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FEBRUARY 2011

# John McNeil

# All Wit

By Jim Macnie

**T**hey come each week, and each week they make you chuckle. Sometimes they read like this: “Wednesday is Tiki Barber’s birthday. To celebrate, the band is moving to an earlier start time of 8:30. In addition, the audience will be asked to participate in blocking and tackling drills between sets. Shoulder pads will be provided, but everyone should bring their own helmet and cleats. No wagering.”

And sometimes they read like this: “To celebrate the 120th anniversary of the official opening of the Eiffel Tower, the band will present works by French composers such as François Rosolineau, Thelonious-Claude LeMonk and Jean Coltraigne. There’s no minimum, so pay a cover, hang out for three sets and have some brie. Or some epouisses. Scratch that: epouisses smells like death, so vile that it’s actually illegal to carry it on the Paris Métro.”

They’re header paragraphs of invitations to see John McNeil’s various bands at Puppets, a Brooklyn jazz club. The trumpeter doesn’t like to do anything without giving it a bit of flair, so for several years now, his weekly gig reminders have been crazed and cool. On his 61st birthday, the text promised a red velvet cake so good, “It will make you slap your grandma.”

Ask anyone who knows McNeil, and they’ll mention the fact that he’s part wag, part wiseass and all wit. A string of quips often shoots from the bandstand when the now-62-year-old brings his freebop antics to an audience. He’s just as quick with a snarky comment as he is with trumpet flourish. The first time I saw him play, he intro’d Russ Freeman’s “Batter Up” with a gleefully sarcastic mention of how lame the Mets were. After an impromptu gig with other New York jazzers last spring, while everyone from Tony Malaby to Rob Garcia was congratulating each other for some nifty coordination during a totally abstract piece, McNeil told his mates with a smile, “You guys were lost a lot of the time, but yeah, it was cool.” They expected nothing less. Everyone knows that he’s a guy who has levity for lunch.

“When we made *East Coast Cool*,” says saxophonist Allan Chase, “we took fun photographs of ourselves dressed in suits, acting like Chet and Gerry. When it was time to decide which of the shots to use, John started sending me these PhotoShopped variations of the cover with the most hilarious fake album titles, many of them *quite* obscene—about 25

came through before he was done, and each was more outrageous than the last.”

The 2006 record Chase alludes to was a novel date, opening the door to a new slant on the 1950s West Coast sound, which is often typified by the darting interplay of the musicians he mentioned, Mr. Baker and Mr. Mulligan. McNeil conceptualized the approach, putting a modern spin on an orthodox repertory. He’s long appreciated the lithe intricacies of cool jazz, having shared bills with Baker and done time in Mulligan’s large ensembles. But he also digs the open territories of free-jazz, and has lots of skills when it comes to launching investigatory solos. *East Coast Cool*’s blend of chipper melodies and mercurial improvs was unique. Its tunes, mostly written by McNeil to bridge the particulars of each element, ingeniously straddled the two approaches.

“When he handed me my music folder, the cover title read ‘CGOA,’ recalls Chase. “I said, ‘John, what’s that mean?’ ‘Chet and Gerry on acid,’ he deadpanned.”

A similar whimsy has been driving the otherwise serious music projects McNeil has helmed for the last few years. His latest Sunnyside album, made in collaboration with tenor saxophonist Bill McHenry, is called *Chill Morn, He Climb Jenny* (yep, it sounds dirty, but it’s an anagram of their names). Like *Rediscovery*, the disc that preceded it, the program contains a scad of unique spins on actual West Coast nuggets that the pair have refined during the last few years. Freeman is a central figure here: Everything from “Band Aid” to “Happy Little Sunbeam” to “Bea’s Flat” is part of the McNeil–McHenry book. Those titles are surrounded by Wilber Harden, Jimmy Van Heusen and George Wallington ditties. It’s a tack that has earned the trumpeter wider visibility. A few years ago the New York Times proclaimed the pair’s weekly interpretation of such jewels to be “one of the best jazz events in the city.”





## John McNeil

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Composer Nicholas Urie has been arranging some of McNeil's tunes and co-leading a big band with him. "There are two types of older people," he says, "those who look forward and those who look back. John, as a rule, looks forward. One the most effective ways he does it is by putting himself in situations where he might not know entirely what's going to happen. Some people his age get confrontational when it comes to doing things in a way other than the norm. He's interested in reimagining his career and the way he relates to improvisation and jazz in general."

Rolling through the book at Manhattan's Cornelia Street Café (where *Chill Morn* was recorded live), the group, which features bassist Joe Martin and drummer Jochen Rueckert, recently found ways to balance their materials. McHenry is utterly willing to stroll down avenues where anything goes. His solos, often fascinating, have a private feel, sometimes taking a few seconds to reveal their inner logic. His exchanges with McNeil are deft; their camaraderie is such that the counterpoint demanded by the arrangements is dead-on. The two weave in and out of each other, offering a sweet symmetry. McNeil is agile as he moves around his horn. His solos can be sly or puckish. Seldom are they arcane, though. The relative simplicity of the melodies gives even the most complicated maneuvers a breezy quality.

"Those West Coast tunes are relentlessly cheery," says McNeil, "you never hear any *sturm und drang* coming from out there; it's sunshine, optimism, vitamin D. In many of these tunes there's almost a Mozartian lightness." He starts singing *Nachtmusic's* "Allegro," and segues it into Baker's "A Dandy Line." "Back in New York, everyone is in a minor key, everyone thinks they're going to die. But not out there. I wonder if [Charles] Mingus brought his own cloud with him when he moved to Mill Valley—that's a very bucolic place. 'Think it's going to rain?' 'Maybe; I see lightning right above Mingus' house.' Even the California song titles were cute: 'Shank's Pranks' and things like that. Back East we'd have titles like 'Black Death' or 'Relentless Cough.'"

McNeil knows a tad about bad weather. He's spent a good chunk of his life battling the constraints of Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, which affects the body's muscles by messing with its neural system. As a kid in Yreka, Calif., he wore braces all over his body. Taunts from bullies were the norm, and McNeil believes that some of his humor was sharpened by the guys who teased him. He took some punches, both verbal and physical, and gave back a few as well. He saw his wit as an armor of sorts. "Being handicapped in a small town doesn't get you far," he says. "It's better to be funny."

As a child he came across Louis Armstrong on TV, was swayed by the charisma and got himself a trumpet. When he was in his mid-teens, the CMT's impact subsided. Befriending a local newspaper editor who had once gigged with Red Nichols, McNeil received encouragement for his own playing. He connected with big bands and fell deeper into jazz. He tended to like the new stuff. He believes he was the only person in Yreka who bought Miles Davis' *ESP* the week it was released.

He's a brainiac, and after hitting a home run on his SATs, IBM tried to recruit him. McNeil decided to stick with jazz because there were more opportunities to connect with the opposite sex. He hit New York in the early '70s, snuggled into the Thad Jones–Mel Lewis Orchestra and played a bit with Horace Silver. He started getting his own gigs, too. Being in shape became a priority. When he first met his longtime sweetie, Lolly Bienenfeld, she lived on the 43rd floor of a Manhattan high-rise; McNeil would run up the stairs to stay in shape.

One day, out of the blue, the CMT emerged again. This time the disease had snuck its way into his face and his diaphragm. He made physical changes to keep his chops together, but it was an uphill battle. Another blow was struck when he discovered that two of his spinal vertebrae had disintegrated. Can you say massive, constant pain? A 14-hour operation helped save him from death, and afterwards the proud surgeon presented him to colleagues as part of a "here's what's possible" medical forum. Time for a victory dance, right? Wait, we're not done yet.

In the mid-'80s the trumpeter lost control of his right hand and couldn't finger the horn with any accuracy. Fellow musicians told him that should be the final straw, but with Bienenfeld's support and a sense of determination honed during his childhood days, he learned to play the trumpet with his

left hand (he's since gone back to his right). Saxophonist Noah Preminger, who has collaborated with the trumpeter, deems that accomplishment "outrageous and fantastic." McNeil explains it in simple terms. "I wanted to play. I could have quit, but there's no mystery in that move. I want to see what would happen if I tried to actually do it."

Every week McNeil heads to Boston for two days to teach at the New England Conservatory. He's been in front of classes since the mid-'80s, and according to a handful of his peers, he's one of the school's most respected educators. Chase, NEC's former head of jazz studies and the current chair of the Ear Training department at Berklee, assures that he's "a fantastic resource to the students, and a big believer in learning." McNeil's courses concentrate on jazz theory and jazz repertoire, and his vast knowledge of songs and their inner workings makes him a go-to guy. Preminger is in awe of his pal's work ethic. "He doesn't stop," says the saxophonist. "It's idea after idea after idea. He used to call me up all day and night to bounce new stuff off of me."

Chase concurs: "He's wildly fluent—that makes him popular with the students. And the way he gets them to pay attention is key. He's very motivating, and operates without bullshit. He always goes the extra mile, and writes new arrangements for each group rather than opting for the standard stuff. The reason I'm emphasizing his diligence is because he's so funny you might think that humor is what he's riding on. Nothing could be further from the truth. He can have people on the floor, but they respect him because he's a hard worker and real bandleader."

Dave Douglas knows McNeil's clout when it comes to the horn. They were once neighbors, and the younger trumpeter would often solicit his friend's opinion before releasing a new album. Their exchange of ideas is deep and ongoing. "I would go over to his house frequently to hang out and play," recalls Douglas. "I loved hearing him play and felt like he had a keen sense of what ideas I was trying to go for. His hands-on knowledge of so much music was always an inspiration."

McHenry agrees. "When he does a gig as a sideman—he once subbed for Duane Eubanks in my band—he rewrote out all my charts in his own hand, just to make it clearer for himself, and then memorized 'em by the time of the gig. And guess what, he played his fucking ass off. He always does."

At a weekly jam session in Brooklyn, McNeil stresses his skills as both curator and traffic cop. Up-and-comers populate the place, and he tries to give each a chance to blow on a tune or two. It starts with a learn-by-listening session. He and trombonist Mike Fahie bounce through a short set to get a vibe going. Then the revolving doors open. One recent evening was marked with timid trumpeters and brazen alto players. A dude who looked like an insurance agent blew a decent tenor on "I Remember You."

"Who knows 'JuJu'?" asked McNeil. Some did, some didn't, so he helped the needy with the design of Wayne Shorter's nugget, and in a few minutes everyone was off. "Deluge" surfaced later in the set.

"I occasionally have to be the bad guy," he explains. "Last week I had to tell someone that he was no longer invited to play. It happens."

But people flock to McNeil because he's the good guy, the entertaining guy. He's the subject of a forthcoming doc by filmmaker James Lester, who made a gorgeous 2007 short on Sal Mosca. Lester caught a Puppets set one night and was really taken with the trumpeter's charisma. "When I told him what I did, he said, 'Why don't you make a film about me?' Now we're doing it. I felt a passion about the Sal piece, and though we've just started, I'm getting that same feeling with John. He really draws you in."

McHenry is psyched when he learns that his pal is going to be in front of a camera. "That's way overdue," the saxophonist says. "I've always thought John would make an incredible subject. The humor endears people to him."

In fact, McHenry has recorded McNeil's on-stage patter in numerous situations, and he promises that he's going to compile several of the quips and put them on YouTube. Which anecdote is most memorable? "I'm not going to spoil it here, but get him to tell you about the time he met John Coltrane at the Vanguard ..."

DB

# Jason Marshall

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