

Jonathan Lorentz

borderlands

Borderlands is the name of the Shawn Snow painting that graces the cover of this album. Snow's art inspired the four-part theme and variations that are the album's framework. The title also describes the artistic realm in which Jonathan Lorentz finds himself. This is "borderlands" as unsafe, unfamiliar territory, where the only things more vague than the demarcations are the rules. It also represents literal geography: Lorentz is a veteran of the Manhattan scene (with a Ph.D. in jazz studies from NYU), but now based in northeast Upstate New York. "Since leaving New York City, I've felt like I have been on the borderlands of the jazz scene," says Lorentz. "I tend to find gigs where there aren't gigs. In fact, the album could also have easily been titled 'Jazz in the Borderlands.'"

He had for several years been working regularly in the local music scene, playing standards in the bars—doing fine but searching hard for a challenge. "It was particularly hard, nearly impossible, to get original tunes out there," he says. "It would bring a bunch of stress onto the bandstand with me. So I thought, why bother?"

That changed when the Jonathan Lorentz Trio came together.

Bassist John Menegon has already been working with Lorentz for two years, after recommendations from other musicians on the scene. Menegon, who cut his teeth in Montreal and New York City before moving Upstate, has also been a member of bands led by David "Fathead" Newman and Dewey Redman. "John is solid as a rock," Lorentz exclaims. "He can play any tempo, any key, and with any meter combination. "This was the first link in the chain.

The other link—the decisive one—was drummer David Calarco, nicknamed "Scorch" for his ferocity. Lorentz was actually hipped to Calarco when playing with one of the latter's drum students. "He said, 'You should definitely hook up with Calarco—he's got his own thing going on,'" Lorentz recalls. "And it's absolutely true. He's got a very intense playing style and outlook on life. His unrelenting energy has made me step up my game, and get my act together on the bandstand. He's a champion of the type of jazz music that doesn't work in the background of some tiny boutique, but rather commands attention and respect." The meeting gave Lorentz and his music a similarly urgent mission.

It's a lifelong one, however. Borderlands isn't anywhere near Mission Accomplished; if anything, it's the first step along the way. But it's a major such step, a declaration of Lorentz's intent to pursue his art to the farthest reaches and the utmost ambitions...and, as the title of this recording makes clear, even to the most foreign worlds.

The haunting title track, which opens the album, only reinforces that sense of quest. Calarco's freely constructed cymbal work suggests howling winds blowing through the untamed wilderness, while the wordless voice of Suzanne Kantorski (one of two vocalists appearing on the disc) joins with Lorentz's sax to evoke a wandering, if disembodied spirit. Menegon's double stops heighten the dark mystery of the proceedings.

This, though, is only the foundation of "**Borderlands**." In three further sections, each member of the trio performs an improvisation on this theme. Calarco takes "**Part II**," an interlude with a suspenseful but surprisingly melodic turn with his mallets. "**Part III**" finds Menegon practicing his careful style in a very brief solo—a lick, really—with all the obscurity and gravitas of an encoded spy message. "**Part IV**" belongs to Lorentz. Longer than the original tune, it's a true melodic variation, given to flights of (thoughtful) fancy but always returning to the touchstone of the composition's seven-note main theme.

This, to paraphrase Ornette Coleman, is the territory; the rest is the adventure. **"Sounds Like"** picks up the dark mood of **"Borderlands,"** but with a propulsive and instantly memorable tune that seems doggedly on the hunt. If the tightly wound twists and turns of Lorentz's solo are any indication, the prey is something both aggressive and elusive. The rhythm, by the way, is an experiment in mixed meter; it's a four-bar head with three bars in 5/4 capped by one in 6/4.

"Hurmmm..." is a head-scratcher, or more accurately a chin-scratcher. Lorentz took its name from the graphic novel *The Watchmen*. "There's a character, Rorschach, that oftentimes scratches his chin and just goes 'Hurmmm,'" he says. "I found that this tune caused a bit of that kind of confusion in the listener." Still, it's hard to get too baffled by the tune; while it abruptly changes both its course and its range several times, the steady swing and cheeky phrasing keep a certain playfulness unmistakably on display.

It will come as no surprise that David Calarco's **"Trane Fare"** was based on "Giant Steps," John Coltrane's legendary obstacle course of jazz harmony. Substitutions aside, Calarco's real change-up comes in the guise of freeform solo breakdowns for Lorentz, Menegon, and himself, respectively; they allow each player to assert his own inventions, but also dare him to re-enter the tune's momentum and complex chord changes without missing a beat.

Opening with a clever and virtuosic bass intro, **"Drive Down"** is a slinky tune that's all but made for a black-and-white 1950s film noir soundtrack. Suzanne Kantorski contributes another wordless vocal, but here gives off a sinister vibe against Calarco and Menegon's strutting in and out of the shadows in 12/8 time. Lorentz's sax ambles along with their groove, his tone alternately hovering over and ducking into it—he's scoping out the scene, musically speaking. Observe, too, that the band never reprises the head: Like many great noir stories, the loose ends are left hanging.

"Stir" is an understatement: This is breakneck swing, the keep-hands-and-feet-inside-the-car variety. (There are regular pauses in the melody where you can catch your breath.) The supercharge in Lorentz's solo all by itself demonstrates why this trio format works so well for him; the piano creates a kind of harmonic floor that Lorentz's lightning bolts would shoot right through. And don't miss Calarco's solo, which, amazingly, improvises on the theme!

"He's the Budz," was written for Lorentz's toddler son, Julius, nicknamed Budz. Convention with such tributes is to write a lullaby; instead, Lorentz celebrates playfulness, though impishness might be a better word what with the mischief running through the tune. (It's the mood that Menegon captures in his solo, too.) He takes the song even further in this direction at home: "To this day," he says, "I'll make up these silly lyrics for this tune and sing them to him, based on whatever he's doing at the time."

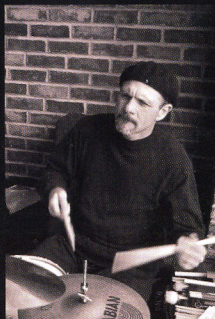
There's a strangeness, an eeriness, afoot on **"The Sign."** Teri Roiger (Menegon's wife and the album's other vocalist) sings about a feeling of loss—not of losing something, but of being lost, and perhaps not really understanding why. Indeed, every element of the tune projects that enigma, from the uncertainty of Lorentz's lyrics and Roiger's filtered vocal to the way Lorentz and Menegon traipse cautiously around Calarco's rock-ish backbeat. Even Lorentz's solo finds him seemingly blowing question marks out his horn.



John Menegon
Bass



Jonathan Lorentz
Tenor Saxophone



David Calarco
Drums



Suzanne Kantorski
Voice (tracks 1, 5 and 13)



Teri Roiger
Voice (tracks 9 and 15)

Though the title of **"You Snooze You Lose Blues"** pays homage to Lorentz's onetime teacher, Frank Foster, and his love of humorous titles, the composition is something else. It's a funky blues (in the sense of James Brown, not Horace Silver) with a very unusual metric pattern. Lorentz conceived it in a mixed-meter that alternates between 4/4 and 3/4 measures over the standard 12-bar blues structure. Unless you're reading the sheet music, though, the sound is a 6/bar blues in 7/4 time. A challenging piece, no doubt—the demeanor, though, is all friendliness and welcome.

Speaking of James Brown, think of **"Drums Play"** as analogous to Brown's "Funky Drummer." It's got the same energy and basic pulse, and roughly the same idea: a rambunctious, rhythmic theme and sax improv whose main purpose is to show off the drummer's abilities. Calarco, you'll notice, does something determinedly different in each of his many short breaks, and his own solo (with Lorentz taking breaks this time) is nothing short of dazzling.

John Menegon's showpiece, **"Motion Detector"** (which the bassist wrote), is a tribute to the great Paul Motian and has a neat subtlety. It moves nimbly and carefully, in the manner of a person trying to avoid being caught by a motion detector. As for the theme (played by Lorentz and Kantorski together), it's sinuous, even sexy, and it'll hook you from the start. Still, it's really about letting Menegon flex some muscle, and his vamp is as compelling as the melody. Then comes his solo: protean, spidery and redefining "sexy" altogether.

"Addiction" pushes past sexy and straight into lusty. It's got an attitude like a session of dirty talk—from the lowdown come-hither of Lorentz's sax, to the simmering double-track of Menegon's bass in arco and pizzicato, to Calarco's undulating waltz. Teri Roiger sings, and here the suggestive quality needs no explanation: just her tone of voice (with a glimmer of Billie Holiday) sounds dirty. Lyrics (written by Lorentz) about "an opulent kiss and copulative bliss" remove all doubt; you'll want to light the candles for this one.

What can't be described in words, though, is the chemistry between the players. While Lorentz is unquestionably the trio's leader, the group is only as strong as the bonds that join them, something you can hear and feel through every moment of the bold venture through Borderlands. Here's hoping it's merely the first leg of a long journey together.

-Michael J. West

- 1 Borderlands 2:17
- 2 Sounds Like 4:58
- 3 Hurmmm... 4:38
- 4 Trane Fare 7:09
- 5 Drive Down 5:29
- 6 Borderlands, Part II :24
- 7 Stir 4:03
- 8 He's the Budz 4:16
- 9 The Sign 5:04
- 10 Borderlands, Part III :26
- 11 You Snooze You Lose Blues 1:50
- 12 Drums Play 4:18
- 13 Motion Detector 5:38
- 14 Borderlands, Part IV 2:57
- 15 Addiction 5:14

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All compositions and lyrics by Jonathan Lorentz, except track 4 by David Calarco and track 13 by John Menegon

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Voice for tracks 1, 5 and 13 recorded on June 14, 2010 by Gary Henry at Northern Track Studio, Wilmington, VT

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Painting, Photography and Art Design by Shawn Snow, Troy, NY

Photography of Teri Roiger by Sarah James

Photography of Suzanne Kantorski by Anthony Dawton

Cover Painting: "Borderlands" 2007 by Shawn Snow

Produced by Jonathan Lorentz



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