

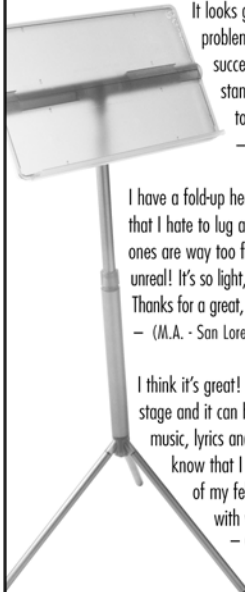
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Reed Mathis (left), Jason Smart and Brian Haas

BILLDOUTHART

Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey Grows Up

The Jacob Fred Jazz Odyssey turned 10 last year, and they've come a long way since they started playing in the bars and restaurants of Tulsa, Okla. One notable difference is their smaller size. Early recruits to their fan base will remember them as a funky seven-piece, horn-fronted outfit. But personal and musical differences eventually led to a downsizing.

"The band had two personalities," said JFJO keyboardist Brian Haas. "It had this completely drunken party personality perpetrated by the horn players, in a way."

The other personality was one that thrived on creative group improvisation. It prevailed. A turning point came in late 1999, when a Los Angeles booking agent was in Tulsa and heard a trio version of the band as well as the full ensemble. He offered to book the trio for a tour. Ever since, the smaller group has been on the road and playing 150 to 200 dates a year. Early on, they had misunderstandings with promoters who were looking for something like Groove Collective and got something more like Medeski Martin & Wood. But before long, people started learning what the new Jacob Fred was all about.

Still, the band often finds itself miscategorized. Whenever a writer labels them a "jam band" they go ballistic. Sure, they gained much of their notoriety on the jam-band circuit since they started touring widely in spring 2000, but they never felt they belonged to that scene. Their music, they say, draws its inspiration from improvisers like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler and their living role model, saxophonist George Garzone of Boston-based trio the Fringe.

"What we play is free-jazz, but it's cohesive free-jazz where we make up melodies," Haas said. Onstage, their goal is to improvise new songs that sound as if they were meticulously

rehearsed. They're a leaderless trio in which each member—Haas, bassist Reed Mathis and drummer Jason Smart—can contribute equally.

They've made big strides toward the jazz-world acceptance they've always sought. Their new recording contract with Hyena and their CD on that label, *Walking With Giants*, have gained them a foothold in jazz venues around the country. "Before the album came out, it was a struggle to get some of these acoustic rooms to let us in," Haas said. "Now we're rolling into these rooms and selling them out."

People say that Jacob Fred has gone acoustic, which is only partly true. While Haas increasingly leaves his Fender Rhodes behind in favor of acoustic piano, Mathis has actually returned to playing more electric bass and is employing a host of effects as usual. Half the time, they switch roles with Mathis playing solos or melodies—shifted up two octaves—and Haas playing bass lines on keyboard. Before, it was easy to confuse Mathis' processed bass leads with Haas' Rhodes, and Mathis chuckles when he recalls how even some reviewers have been fooled.

The past few years have seen JFJO transform from wild young 20-somethings to, well, older, more tasteful 20-somethings. "I listen to recordings of us from even two years ago, and Brian and I are just creaming the tune," Mathis said. "It's like a vomit of ideas."

Haas and Mathis interact musically like brothers, but it took Smart to take the music to the next level. Smart heard the band numerous times with a few different drummers. When he joined the group in late 2001 he introduced more space. "It was like late-period Coltrane all the time, which a small percentage of people can deal with," Smart said. "I wanted to rein it in a bit so listeners could have more opportunity to be part of it."

—John Janowiak