



# Music scene by Rick Massimo: Odd rhythms, unusual sounds dominate Katahdin's Edge

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A musical education can easily lead to calcified, academic music that impresses a few people and is tolerated by the rest. Katahdin's Edge isn't like that.

The group is led by pianist Willie Myette, who graduated from the Berklee College of Music, and bassist John Funkhouser teaches there. But the trio's debut self-titled CD (they're rounded out by drummer Mike Connors) manages to groove while it's taking head trips.

"When you're at Berklee," Myette says, "it's like, 'Do these scales over these chords, and this is what you have to sound like.' It took me a long time to get beyond that, and start to find my own voice and not worry about 'This note goes with this chord. . . .'"

"Both of these guys are not stuck in that whole technical thing," Myette says.

"However, we can talk in technical terms."

The rhythms are the first thing that hit the listener. Virtually none of the album is in straightforward 4/4 time. Unusual meters, borrowed from Middle Eastern, Balkan and Israeli music, dominate the CD.

"It's pulling in all of these odd meters and all of these odd sounds," Myette says.

"Traditional jazz is much more in the box, and we're trying to get out of the box. . . ."

"It also gives you kind of a new palette of choices. Playing in 4/4 . . . playing standards, it's been done over and over and over again. And it's been done better than we could do it. So there's no need to do that."

That's the kind of talk, backed up by academic resumes, that often spells musical trouble. But, Myette says, "you don't want to just do it for the sake of playing in seven or five. You want to do it so that it sounds nice." The key, he says, is keeping the harmonies simple. "People are able to relate to it a lot easier."

MYETTE, FUNKHOUSER and Connors run the Middle Eastern rhythmic (and occasionally harmonic) sensibility through the jazz-trio format. Myette's quick-fingered piano is the key.

Keith Jarrett is his "all-time favorite" piano player, he says. "Keith Jarrett has an incredible lyrical sense to him. His lines are just beautiful, and the melodies he creates are gorgeous. So I listen to him and end up thinking about how I can elongate my lines and my improvisations as well, while keeping it cohesive."

But his other influences are compositional, including Dave Holland, who doesn't have a piano player in his band.

Myette says that the music he writes for Katahdin's Edge is influenced by the other groups he plays in.

From the funk outfit Herbal Nation, he takes the directness and a melodic sense.

The non-Western rhythms come from his work with local Jewish-music stalwart Fishel Bresler, most obviously on the Middle Eastern stomp of "Zargonic Effect" and in "Enigma," which features a wavering, atonal solo from Funkhouser.

And his work with children, incorporated under the title JazzKids, helps him keep it simple. "Each group gave me something new to work with."

The songs are mostly linear -- some parts repeat, but not in the usual verse-chorus-verse structure of pop music, or the head-solo-head structure of straight-ahead jazz.

"You never know where it's going to move to, especially when we're playing live," Myette says. "We might do something that's completely different from the album."

KATAHDIN'S EDGE HAS gotten a lot of radio play nationwide, and they've made two trips to the Northwest, where Myette was doing JazzKids workshops and caught the ear of a local club owner. They're set to return this month, as well as in September. Myette, who has also played locally with Tish Adams, Otis Read and Big Nazo, started JazzKids "as a way for me to show jazz and improvisation to my piano students when I got out of Berklee," Myette says. "I went for film music, but I knew I wasn't going to move to Hollywood."

When he started teaching, he found a dearth of jazz songs appropriate for young beginners, so he wrote his own. Eventually, Mel Bay published a book of his compositions. Alfred Publishing is publishing his books.

"They teach you jazz music," Myette says, "but more importantly . . . how to improvise."

JazzKids has taken Myette all across the country -- to California, the Northwest, Kansas and more. He's headed for El Paso, Texas, next week. He usually does workshops for groups of private piano teachers, and sometimes for students as well.

Katahdin, by the way, is the tallest mountain in Maine, says Myette, an avid hiker. "I had to find a name that was better than three guys behind instruments."

Katahdin's Edge is at the Narrows Center for the Arts, 16 Anawan St., Fall River, tomorrow night at 8. Tickets are \$12; call (508) 324-1926.