

# EARSHOT JAZZ

A Mirror and Focus for the Jazz Community

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**Chuck Deardorf**

Photo by Daniel Sheehan



# Chuck Deardorf

By Steve Griggs

Chuck Deardorf perches on a stool at the back of the stage, the best view of the audience. This vantage point is ideal for a bass player's role as harmonic backbone and center of gravity for the groove. The club's wooden stage amplifies low notes. Where inexperienced bassists would produce unfocused booms, Deardorf's tone is even and clear over the entire neck of his German acoustic bass, built in the late 1800s. His fingers crawl over the strings like a spider. Quick solo phrases end on a brief sustained note with a touch of vibrato. His sound is refined, precise, fluid – reminiscent of ECM recordings from the late 1970s.

Deardorf wears a black mock turtle-neck, dark slacks, and comfortable loafers. Although this is "gig attire," he doesn't wear flashy clothes off the stand. His eyes sparkle with wisdom behind frameless glasses. Making eye contact, he speaks quietly, directly, with a generous dose of self-deprecating wit. His wavy dark hair sweeps back and does not cover his ears. His neatly trimmed beard turns gray at the front of his chin and the back of his jaw line.



PHOTO BY DANIEL SHEEHAN

For 30 years, Deardorf has been the first call bassist at Seattle clubs whenever traveling veteran jazz musicians need a local rhythm section. Deardorf performs regularly in bands led by pianist Jovino Santos Neto and vibraphonist Susan Pascal. In March, he headlined the Earshot Jazz Golden Ear Awards with a quintet comprising Warren Rand (alto sax), Dawn Clement (piano), Dave Peterson (guitar), and Gary Hobbs (drums) and was honored by being inducted into the Seattle Jazz Hall of Fame. Also in March, while on sabbatical from Cornish College of the Arts, Deardorf released a new re-

recording – *Transparence*. Deardorf has accompanied notable artists on more than 30 recordings as a sideman, but *Transparence* is his first CD as a band leader. This new project sums up Deardorf's musical influences, partnerships, and artistry from decades of teaching and playing jazz.

Deardorf was first exposed to music when his mother played stride piano at their Ohio home. Three of the five siblings played music, but Deardorf jokes that he was, "The only one dumb enough to make it a profession."

"I came up playing trombone through music programs in Ohio public schools – state contests, marching band, concert band. My parents encouraged me to be a musician but had reservations about me doing it for a living. They had heard horror stories about the life of musicians – they are all true – but they supported me financially through my undergraduate study at Evergreen State College. I was lucky. I know many musicians who are still in conflict with their parents over playing music."

After earning his degree, Deardorf put his trombone in the closet to answer the call of the bass. "I started teaching private lessons in music

stores. Scott Reeves hired me as an adjunct bass teacher at Western Washington University in Bellingham. My first student was the talented Portland bassist Dave Captein and I was like, 'What am I going to teach THIS guy?' Well, good private lessons are a two-way street."

"Jim Knapp started the jazz program at Cornish in 1974. Gary Peacock was teaching acoustic bass and Jim asked me to teach electric bass in 1979. Gary had stopped playing for five years and was in Seattle studying Chinese medicine or something. I got to hear Gary get his chops back. That was cool."

In 1986, Jane Peck, the Music Department chair, hired Deardorf to be the jazz program administrator. He held that position for almost fifteen years, and in 2000 when the college administration merged the classical and jazz programs, he assumed even more responsibility. "Over the past 25 years I figure I've auditioned about 1,500 applicants and advised 1,000 students."

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–Chuck Deardorf

Last September, Deardorf stepped down from administration and became a full-time teacher. Deardorf teaches bass, leads classes in sight-reading, coaches ensembles, and counsels students in music careers. "His mentorship and influence on all students is powerful," fellow faculty member Jovino Santos Neto says. But Deardorf worries about the future of his students. "Where will they play after they graduate, once they get out there and start fighting? My generation, geezers now, could work six nights a week

to pay rent. That's difficult when there are five bands sharing one night."

"That doesn't mean we don't teach jazz music. It's the information and art that needs to be passed on. Unless you are willing to go 100 percent in music, perhaps you should do something

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"Unless you are willing to go 100 percent in music, perhaps you should do something else for a living."

–Chuck Deardorf

else for a living. One student's parents asked, 'What's your placement rate after graduation?' I guarantee that 100 percent of our students have played a gig. I didn't say that, but I thought it. I'm happy to see recent graduates creating their own scene."

The bias at Cornish is toward performance over scholarly research, so all teachers play with student, faculty, professional, and community ensembles. "Cornish attracts students that are slightly off the beaten path. The

faculty has freedom to bring their own approach because each teacher is different." It is exceptional for an educational institution to recognize the spirit of mutating freshness that is crucial to jazz. Deardorf explains, "You can't codify jazz. If you do, it dies."

"I couldn't jump right into John Coltrane and Charlie Parker when I was younger because my ears weren't acclimated. I just didn't get it," Deardorf says. "I came to jazz through rhythm and blues, rock jams of Miles Davis with John McLaughlin, and fusion by

Weather Report. My early listening was Pat Metheny's *Bright Size Life* and Keith Jarrett's European band with saxophonist Jan Garbarek.

"One of the first jazz recordings I heard in college – the first tune you learn as a bass player – was 'So What'

on Miles Davis's *Four and More '64*. In the aggressive playing, I recognized that rock-and-roll attitude of not worrying about mistakes, where the rhythm section energy is crackling with precision, and breathing," he reminisces.

"After I saw Eberhard Weber play electric upright bass with Gary Burton, I bought a Fender electric bass and put on a new fretless finger board. Then I heard Jaco Pastorius's first record – that was a revelation. He was doing that thing that I was going for. I don't like to rank players in categories, but Jaco was the Charlie Parker of fretless electric bass. On the song 'Used to Be a Cha Cha,' he was a total groove-meister with those sixteenth-note bass lines. I couldn't do that as a sideman, because it was too busy and would clash with the soloist. But I can do it as a leader."

On *Transparence*, a nod to Pastorius comes on the Beatles' "Dear Prudence." Starting with a harmonic chime that sounds like the old pendulum clock in Deardorf's living room, the bass states the melody over a descending acoustic guitar figure. Deardorf's opening notes swell in volume. When the drums kick in for the groove, he opens fire with Pastorius-like machine gun bass notes. After an overdubbed bass solo, the meter switches from 4/4 to 7/4 for the drum solo and closing

melody. The time is so solid the groove does not budge.

"I like guys who can do a lot of different things – players who have a broad approach with no walls between genres or styles." Deardorf demonstrates this on *Transparence* by mixing up swinging standards, driving rock, Latin fusion, free bop, and delicate ballads. Even though each track includes melodic statements and solos by the bass, the sound keeps changing throughout the recording because no two tracks have the same instrumentation or personnel.

Each of the tracks has a surprise twist. For example, the opening tune "Collage" drops the listener into the middle of everyone simultaneously improvising over the chord changes to "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To." The melody, with quotes from several bebop tunes, only comes after the solos and is played in unison, drums and bass included. After the melody, sax and piano trade fours and the key modulates on the last section of the song form.

On "Alone Together," Deardorf lays down a steady repeated figure that allows guitarist Bruce Forman to stretch time and erase bar lines and avoid playing on the first beat of a measure. The high level of listening and interplay dove-tails the end of Deardorf's solo with the start of Forman's as they spontaneously play syncopated descending lines together.

Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Zingaro" features an urgent but gracefully arching solo by guitarist Rick Peckham. The balanced melodic and rhythmic counterpoint between solo and bass builds to a two-note peak by the guitar with just enough distortion to let out a soulful cry.

Pianist Bill Mays and Forman play duets with Deardorf on "Moon and Sand" and "Sweet Lorraine" respectively. The groove is so strong and the

communication so intimate on both of these cuts that drums are not missed.

"Creatinine" recalls the freedom of McCoy Tyner's "Passion Dance." Added to the sounds of the band are overdubs and signal processing. The group progressively drops the constraints of four-bar phrases, written harmony, and finally pulse.

Deardorf's musical collaborators have nothing but praise for his talent. Neto says, "Chuck's ability to lock in with a rhythm section in any style of music is uncanny; his ears go deep inside the groove, as he always finds the most musical way to negotiate awkward chord changes, odd time signatures, and melodic jumps." *Transparence* features this aspect of Deardorf's playing on Neto's "De Mansinho."

Guitarist Forman says, "He brings something special to every situation and he brings out the best in everyone who plays with him. Chuck is a rare talent, extremely versatile, yet still able to retain his artistic signature throughout."

Deardorf's style of playing makes complex technique and improvisation sound effortless. On days he is not playing a gig, he practices to stay in physical shape. "I have a maintenance routine of scales and arpeggios that takes 45 to 60 minutes. I transcribe saxophone solos to understand what they were thinking – the structure, concept, and rhythms. I work on the bow with the Bach cello suites. I look over music for upcoming gigs."

While on sabbatical, Deardorf plans to put energy behind the release of *Transparence*, compile materials from his teaching into an instructional book for bass players, and spend more time with his family.

That family is wife, vocalist Kelly Harland, who Deardorf met in 1983 when they worked a lounge gig together. They married in 1989 and share a

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Ensemble. More information is available at [www.artsfund.org](http://www.artsfund.org).

### **Fulbright Awarded to Seattle Composer Daniel Barry**

Seattle composer Daniel Barry's stellar work has been recognized with a Fulbright scholarship, allowing him to serve as composer-in-residence in the music department of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas near Sao Paulo in Brazil during 2011-2012. Barry says, "This honor helps validate my work over the last two decades and also serves to perpetuate new efforts. The opportunity for an in depth exchange of musical ideas with master musicians from various regions of Brazil is about as good as it gets for me musically." This spring, Barry will conduct performances of his compositions in Iceland and Norway with the Reykjavik and Vestby big bands. In July, he will travel to Manaus, Brazil, as a guest performer at the Amazonas Jazz Festival. Closer to home, Barry's music for jazz orchestra is performed every Sunday evening by the Jim Cutler Jazz Orchestra at Tula's in Belltown. Barry is also musical director for the Seattle Women's Jazz Orchestra, who play in and around Seattle.

### **ON THE HORIZON: Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra presents "Jazz of the Harlem Renaissance"**

Saturday June 18, 2011, at 7:30pm, Nordstrom Recital Hall; AND Sunday June 19, 2011, 3pm, Kirkland Performance Center  
Tickets are \$15-\$39; [www.srjo.org](http://www.srjo.org)

The Seattle Repertory Jazz Orchestra (SRJO) collaborates with the Seattle Art Museum to treat audiences to a selection of images from significant paintings by Jacob Lawrence, and his unique views of the Harlem Renaissance period (ca. 1920-1935), interspersed with the SRJO performing classic jazz pieces from the same period by jazz composers Fletcher Henderson, Jimmie Lunceford, Duke Ellington, and others.

Deardorf, from page 8

cozy home on a quiet street in north-east Seattle. Their son Will was born in 1991. Harland documented Deardorf's love and devotion to his son in her memoir *A Will of His Own: Reflections on Parenting a Child with Autism*.

Five years ago, Deardorf was diagnosed with acute nephritis: "The inside of my kidneys are slowly fossilizing," he says. Inherited from his father and grandfather, the main symptom is fatigue. He regulates his diet and blood pressure. Now that the disease has progressed to stage 4, he would need to

begin dialysis in a month or two. Bassist and long-time friend Bruce Phares set up the Facebook page Let's Find a Kidney for Chuckie D! to aid in the search for a kidney donor. Luckily, one of Deardorf's brothers was a match, so they went under the knife in late April.

It will take more than a kidney transplant to knock Deardorf out of his groove. This summer he plans to teach jazz camps at Cornish and Centrum's Jazz Port Townsend in July before returning to his full schedule in the fall.



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