

“On the Road”

BY CHRIS MCNULTY

ever found yourself in this situation – leading a band you’ve never worked with before, with no time for a decent rehearsal, you want to do some cool material, you have no musical accompanist? Well, if so, read on...

I would specifically like to talk about dealing with sophisticated arrangements on the bandstand in an either unrehearsed or under-rehearsed situation and being ready to make last-minute adjustments on the spot. I am assuming that when using a pick-up band you will be as well prepared as possible – getting copies of your charts to musicians in advance and perhaps even including MP3s. Sometimes this method works well; other times you may find that going to great lengths to accommodate will lead to unrealistic expectations. On occasion, musicians just don’t get to the music in advance (or they get it and freak out, but don’t tell you!). Of course, you may be fortunate and find yourself amongst some really amazing musicians – they exist all over, even in the smallest and most remote towns. However, you may be unable to accurately evaluate the performers and the situation you will be working with until you’re at the sound check or in the rehearsal situation. Either way you will need to be prepared for dealing with the unexpected.

Guitarist Paul Bollenback and myself work in a number of diverse and interesting situations. However, on any number of occasions I may find myself working with an entire pick-up band whom I may not have had the opportunity of playing with before. Having Paul in on this article



Chris McNulty

has a two-fold purpose. First, we can talk about what it might be like to be the musicians working in that pick-up situation; second, Paul can discuss how he deals with those musicians when he is accompanying me.

For the purpose of this article we have chosen an arrangement of Paul’s – “I Should Care” as it appears on my latest recording, *Whispers the Heart*. We will use this arrangement to address certain issues when dealing with a pick-up band performing a new and unfamiliar arrangement for the first time. As implied earlier,

lessons learned

you should consider from the outset that you may only have a limited time to go over your music – perhaps just a sound check and a quick run through of the more complex arrangements. Your astuteness at evaluating how the musicians are dealing with an unfamiliar piece of music will be a real advantage here. It should also be noted that whether performing with a pick-up band or with Paul along, I will always take a wide selection of material with me, from simple lead sheets with perhaps a vamp intro or written ending all the way to full-blown arrangements of familiar tunes, as well as my original music. All for the simple reason that it's better to be well prepared as opposed to being under prepared.

I will always err on the side of caution when selecting an opening tune for a performance of this kind. I want some-

thing that gets into a pocket quickly, doesn't stretch me too much physically, but allows me to get my ear and groove in strongly; I want to get the audience's attention immediately. I picked "I Should Care" as opposed to one of my originals, because as a tune, it should be more than familiar to most jazz musicians, so the probability of any train wrecks happening inside the body of the head would be most unlikely. However, this arrangement now has an added eight-bar figure in 6/8 feel, which serves as a conduit to connect the rubato section to the head of the tune in time. For the purpose of this article, "I Should Care" is going to be my opener, so we have the added issue of wanting this piece to work very strongly and without any hiccups. The last thing you need happening in a major performance is for the opening tune to collapse before you even get to the head.

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Chris McNulty: As you can see, any reasonably capable musician – and not necessarily a chordal player – can play the rubato section. When necessary, there have been times when I have even sung rubato sections a cappella. Please note that when traveling with Paul, the eight-bar Afro-Cuban section (where the time begins) is often opened up so I can solo freely over the top and do my thing without the constraints of time limitations. It's an established rapport and confidence that allows us to alter any given arrangement, in any manner. We will then alert the other musicians that this figure is now an open vamp until my or Paul's cue.



Paul Bollenback

Back to the “rehearsal” (without Paul): Before we even attempt to practice this, I might have to sing the figure to the musicians, so this means being prepared. What am I going to sing? I am going to tap the rhythm and sing the bass figure melody. Then I am going to explain that it's a 6/8 Afro-Cuban feel. If they don't know or can't play a 6/8 Afro-Cuban feel, even simply, I am already thinking it's not going to work, which is why I will also bring a less complicated version of the same tune. If this figure presents a problem, I may still want to include a vamp out of the rubato on that G9 sus4 chord, but with a straight-eight Latin type feel or a swing feel going into that medium swing tempo of the head the second time.

I want to be able to sing material that I can do my best work on, so I'd rather compromise the arrangements than the material any day. What's important to remember is that the bandleader (and that means you), really needs to understand what part each instrument should be playing, and in most cases be able to either play the part on the piano or sing it to the musicians, in order to make it clear what is expected.

Dealing with the Figure Coming Out of the Rubato Section

It's never that easy to be singing rubato and counting out the time cue for the

next section, vocally – I think it also takes something special away from the emotiveness of the moment. So I am going to have to either click the time with my fingers, foot-stamp the time, or tap my leg to indicate the time, as I sing the final notes in the rubato section. Somebody has to give a very clear indication of the downbeat to hit this figure and, in this instance, it's going to be me (you). It's relatively easy to give a very strong one-bar count/click with an even stronger and longer downbeat click and hand movement to delineate the downbeat of the start of the figure. Don't be afraid to take charge – If you've done your homework, this will work. Knowledge is power and will help to eliminate any mystery and confusion.

The Figure Coming into the Head Proper from the Eight Bars of Afro-Cuban

To get into the medium swing feel, there's an accented phrase that is an ensemble hit, and it happens 1/2 way through the last two-bar phrase of the eight-bar figure. If that doesn't get nailed there will be a problem. This is where the musicians need to be paying a lot of attention, but also me, because if I just take off soloing in the hope that they all have it, I'm asking for trouble. I need to be ready to delineate the ensemble hit of the 1/4 note and the dotted 1/2 note. If we all make it past this point, the rest is a piece of cake, because it's going to be swinging all the way... hopefully. We come up against that same figure again at the end on the head out, though at this point it's in tempo and becomes a lot less difficult to negotiate out of the swing feel into 6/8

If you haven't been honing your skills as a conductor, bandleader, and chart reader, don't expect that those skills will just appear out of nowhere. I have learned from experience that this skill is the hardest one of all to practice on and off the bandstand. If you want to be able to do some special stuff on the road and you want your arrangements to work, you are going to have to know a lot more than

lessons learned

how to conduct a band. Split second decision-making comes into play. In this instance, you will not only have to evaluate the musicians' comfort level, as far as their ability to nail the figure and make those ensemble hits, you may also be asked to help them do it!

Paul Bollenback: In a rubato section with a singer, I like to see the melody and lyric on the chart, especially on an unfamiliar tune. That way I can really follow and support the singer by "aiming" to place my chords on the downbeats where the lyric has emphasis ("I..." at the beginning of letter B, "care..." in the second bar of B, et cetera). Where there is a rest at the beginning of the bar for the lyric (as in bar three of "I Should Care"), I play a chord on that beat to "set up" the change for the singer. Many times I will leave chords out in order to make the accompaniment flow more evenly, simply

DISCOGRAPHY

- **Solo Recordings:** *Whispers the Heart, I Remember You, Dance Delizioso* (Elefant Dreams), *A Time for Love* (Amosaya Records), *Big Apple Voices* (Venus Records), *Waltz for Debbie* (Discover Records)
- **As a Side Musician:** *Brightness of Being* – Paul Bollenback (Elefant Dreams); *Southern Exposure* – Tom Lellis; *A Century of Steps* – Bruce Cale; *First Chance* – Sam McNally
- **Web site:** www.elefantdreams.com



using the lyric as my guide. This allows a singer freedom to push or lay back on the phrases without us catching each other off guard. A very expressive and creative singer like Chris will particularly keep you on your toes, as no two renditions will be exactly alike.

I also like to watch very closely for visual cues as to tempo and feel, and try to help communicate these to the rest of the band. In the transition between rubato and 6/8 on "I Should Care" there will be a count from Chris, so I wait for that count and try to get the feel from her body language, then come in strong, but with a sensitivity (hopefully!) to the vibe, mood, and volume of the piece. I will also look up at both the bandleader and the other musicians as an ensemble part is coming up to make sure everyone is paying attention – for example, the ensemble hit at the end of the 6/8 section going into 4/4. This has got to be very clear and clean, as it sets up the tone and feel for the next section. If the whole band has eye contact at these important moments, there is a better likelihood of things going smoothly.

In terms of voicings, I like to keep them clear, without a lot of substitution. The name of the game when working with a great singer is: support, support, support. As an example, in bar five of "I Should Care," the chord is a Bmin7b5, with F natural as the melody. Even though it might seem hip to play a Bmin11 voicing with the E on top, that E will not support the F that is the sung melody note, and can easily cause even the best singer to go flat, or to have to adjust their line to fit my voicing – a really good way to ruin the gig! So respect the melody with your voicings, and lis-

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ten to what the singer does. When I'm performing this tune with Chris and she chooses to sing something other than the exact melody note, it's still my job to find the right voicing that supports her. In other words, if the singer is the hand, then you are the glove, so try to fit in and adapt.

Chris McNulty: Thanks, Paul. Of course we have an established rapport, so we can read each other on the switch of a dime. That rarely happens on the road, because everyone is so busy trying to deal with their parts – heads are down when they should be up.

In Closing

Sometimes decisions will have to be made that will effect your arrangements and/or music program. If you happen to be on your own, you will need to be prepared to take control. You are also required to have thorough knowledge of your written music that goes way beyond merely describing the geography of a chart to the piano player. The musical choices and decision making required in these kinds of situations will most probably be more complex than what's required at, say, a casual jam session or local gig, especially when you have highly arranged music involving rhythmic figures, meter changes, tempo changes or specific chord voicings. Either way there's quite a deal of overlap, so these tools should hopefully be useful in many various settings.

Chris McNulty is a jazz vocalist, composer, lyricist, and educator who performs regularly all over the world. McNulty has collaborated and performed with some of the finest musicians on the jazz scene today including: Gary Bartz, Paul Bollenback, Mulgrew Miller, Terri-Lyne Carrington, Tom Lellis, Billy Hart, Dave Pietro and Joe Locke, among others. She is also a member of Bollenback's Brightness of Being Ensemble. Chris has six recordings out under her name, the most recent being Whispers the Heart (Elefant Dreams), released this September 2006. A more in-depth article on the subject covered in this article and other related topics will be posted on Chris' Web site shortly: www.chrismcnulty.com

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