baltimore connection for the tight cohesiveness displayed by drummer Devin Gray's quartet on his debut release as a leader. Gray met bassist Michael Formanek while studying at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, where Formanek teaches. Trumpeter Dave Ballou teaches at Towson University near Baltimore, but actually first met a youthful Gray at a jazz camp years ago in Gray's native Maine. Tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin grew up in Baltimore, and hooked up with the other three for gigs in both Baltimore and New York, where Gray now resides. Eskelin has led close to 20 CDs, while Ballou and Formanek have produced nine each. Formanek has long been associated with Tim Berne, and has also recorded previously with Ballou, while Eskelin is perhaps best known for his work with Joey Baron and for his trio with Andrea Parkins and Jim Black. Gray's eight compositions on this CD were written with these veteran progressive jazz artists in mind.

"Quadraphonically" is launched by Gray's cleverly stuttering start-and-stop drumming, which serves as an effective contrast to the more languid theme voicings of Ballou and Eskelin. This in turn leads to the distinctive contrapuntal (or quadraphonic) interaction of each quartet member. The revisiting of the theme brings out its Ornette Coleman/Don Cherry derivations, especially with Formanek's Charlie Haden-like ostinato and Ballou's intonations reminiscent of Cherry. "Cancel the Cancel" contains a deceptively simple, yet satisfyingly logical thematic arc, offering fertile ground for the whirlwind simultaneous and complementary improvisations of Ballou and Eskelin. The mood is quietly seething, with Formanek's booming single notes rising to the top layer as the piece slowly dissolves into thin air.

The floating lighthearted melody of "Down Time" is enticing, especially with Formanek's persistently buoyant bass patterns as a foundation. Ballou's extended solo is typical of him--lyrical, confidently building, and played with a well-rounded appealing tone. Formanek and Gray are in encouraging lock-step with him all the way. Eskelin's following tenor solo is not nearly as legato in its thrust, instead absorbingly utilizing space and more staccato phrasings that feature both concise swirls and longer lines. The bassist and drummer are as equally responsive to his musings as they were to Ballou's. The reprise is approached more free-form, providing a refreshingly different perspective. Long tones and mallets create a brooding opening for "Prospect Park in the Dark," a tribute to Charles Ives. A contrapuntal free dialogue by the foursome then ensues. The track as a whole is a spellbinding success, with it ending much as it began, except for a delicately nuanced interlude by Gray, first on cymbals and then on sticks.

The staccato theme of "Talking with Hands" is deftly handled by tenor and trumpet with Gray's forceful accentuations. The explorations in counterpoint by Ballou and Eskelin are lucid and compelling, gradually intensifying prior to a brief return to the prodding opening. "Otaku" begins spacy and rubato, highlighted by Ballou's and Eskelin's intriguing, interwoven lines of thought, primarily mellow until Formanek's adamant interjections instigates an edgier, more urgent mindset. Gray's variegated drum work helps sustain the trumpeter's and saxophonist's creative drives.

"Thickets" is dedicated to drummer Gerald Cleaver, who has mentored Gray and has also recorded with Formanek. Sustained tones and arco bass lead first to Eskelin's chattering improv, and then to Ballou's chirping, nervous statement. Tenor and trumpet then merge voices in a manner bordering on the telepathic. The contemplative, ethereal close brings the selection full circle. A whimsical air pervades the catchy melody of "Katahdin," as enunciated by Ballou and Eskelin. Ballou's elastic, dissonance-laden solo, however, is serious business. Formanek and Gray combine their talents in determined support of Ballou, as well as for Eskelin's similarly probing improv. The reiteration of the theme brings this fascinating CD to a sublime end.

As for the CD's title, "dirigo" (which is Maine's state motto) is Latin for direct or lead, while "rataplan" is French for the beating of hooves or drums. Hence, leading from the beat. **JAZZ TIMES - Scott Albin**



Despite his youth, drummer Devin Gray has built an impressive resume and a well-deserved reputation as both an improviser and instrumentalist. His first CD as a leader, *Dirigo Rataplan* shows that he is not a slouch in the composition or bandleader department either. The record's title, loosely translated from Latin and French, means leading from the beat, and Gray's unique approach to the drum-set allows him to do just that—not an easy feat given the august company he keeps. His quartet consists of idiosyncratic tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, versatile bassist Michael Formanek and trumpeter Dave Ballou, a stalwart of New York's creative music scene.

Gray's percussive approach is somewhat reminiscent of Marilyn Mazur, particularly on the opening track, "Quadruphonic." His angular rhythms and complex tonal constructs are in the forefront of this track while his band mates play short bursts of notes in support, before a theatrical saxophone and trumpet dialogue evolves into a melancholic ensemble play. Elsewhere, his impatient and relentless drumming hints at Elvin Jones' polyphonism, such as on "Talking with Hands" which features Eskelin and Ballou embellishing the melody in unison in an homage of sorts to Albert Ayler's New Orleans Brass Band influenced Avant-Garde stylings. "Gray, not only seamlessly keeps up with his side musicians but his compositions create the right environment to showcase their individual skill sets." Eskelin's thick and lyrical tone is well suited for the funky and free "Down Time" where his edgy, intricate and stimulating flight of fancy is not unlike the inside-outside playing of the distinctive Chicago Jazz man Von Freeman. On "Katahdin," his engrossing solo ebbs and flows in unusual yet stimulating patterns.

In addition to playing the perfect foil to Eskelin, Ballou's chirps and twitters build into a melodic yet jagged extemporization on the atmospheric "Thicket." Their unified sound over Formanek's virtuoso and acerbic arco bass gives the impression of a bagpipe blowing in the night. The nocturnesque ambience is also present on the Zen-like "Prospect Park in the Dark" with its free flowing, stream of consciousness, four-way musical conversation.

Momentum slacks just a tad on a couple of the tunes. On "Cancel the Cancel," for example, there is a repetition of musical ideas and on "Otaku" the group improvisation gets a bit chaotic. Despite a very few and minor rough spots, *Dirigo Rataplan* is an eloquent debut from an

immensely talented musician. Hopefully this is just the introduction to an impressive oeuvre to come. **All About Jazz - Hrayr Attarian**

Point of Departure

an online music journal

Dirigo Rataplan is the impressive studio debut of young New York-based drummer Devin Gray. Joined by an all-star line-up of tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, trumpeter Dave Ballou and bassist Michael Formanek, Gray challenges established veterans with a selection of subtly diverse originals that expertly balance freedom and form. “The album’s intriguing title reinforces Gray’s approach; “dirigo” means “to lead” in Latin, while “rataplan” is French for “the beating of hooves or drums,” loosely translating as “to lead from the beat,” which Gray does quite admirably,...” even when the beat in question is more implied than stated.

Despite the generational disparity between Gray and his well-known sidemen, they nonetheless share a common aesthetic bond. A former student of Formanek’s while studying at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Gray originally met Ballou at a jazz camp in his native Maine. Ballou’s teaching position in Towson, Maryland facilitated the formation of a trio, which subsequently grew into a quartet with the addition of Eskelin, a Baltimore native.

“A well-rounded instrumentalist, Gray’s approach to directing a band from behind a trap-set avoids the typical pitfalls that hamper many similar drummer-led efforts. Devoid of pyrotechnic flash, Gray’s sensitivity to tone, texture and nuance is one of his greatest assets,...” as revealed on the impressionistic opener, “Quadrphonically.” Introducing the date with a shimmering mosaic of percussive accents, Gray prods Eskelin and Ballou’s clarion unisons and Formanek’s robust pizzicato with a percolating undercurrent of forward momentum, confirming the compositional value of dramatic restraint.

This is not to imply that Gray doesn’t swing however; the soulful lyricism of tunes like the punchy “Cancel the Cancel” and bluesy “Down Time” are underpinned by dynamically shifting rhythmic foundations that owe much to both hard bop and funk. The latter influence pointedly materializes on “Katahdin” and “Talking with Hands,” spry numbers that feature spirited in-the-pocket grooves from Formanek and Gray; their hard-hitting downbeats and modulating tempos fuel fervent contrapuntal exchanges between Ballou and Eskelin. The atmospheric “Thickets (for Gerald Cleaver)” and abstract “Otaku” further highlight the quartet’s collective rapport, while the elegiac tone poem “Prospect Park in the Dark (for Charles Ives)” demonstrates the group’s refined improvisational prowess, keenly evoking the dedicatee’s penchant for experimentation.

A rich and eminently listenable affair, Dirigo Rataplan is a strong debut from Devin Gray – a name one will likely hear about with far more frequency, if this record is any indication.

Troy Collins - Point of Departure

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