

## Steve Swell Improvisational Life Lessons

It is not unusual for a jazz musician to supplement an income with teaching gigs. Trombonist Steve Swell has been doing just that, but his teaching ventures out of the ordinary. He deals with special aid kids or teenagers with police records.

"It is somewhat like being an improviser," Swell said. "You have to be constantly on your toes, be strong in what you know and be sensitive to the kids' needs, just like you would be within a band, striving to make a situation work."

Swell is working for LEAP (Learning through an Expanded Arts Program), visiting the New York Public Schools several times a week. Despite the chaotic nature of the classes, the experience has been gratifying.

"Being single and consumed by the various aspects of a musician's life, this is a wonderful way to think about people other than myself," Swell said. "It made me more aware of the real world and how I—and my music—relate to it."

Swell's social and political consciousness has ramifications in his musical life. Tired of clannishness, he is attempting to bridge various jazz factions through his big band, Nation of We.

"I didn't play in small jazz bands until I was

in college," Swell said. "I grew up playing jazz through big band programs. Later, I performed in Buddy Rich, Lionel Hampton, Alan Silva and William Parker's bands. Big bands have always been part of me."

Nation of We's fourth concert has been documented on *Live At The Bowery Poetry Club*, which consists of the suite "Declaration Of Interdependence," whose parts are built around various musicians' configurations improvising over vamps played by different sections of the ensemble. The recording is available as a download from Ayler Records (ayler.com).

Although composing has been a constant component of Swell's musical life, it's only recently that he began leading his own bands.

"[As a leader], you are responsible for anything that needs to be taken care of," Swell said. "You are building relationships with anyone in this business, the same way you build relationships with the musicians you work with."

Last year saw the release of Slammin' the Infinite's *Remember Now* (NotTwo), a quartet date with saxophonist Sabir Mateen, bassist Matthew Heyner and drummer Klaus Kugel.



ERIC WERSTEIN

This spring, Rogue Art should release Fire Into Music's debut, *Swimming In A Galaxy Of Goodwill And Sorrow*, which is probably the trombonist's most accessible project. Over the team of bassist Parker and drummer Hamid Drake, Swell and alto saxophonist Jemeel Moondoc harmoniously play off each other.

"Counterpoint is part of being a good improviser," Swell said. "You either react to other players or find the space to throw something in. It's a natural element of improvised music."

—Alain Drouot