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## **Jazz Architect**

Dan Ouellette

There's no dearth of strong players in jazz today. Choose an instrument and several distinctive virtuoso voices immediately spring to mind. However, compiling a who's who of talented up-and-coming composers is an entirely different matter. While dozens of promising young musicians are getting the opportunity to be heard in public and on disc, few are contributing to the idiom's compositional legacy.

There are exceptions. You can add to that short list of rising-star composers the name Jack Perla, the Oakland, Calif.-based pianist who won the top prize at last year's Thelonious Monk Institute and BMI Jazz Composers Competition. The award is annually presented to an aspiring composer who best demonstrates originality, creativity and excellence in jazz composition. Perla's "Roman Candles" was chosen by a panel consisting of Terence Blanchard, Pat Metheny and Michael Brecker. The tune appears on Perla's auspicious debut CD *Swimming Lessons For The Dead*, recorded on his own Speak Your Peace label ([www.speakyourpeace.com](http://www.speakyourpeace.com)) with an all-star cast of the San Francisco Bay Area's straight-ahead jazz community, including saxophonist Harvey Wainapel, guitarist Andre Bush, trumpeter Chuck MacKinnon, trombonist Jeff Cressman, bassist Derek Jones and drummer Alan Miguel Hall.

"It's great to get recognized in this way," says the 37-year-old Perla, who holds composition degrees from the Manhattan School of music and Yale. Prior to moving to the West Coast two years ago, he led the New York-based group Music Without Walls, featuring Marty Ehrlich, Mark Feldman, Eric Friedlander, Pheeroan Aklaflaff and John Goldsby, which gigged at such venues as the Knitting Factory and Merkin Hall. "It's been a long time in coming. I definitely see myself as a musical architect. You can hear that on my CD. I like larger forms, detailed arrangements and the development of dramatic impact in the music. I'm not interested in head-solo-head jazz."

Perla not only received a \$10,000 prize, but he also performed "Roman Candles" at the Smithsonian Institute in late October with trumpeter Scott Wendholdt, tenor saxophonist Seamus Blake, bassist Derek Jones and drummer Sebastian De Krom. It's a moving, straightahead piece that in spite of its title does not get pyrotechnic. "Fireworks? No, not at all. It's really about this chapel on the Piazza del Popolo in Rome where worshippers were lighting votive candles. I went into the church to get away from all the traffic noise, and I just sat in the quiet. The atmosphere there was

so meditative that the melody just came to me. Once I got back to the States, I turned it into a jazz piece."

For Perla, the art of composing involves combining the narrative elements of classical music with the rhythmic drive and improvisational flexibility of jazz. "I'm always trying to reconcile those elements when I write, to make them cooperate. The written sections and the solo spaces require such different energies. It's hard. You want to get the composed parts to swing and have the same energy of the solos. On the other hand, you also want to keep the improvisation as interesting as what's been written down. For me as a composer and a bandleader, finding that balance is compelling."

As a composer, Perla finds inspiration from several artists, including Tom Harrell and Woody Shaw. He also singles out Charles Mingus, Wayne Shorter and Paris-based Vietnamese guitarist Nguyen Lee. "I love Mingus' Epitaph. It's so huge. There's so much happening. It's amazing how the big band wheels off into different directions. As for Shorter, his material is so strong you can't distinguish between what's great writing and great blowing. It's all mixed together. He transcends the written notes so that the story he's telling is always progressing. Nguyen Lee is definitely coming from another place. His compositional thinking is so incredibly free, and his voice is totally fresh. He can play an eight-minute piece and nothing repeats."

A superb pianist, Perla cites Bill Evans ("I transcribed a lot of his music when I was younger and learned a lot from him about harmony"), Keith Jarrett and Oscar Peterson as important role models. Lately, he's been listening to Mulgrew Miller and Stephen Scott. "There are so many great pianists today, it's a little daunting," Perla admits. "But I'm feeling really confident as a jazz composer. That's what motivates me. It's like what Gerry Mulligan used to say: Take the form and push it a little further."

In addition to playing dates on both coasts in support of *Swimming Lessons For The Dead*, Perla is working on new compositions, including a commissioned piece for the Philip Glass-produced new music concert series *Music at the Anthology Film Archives* in New York City. His piece will be unveiled on the April 15 program.

Perla also teaches at the UC-Berkeley's Young Musicians Program, which provides financially disadvantaged youth with music lessons and performance opportunities. "That's been very important to me," he says. "We're getting hit over the head in this market-driven economy to push education in competitive skills such as computer programming and scientific technology. That's fine, but not all kids are going to want to splice genes, especially those who have a creative bug. I see that need for music education in the nine-year-olds I work with when they say, 'Before we start the lesson today, can I play you this tune I wrote?'"

Coming away a winner from the Monk Institute's annual competition has enhanced the careers of past victors. Case in point: Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter recorded composer Michiel Borstlap's 1996 award-winning piece "Memory Of Enchantment" on their duo CD, *1 + 1*. Is "Roman Candles" slated for similar success? Perla's mum on the subject. "There has been interest. I can't go on the record about anything right now, but let's just say I'm very excited by the prospects."