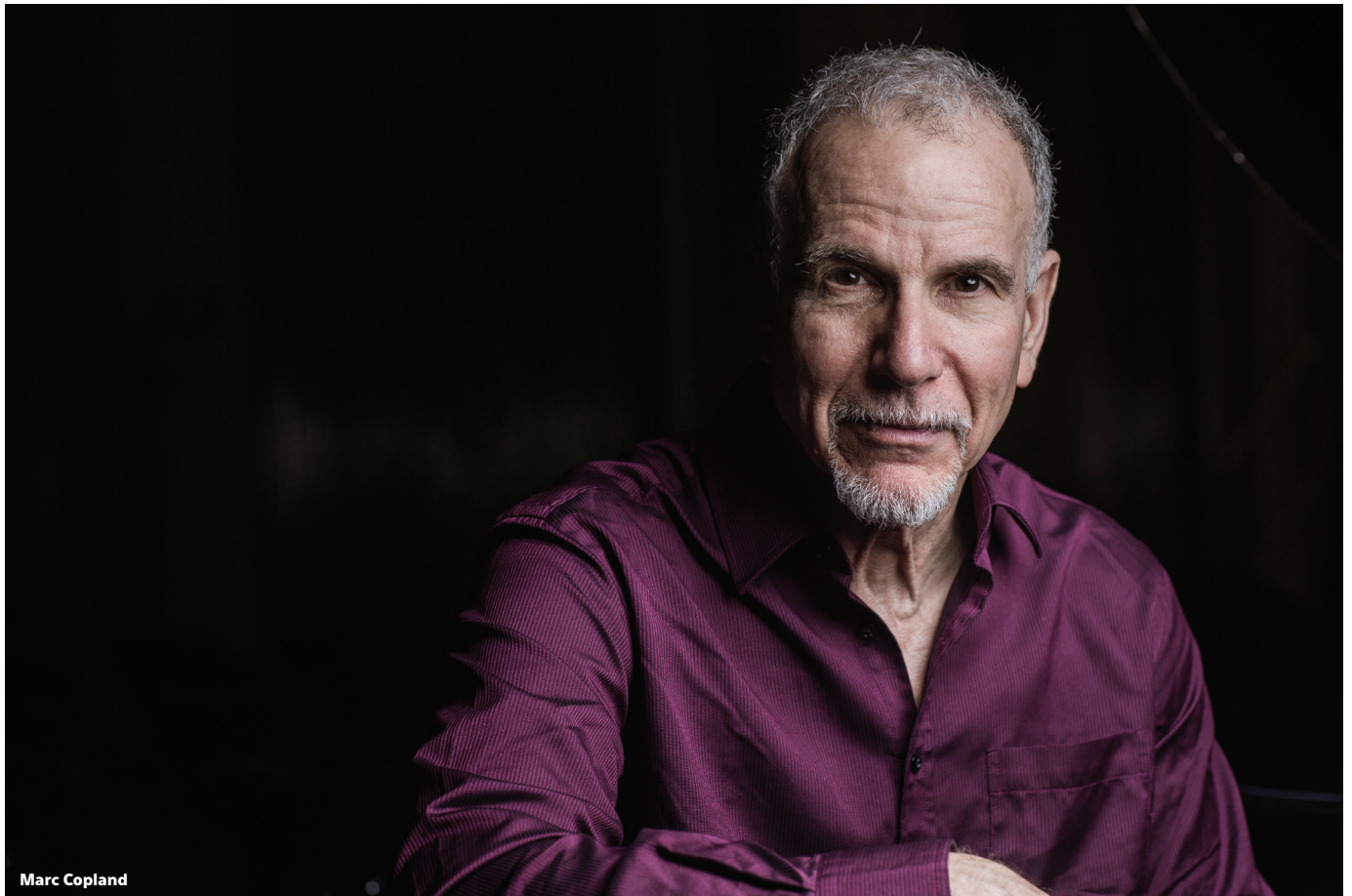


## MARC COPLAND



Marc Copland

# BEYOND THE NOTES

By Bill Milkowski / Photo by Guido Werner

In his prodigious output as a leader (more than 40 albums to date) and as a highly valued sideman (Gary Peacock Trio, John Abercrombie Quartet), Marc Copland always seeks a place in the music that takes him somewhere beyond the notes.

“For music to really fulfill its function as an art form, it has to get beyond the notes, just as painting has to get beyond the colors,” the pianist-composer maintains. “These things are all tools that enable the art form in question to move the listener and make an experience that’s deeply resonating, both in musical and extra-musical ways. All those tools are important, but at a certain point it’s about what is this art saying at another level. The musicians whom most listeners would recognize as artists like that—John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock—they all had that. And at certain points in their careers, it all coalesces and it’s very clear that they’re sending a very strong message, both with the innovative tools that their music uses and with what they’re trying to say beyond the notes.”

Over the years, Copland—who studied under the great Lennie Tristano at Columbia University—has trained himself to access that rarefied space more quickly, whether it’s in solo, duo, trio or quartet settings. “The access is pretty much there most of the time, but the test is are you get-

ting into new territory. If you’re playing a little bit differently than you did a year or two ago, then something good is happening. You’re trying to develop what you’re doing and expand the places that the music can go, which involves expanding the capabilities of the musical tools, in part.”

On Copland’s album *Zenith* (see “CD Reviews,” page 71), released on his own newly established InnerVoice Jazz label, he and his longstanding telepathic rhythm tandem of bassist Drew Gress and drummer Joey Baron explore new territory with trumpeter Ralph Alessi, for whom he has particularly high praise. “When I heard Ralph’s [2013 album] *Baida*, something clicked in my head,” Copland explains. “I felt I was listening to someone with real depth, both as a composer and as a player. And as soon as we hit together, it was very easy. He just jumped right in. He totally gets what I’m trying to do and what we’re trying to do as a rhythm section, and he brings his own perspective to it.”

“I think clarity is a really good word to describe what Ralph does,” Copland continues. “Chops, to me—and I tell this to students—are meaningless. It’s nice to have them, but if you’re not saying anything, what good are they? Clarity is good; meaning is good. Then if you can enhance that with chops, fine. But the danger is always that someone will get seduced by chops for chops’ sake. And to me, music is not about that. Music is about

going to another place.”

The key for this empathetic quartet, and every musical situation that Copland finds himself in these days, is listening.

“It helps when everybody listens first, and that certainly happens in the bands I’m spending most of my time with now, which is the *Zenith* band, Gary Peacock’s trio and John Abercrombie’s quartet. That’s a common feature among all those groups. As musicians we want to leave space. That’s a sound that’s been inside my head from the very beginning. At any recording or gig I play, I try to establish that sound and use of space, and listening is the first step with that. And if everybody isn’t doing that, it can’t happen. But if everybody’s listening and responding to each other and to the sonic environment, then with the piano one can set the musical stage so that harmony and melody and rhythm can interact among the players in a certain way. And when that happens, then it’s very easy to start to go beyond the notes.”

While Copland has previously recorded for the Pirouet, hatology, SteepleChase, Savoy, Challenge and Sketch labels, forming his own InnerVoice Jazz will allow him to go even further in his search for that place beyond the notes.

“I’ve been very fortunate in my career to work with quite a few different producers, as a leader and as a sideman, and they’ve all been great. Having the label is an opportunity to put some of what I’ve learned to good use and to let the music take another direction. It’s an issue of having another outlet. Right now I’m kind of associated with ECM because John’s band and Gary’s band are on that label, which is a fabulous label with a great producer, obviously. But again, it’s like when you play with different musicians: It enables you to sometimes take the music to a slightly new or different place. So this experience of having my own label feels to me kind of the same. It’s not to replace working with other labels and other producers; it’s to enhance and supplement.”

DB



STEVEN SUSSMAN

Copland’s new album on InnerVoice Jazz is titled *Zenith*.

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