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Look What the Wind Blew In

Hot-shit young trumpeter Maurice Brown, who's been tearing it up in New Orleans for the past four years, comes home to Chicago.

By Peter Margasak

By their very nature, jazz jam sessions are all about surprise, and the post-Jazz Fest show at the Velvet Lounge on September 4 was an especially good one. Sharing the front line with club owner and tenor saxophonist Fred Anderson was trumpeter Maurice Brown, a regular presence at the club in the late 90s but a rare sight in recent years. Brown normally would have been in New Orleans preparing for his weekly gig at Snug Harbor, the most prestigious jazz club in the city, but Hurricane Katrina changed his plans. For now, one of the most celebrated and fastest-rising jazz players to come out of Chicago in the past decade is back home.

Brown, 24, says he'd already been thinking about leaving New Orleans, where he's lived for the last four years. "I'd been feeling a pull for a while, because I was getting a little too comfortable there," he says. "That's what you work to get—that balance. But once I got it I felt like I needed to move on. I was just asking myself if I should move back to Chicago or go to New York. I decided to stay and not do anything, and then, boom!"

On Saturday, August 27, Brown played a gig at the legendary club Tipitina's with his funky hip-hop-inflected project Soul'd U Out. By the early hours of August 28, the day before Katrina hit, he was riding with a friend to Memphis, taking only a handful of possessions ("my horn, a laptop, and a couple of outfits"). By Tuesday, when it was clear he'd be away from New Orleans for longer than he'd expected, he headed to his parents' home in south-suburban Markham, where his career began.

Brown started playing trumpet in his school band when he was 10, but his devotion to jazz began at 15, when he attended a workshop conducted by Wynton Marsalis at a south-side church. "Everybody lined up and played one chorus of blues, and when I played mine he said, 'Keep going, keep going,'" Brown says. "I ended up playing four choruses, and then he pulled me to the side and he told me to never stop playing, that I could be greater than him." Inspired, he spent his spare time practicing and devouring his parents' extensive record collection.

Two years later he began sitting in at jam sessions at clubs like the New Apartment Lounge, the Velvet Lounge, and the now defunct Alexander's Steak House. He was unusually open-minded for such a young player, and he was hungry to play in all kinds of settings. "My first impression was that he had nerve, that he wasn't afraid," Anderson says. "He just seemed like a natural, and he just jumped right in."

Doors began opening: Brown performed with the National Grammy Band, and he played in the Jazz Institute of Chicago's Bebop Brass shows led by pianist Ken Chaney. Pianist Ramsey Lewis tapped him to play at one of his gigs at the Symphony Center.

Brown expanded his network of relationships by regularly visiting Jazz Showcase and getting to know owner Joe Segal. ("I was a pain in Joe's ass," Brown says.) He'd track down musicians playing the club like Tom Harrell, George Coleman, and Roy Hargrove, offer to take them to

lunch, play in their hotel rooms, ask to get on the guest list—and then get called to sit in. After graduating from Hillcrest High School he entered Northern Illinois University's jazz studies program, but he was soon struggling to balance academic work with regular gigs in the city. "It was killing me," Brown says. "I remember getting back [to De Kalb] at six in the morning when I had an eight o'clock class."

His time at NIU was cut short in late 1999, when acclaimed trumpeter Clark Terry, on Marsalis's recommendation, invited Brown to join him on a ten-day jazz cruise aboard the *QE2*. There Brown met and played with musicians like Nicholas Payton, Lou Donaldson, and Lonnie Smith; when the cruise ended Terry took Brown along for a two-week European tour. Brown transferred to Columbia College in part to avoid long commutes to his local gigs—he had a weekly engagement with fellow trumpeter Corey Wilkes at the South Loop cafe Some Like It Black—but he was now picking up an increasing amount of road work. Ironically, some of his travels involved teaching: Brown conducted workshops in Paris with the great expat Chicago saxophonist Johnny Griffin, where some students weren't much younger than he was. "The thought of it was weird," Brown says. "But once we got into the discussions it just clicked."

In 2001, on a friend's advice, he decided to switch to Southern University in Baton Rouge to study with clarinetist Alvin Batiste. Brown got a scholarship, and he figured that

moving to a different city would help him concentrate on his studies. He worked hard with Batiste, but after a year he was itching to perform more regularly. He considered going back to Chicago or giving New York a shot, but decided to try New Orleans first. "I had gigs there, but I never broke into the scene because I always had to go back to Southern," he says.

Within six months he'd landed his weekly slot at Snug Harbor, forming an excellent band with some of the best young talent in the city. Brown had played on records with Fred Anderson, Ernest Dawkins's New Horizons Ensemble, Roy Hargrove, Curtis Fuller, and others. But he didn't commit his own music to CD until last year, forming his own label, Brown Records, to release *Hip to Bop*, a dazzling display of his mastery of most mainstream jazz idioms, spiced with healthy doses of funk and soul.

"I don't know what a lot of those musicians are going to do," he says of Katrina's impact. "That's where they work, and it's their whole life." Brown's friends and bandmates survived the hurricane, and he's been able to keep working—last weekend he played in Hungary with the New Horizons Ensemble. But New Orleans's Tremé neighborhood, where Brown lives, suffered heavy flooding; Brown figures his home studio and nearly all of his belongings are destroyed. To help his fellow Katrina survivors, Brown is co-organizing a series of benefit concerts for the New Orleans Musician's Clinic (www.woz.org/clinic), starting September 24 in New York with Wynton and Branford Marsalis, McCoy Tyner, and more; shows in Chicago and LA are still in the planning stages.

Brown's been apartment hunting in Chicago, and for the immediate future he'll split his time between here and New York. "I want to stay here," he says. "But I need that support to do it—I need the clubs to want me to play." He's remarkably upbeat for somebody who's lost his home, but he says he misses pieces of his music he left behind, particularly some completed Soul'd U Out recordings on a hard drive. "When I look back, the things I'm thinking about are that hard drive, the trumpet

I won in a Miles Davis competition, pictures," he says. "That's what I'm thinking about, not the leather couches and the new radio."

Though there is his 1989 Cadillac Brougham, which he bought in Wisconsin before moving to Louisiana. "I loved my Cadillac. I parked it in a garage—and now it's underwater."

Bla Time

On September 17 five staffers from Bla, a club in Oslo, Norway, will take over the Empty Bottle as part of a unique cultural exchange program that began two weeks ago, when Bottle staffers visited Bla. The Norwegian rock band JR Ewing headlines, but the just-announced support act, a duo of pianist Havard Wiik (a member of Ken Vandermark's Free Fall trio) and saxophonist Hakon Kornstad, is what I'm most excited about. Their brilliantly titled new album, *Eight Tunes We Like* (Moserobie), showcases their more lyric side, but these guys take jazz in all sorts of surprising directions. The show is free. ☐

Bob Mehr is on vacation.



Maurice Brown

JIM NEWBERRY

The Treatment

A day-by-day guide to our Critic's Choices and other previews
friday16

BELLINI At a 2002 show in Athens, Georgia, Bellini drummer Damon Che abruptly left the stage in the middle of the band's set; later that night he loaded his kit in the band's rented van and drove home to Pittsburgh alone. Former Girls Against Boys drummer Alexis Fleisig filled in on short notice, and, even better, he's stuck around: the quartet has improved immeasurably on its new album, *Small Stones* (Temporary Residence Limited). Singer Giovanna Cacciola—who, along with her husband, Bellini guitarist Agostino Tilotta, used to play in Uzeda—uses her smoky voice to fill in the jagged cracks created by Fleisig's mathy rhythms and Matthew Taylor's lurching bass lines, creating a sound that's both sultry and dangerous. Tilotta's guitar playing is loud and slithery—it recalls Duane Denison's sharp arpeggios in the Jesus Lizard, but it's caked with mud and grit. Mono headlines and Headlights open. ►► 10 PM, Subterranean, 2011 W. North, 773-278-6600 or 800-594-8499, \$10.

—Peter Margasak



Freakwater

CC FREAKWATER Through the years singers Cathy Irwin and Janet Bean, along with longtime bassist Dave Gay, have added some instrumental variety to their records by bringing in a single player like Jon Spiegel, Brian Dunn, Bob Egan, or Max Johnston. But on their last album, *End Time* (1999), they brought in a string section and full band, and for their first record in six years, the new *Thinking of You* (Thrill Jockey), they got some wide-ranging help from key members of Califone. Even so, the music is unmistakably Freakwater: the songs are defined by the way Irwin's earthy, unpolished cry and Bean's delicate holler alternately clash and braid together. Their lyrics are mostly nery portraits of doomed romance—they nail the way lovers suffer pain and misery in relationships and take pleasure in dispensing abuse. But "Buckets of Oil" is a seething indictment of the Bush administration's deceptions in Iraq, and "Cathy Ann" is a poignant elegy for Woody Guthrie's daughter Cathy Ann, who died in a fire at the age of four. The Califone folks do an expert job at fleshing out the moods of the songs, bringing a Stonies swagger to "Hi Ho Silver" and an old-timey wheeze to "Cricket vs. Ant." For this show the core trio will be joined by Spiegel (pedal steel), Jim Becker (fiddle, keyboards, guitar, vocals), and Joe Adamik (piano, horns). This show is part of the Hideout Block Party, which starts at 7 PM today; see page 62 for the full schedule. ►► 8:30 PM, Hideout, 1354 W. Wabansia, 773-227-4433, \$10. ☐ —Peter Margasak



James McMurtry

CC JAMES McMURTRY Like his father, author Larry, singer-songwriter James McMurtry brings a high-art sensibility to his portraits of common folk: the more prosaic the scene or downtrodden the characters, the more continued on page 6