Steve Swell: Sound Miracles

By Gordon Marshall

Trombonist Steve Swell captures the energy of a big band in the close quarters of a small group. An alumnus of Buddy Rich's and Lionel Hampton's bands on the one hand, and collaborator with Anthony Braxton on the other, he seems bound to have fixed upon such a hybrid configuration at some point. But how an artist could exhibit such stylistic range and adaptability to begin with, and on top of that reconcile them in a career that has already spanned three decades, is a question requiring some digging, representing as it does an achievement unique in any jazz era.

All About Jazz: Many people can't imagine a cooler, neater instrument than the trombone--with the slide, the range, the sheer size of it. What drew you to it when you were young?

Steve Swell: In public school, in New Jersey, there was a music teacher who would give demonstrations on the instruments, in the third and fourth grade, and on the basis of that you kind of picked it. The teacher played the trombone and he actually played the slide right down into my face as I remember, and thought that was kind of cool and kind of fun--I'm sitting in the front row.

I didn't really fall in love with it then, but when it came time for me to pick an instrument, I had a "kid" injury to my arm, my wrist. I had cut myself on some glass in a construction site; I fell and slipped on some glass and had some stitches. And really my first choice was trumpet but I couldn't move my fingers at the time. I could only play trombone, and that's really how I ended up with it.

I showed some early proficiency on it. I was kind of a shy kid, and the teacher was very good about giving me some attention with it, some instruction, and I enjoyed doing it to a certain degree. I didn't fall in love with it until I heard Roswell Rudd play the trombone on the radio--I was about 15.

AAJ: So that's when you started listening to jazz?

SS: Actually, a little before that. My father was into big bands...When The Beatles came on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1964, my father was--a lot of parents were afraid of The Beatles and the long hair--and my father didn't want me to see The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show, so he took me in his room and played some Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller records for me, which is kind of weird--to keep me away from the rock and roll that was just starting to happen.

AAJ: Was it a blessing in disguise, diverting you into something that would be more...

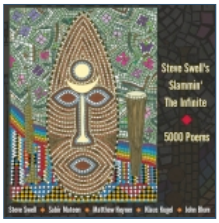
SS: That's what he was trying to do and it piqued my interest a little bit, but of course I still was a kid in New Jersey, and I listened to the rock and roll that was coming up in the '60s and '70s, so it didn't stop me anyway.

I had some good teachers in school, some friends. The teachers turned us on to Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie-- mostly bebop from that point on. And then I heard free music around 15, and that's when I really fell in love with the music.

AAJ: One of your first big gigs was with Buddy Rich. Was your father still around at that time to be pleased that you were working with one of the heroes of the big band era?

SS: He was, he was. I had played with Lionel Hampton the year before that. He's still alive, and he understands what I'm doing, but at that point I think he was still trying to discourage me from playing music.

AAJ: Buddy Rich is a larger-than-life figure, reputed to be a driving, ruthless leader. Is that accurate?



SS: His reputation is exactly as is known--He was pretty tough. And I think that was because he was already two or three generations older than most of the musicians he was working with--certainly at the time I was working with him in the early '80s--and he was a taskmaster, no question about it. He was very rough on his musicians, but it was only really because he wanted the best out of them more than anything.

AAJ: That discipline seems to have been instilled in you, that gives your music a driving quality; this no-holds barred ability to keep going and going in your solos and ensemble work, and one can't help thinking the Buddy Rich experience might have germinated that.

SS: I agree. I don't think it's just him, I think it's a combination of being out there with a lot of older musicians like that, who had a lot of drive. Lionel Hampton had the same kind of drive, in a different kind of way: he wasn't as verbally demonstrative, but we would always do two, two-and-a-half hour sets a night. And people like Ken McIntyre also had a very unforgiving standard that you really had to reach. I thing the culmination of all those experiences had an effect on me.

AAJ: McIntyre was a devoted educator, though, and one would imagine his demands were more rooted in a desire to get the best out of his students than to be successful commercially.

SS: That goes to Buddy Rich and Lionel Hampton as well. It wasn't about being successful in terms of being a successful musician career-wise. With all these people, it was about the music and being the best you could possibly be.

AAJ: So you were working in this big band context. Was that a desire of yours, to work within the tradition, or was that simply where the work was at the time?

SS: When I was growing up--it's not this way anymore--it was really, not so much a rule as an unwritten rule that you spend time in those big bands, in Woody Herman's big band, or Buddy Rich's...

AAJ: So it was a rite of passage?

SS: Exactly. You were supposed to pay your dues in those bands before you went on to have a bandleader or solo career. That's the ethic I grew up with and I aspired to that. I tried to get in Woody Herman's band but I didn't quite get there.

AAJ: Well, Buddy Rich and Lionel Hampton are as big as names as Woody Herman, aren't they?

SS: Oh yeah, of course, but when you're in your 20s and early 30s those guys were around and you just wanted to be next to them, and hear them and play with them if you could.

AAJ: Was McIntyre the first break with the swing bands?

SS: I was in Lionel Hampton's band and then I was in Buddy Rich's, and then I went to Jaki Byard's big band, and through that I started to meet some people and I broke with more--I had already been into free music but it was at that time that I started to work with Jemeel Moondoc and Walter Thompson and eventually ended up with Tim Berne. So McIntyre was a pivotal time for me.

AAJ: The Byard/McIntyre axis.

SS: Absolutely.

AAJ: You've worked with Cecil Taylor, too, Bill Dixon. What was the path from big band, by way of the small units where you were collaborator, to starting out your own bands where you were leader? Was that a smooth transition?

SS: I don't thing there's anything smooth or gradual in jazz. Things just kind of happen, and if you're in New York, you have exposure to a lot of different people and opinions, and ideas of how to do things and when to do things and where to do things, and the one ethos I had was to be around those earlier big bands, and when I got around to Jaki Byard and Ken McIntyre and Jemeel Moondoc, those were a little bit smaller, about 10, 12 pieces--from there it was just a natural progression to wanting to make my own music, I was just drawn to it, and inspired by all the

different approaches to how to improvise and how to put your own bands together, and eventually I just had to do my own thing. And I still feel that push and that desire to do that.

AAJ: When was this that you first started out as a leader?

SS: I would say in the late '80s and early '90s I had forays into different bands. I had a band with Joe Fonda, with Lou Grassi, and I had a little band I was doing with Will Connell, and from there-- those were things I was trying to do; I wasn't sure what I was doing with them, I was just writing music and playing out in front of people. They weren't recorded or anything, I was just out there doing some gigs with it and see where it took me, without thinking how to advance it, just doing it to get the experience of doing it, and try to have a good time doing it of course, as well.

AAJ: Who else?

SS: In the mid '90s, Tim Berne--I met Herb Robertson on Walter Thompson's band and he kindly brought me into the Tim Berne world, and I met Joey Baron on that band and I played in Joey Baron's band, and did some touring with Hank Roberts' band who was also involved in that circle, the Knitting Factory circle. That was about 1990.

AAJ: So there was some overlap between being a sideman and leading.

SS: Being a sideman is a thing I've always done and I still enjoy doing it and I also get experience from it and ideas, and I do grow from it also. And I incorporate some of what I learn as a sideman into my own music, and I like being a sideman because it takes some of the pressure off of everything you have to do as a bandleader. So in some senses, I won't say it's a vacation, but it's time off from some of the pressures of doing your own thing. But then you have to get back to your own thing, too. So there's a push and pull on both sides of that coin.

AAJ: Being a sideman, you would get to focus on your own solos and developing your own solo technique.

SS: Yeah, you do that in your own band, too. You just get a little more time to breathe maybe before you go back to try to put your own work together.

AAJ: So about your solos: how do you feel you relate to trombone history, modern trombone history, like Jimmy Knepper or Grachan Moncur III, or Roswell Rudd.

SS: It's all very, very important to me. My whole approach to improvising is coming from a very deep-rooted jazz sense and a very definite trombone history, going back to Kid Ory, and J.C. Higgenbothen--and I loved listening to Jack Teagarden when I was a kid. And, of course, J.J. Johnson. I very much love the whole tradition of the trombone in jazz. I'm rooted in that tradition, but also I have a sense of--a like what's going on in the rest of the world, the Connie Bauers and the Walter Wierboses, who are European. They don't really have that same tradition, so I'm also open to that and try to incorporate all that into my improvising--very open to all of it.

AAJ: Could you pick two or three trombonists who were maybe more influential than the others, and discuss why that is the case?

SS: Of course I have to start with Roswell Rudd. He's the first-- I'd listened to a lot of trombone players before I'd heard Roswell, but he's the first one where I really said, "There's an approach for me." There was a way to find my own voice, the way he's approaching the trombone. And it was just so totally off the charts in terms of breaking with everything you were supposed to do--it just opened up my imagination more than anything, in terms of how to play the trombone.

AAJ: I can see a sort of democratic ethos at work in Rudd, being a member of the New York Art Quartet, and maybe a parallel one with you in your quartets and quintets. Is that the case?

SS: I think he brought back a sense of collective playing. Free improvisation was a lot of collective playing, but his position when he was playing trombone like he was with Archie Shepp was--there was a very Dixieland element to it. I don't mean style-wise, but in terms of two horns playing together, where you didn't have that in swing or bebop for a good 20 or 30 years. It had become the soloist only. And Roswell brought back, to me, a sense of collective playing in the modern style. And I love bouncing my sound off of other horns, and even when I'm soloing there's still a sense of interacting with the other instruments, the drums and the bass.

Others? I would say George Lewis, and the same with Grachan [Moncur] give me a little more--I won't say permission--but a little more allowance and leeway to use the bebop sense in free improvising. So in that sense they contributed to my vocabulary, in terms of opening up another door. Because I was rooted in bebop and swing, and those guys--Grachan has an incredible sense of swing--and George Lewis, especially with his playing with Anthony Braxton, brought this incredible, almost bebop technique-oriented vocabulary that went right out into the free thing, and that was inspirational to me.

And then I would say some of the European players--Walter Wierbos, Connie Bauer, Johannes Bauer, Alan Tomlinson--those guys opened up a whole other area, where you didn't necessarily need a relatable rhythmic sense, a relatable harmonic sense; they were completely way out there. And I use all of those types of vocabulary in my playing.

AAJ: What you learned from Rudd, about trad jazz--where you're not simply just doing your own thing, it's almost a form of role playing, where you're doing something that is proper in the context of a whole, in your solos.

SS: I think that's key to making a valid musical statement, something that's relatable and something that's profound. It gives it some other kind of life.

AAJ: Tell me more about your earlier ensembles.

SS: I had tried a variety of things and a variety of approaches. I had a band with two horns and drums. I was very much trying to find my own voice, so I would eliminate piano and bass. Being someone who does incorporate collective playing, I tend to get pulled to what a bassist or pianist who may be a strong personality was doing. So I was trying to forcefully develop my own voice by eliminating those players, so I wouldn't be drawn so much into other players' sound world.

The reason I started Slammin' the Infinite and Ullmann/Swell was really I wanted a long-term band, and both those bands have been going about seven years now, and I thought it was important to have something going over the long term. But that's difficult as well. Everything you do in this music has got some kind of particular challenge to it, that some are unexpected.

AAJ: Slammin' and Ullmann/Swell are both unqualified successes. Have you been as happy with everything you've done?

SS: There's been peaks and valleys along the way but as you mature you tend to get steadier and more confident in what you're doing. But these two bands, they were very good ideas in terms of the types of players and the particular players I was using--but of course there's always the unexpected, and the unexpected means you're going to get something extra with that that's going to be surprising and great and wonderful to discover, but you have to keep with it to keep that discovery developing.

Steve Swell (right) with Ned Rothenberg (left)

I really learned along the way you have to start with the musicians you want to work with. You can't turn people into the musicians you want. You have to start with the musicians who can give you everything you want, and everything that will surprise you also. So it's a juggling act there.

AAJ: Going back to your statement about your early ensembles where you tried to eliminate piano and bass: you went from the maximal context of the big bands earlier, to doing this minimalizing and stripping the ensembles to bare bones. One of the great things about you as a musician is your dynamics, and the way you can combine or dis-combine with the other musicians and create a very powerful solo on the one hand, and then take a step back and be a backup for another musician.

SS: I'm discovering that's a unique ability. You assume in New York everybody can do that, but there's really only a handful of people who really can.

AAJ: Your process--looking retrospectively at your career, you are trying out new things and constantly evolving--evolution is a key concept with you. And looking back and re-conceiving, reconnoitering; and above all your stamina, the way you keep pumping out strong works year after year as a leader...There's a central paradox in your work in that it's very high, unbridled energy, and on the other hand it's about musicians listening to each other and restricting themselves in the interest of a larger whole. In terms of a musician's ethical outlooks, you appear to present an ethic of restraining individual impulse for the sake of greater group coherence.

SS: Absolutely. I rarely overstep my own bounds in terms of overplaying. I know when I've soloed enough, and sometimes I'll try to push myself

to get to another place, but I tend not to overdo it, to overplay. I think I'll do just enough of what is right, and not just keep going for the sake of just playing. And when someone isn't sharing the soundspace, it is the one thing that will upset me a little bit.

AAJ: You may never overplay, but you do test the endurance of yourself and your listeners in a very positive sense, in a way that is challenging, even ethically challenging. Your music is very uplifting, exuberant, and it makes a demand on the listener to share in that exuberance...Like you're leading a hike or a run, and everyone's got to keep up with you.

SS: What happens when people listen to music, I have the feeling a lot of times people listen to music and they expect a certain thing. Even today, free music, free jazz has become a part of the vocabulary. It's kind of sad in a way that we don't take the time to sit back and eliminate all those other things that are in our heads and give ourselves 100 percent to the music, and to listen. So certain things will sound a certain way to people, and they don't recognize that maybe this is something a little bit newer, a little bit different, it's pushing an envelope in a certain way, and while people say they want that, or want to be associated with that, when they're actually confronted with it they turn away from it. And that's a little bit sad.

AAJ: One of your challenges is to bring your audience into the music actively. There's more to music than pleasure--people have forgotten the avant-garde ethic that the music should be challenging and be uncomfortable and take them out of their comfort zone, and you have just the right balance of exuberance and pulling the listener out of their comfort zone, to the point where they learn something from their music.

Which brings us to your work as an educator. You teach in a number of contexts: in shelters, schools, to special needs children?

SS: Yeah. In a sense I've become the kind of teacher that--I'm covering a lot of different things. I had to do it, but it's been a very interesting way to find a variety of approaches to teaching, and finding a variety of ways to bring music to kids, and have kids be able to express themselves. It just happened that I had to do it this way, in survival way, but it's been very fulfilling to me because I've had to cover a lot of age groups and social groups. I feel I've been able to bring something different to people in the educational area that they may not have gotten in a traditional sense...It's something that's part of my life now.

If I'm leading a band now, something from my teaching creeps in, either a way to express something musically, or a way to elicit something out of my band--it travels both ways.

AAJ: Talk about your grant to teach special needs children.

SS: In 2008 an organization called the Jubilation Foundation--two teachers recommended me for that, and I was one of the lucky ones to get it.

AAJ: What was it like? Were you teaching them to play instruments? To sing?

SS: Well, this where being able to do a variety of things comes into play. A lot of times--many times I had some very severely handicapped kids, kids who (require) wheelchairs, in a hospital their entire lives; some don't live past the age of 20. And lot of these kids cannot really communicate except by what you see in their eyes, and a lot of it is just really stimulation for them. I'll come in with my trombone, and some of them are severely crippled in their hands--and they'll hold the end of the trombone when I play it, and I'll have them sort of push the slide if they can; and it's a physical and an oral stimulation for them.

So it's not necessarily that I'm teaching them anything, but I'm giving them the experience of hearing or playing. I'll have them bang on a drum. These kids can't speak. You'll play one note on a tambourine, and have them repeat that--two beats and see if they can understand that you are hitting the thing twice now, see if they can do it. It's amazing how music can communicate with these kids. You get very attached to them.

AAJ: It's an immensely creative act, teaching in such a context. In a way that might even dwarf anything that one might be able to do in one's own career as an artist, helping people in such need.

SS: You hit the nail right on the head there. I mean it humbles you. Most of us walk around, we don't thing about it; most of us can feed ourselves, we don't think about that; we wash ourselves, we do all these things everyday that we just consider normal, and then--I've been to whole schools where everyone's in a wheelchair. But that puts everything in perspective for you, and that's a good thing.

Selected Discography

Ullmann/Swell 4, *News? No News* (Jazzwerkstatt, 2010)
Steve Swell's Slammin' The Infinite, *5000 Poems* (Not Two, 2009)
Steve Swell, *Planet Dream* (Clean Feed, 2009)
Steve Swell, *Magical Listening Hour Live at The South St. Seaport* (Cadence Jazz, 2009)
Steve Swell, *Rivers of Sound Ensemble* (Not Two, 2007)
Steve Swell's Fire Into Music, *Swimming in a Galaxy of Goodwill and Sorrow* (Rogue Art, 2006)
Steve Swell's Slammin' The Infinite, *Live at The Vision Festival* (Not Two, 2006)
Steve Swell's Nation of We, *Live at the Bowery Poetry Club* (Ayler, 2006)
Steve Swell, *Double Diploid* (CIMP, 2006)
Steve Swell's Slammin' The Infinite, *Remember Now* (Not Two, 2005)
Steve Swell/Dave Taylor Quintet, *Not Just...* (CIMP, 2005)
Ullmann/Swell 4, *Desert Songs and Other Landscapes* (CIMP, 2004)
Fire Into Music, *Live LP* (Ballroom Marfa, 2004)
Steve Swell, *Slammin' The Infinite* (Not Two, 2003)
Blue Collar, *__Is An Apparition* (Rossbin, 2003)
Blue Collar, *Lovely Hazel* (Public Eyesore, 2003)
Steve Swell, *Suite for Players, Listeners and Other Dreamers* (CIMP, 2003)
Steve Swell/Tom Abbs/Geoff Mann, *New York BrassWood Trio* (CIMP, 2003)
Steve Swell/Perry Robinson Duo, *Invisible Cities* (Drimala, 2002)
Steve Swell, *Poets Of The Now* (CIMP, 2002)

The Transcendentalists, *Real Time Messengers* (CIMP, 2002)
Unified Theory of Sound, *This Now* (Cadence Jazz Records, 2001)

Photo Credits
Pages 1, 2: Frank Rubolino
Pages 3, 4: Scott Friedlander
Page 5: Michael Galinsky, Courtesy of Steve Swell

Click the BACK button to return to the previous page.