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AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

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By E.E. Bradman

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“We just want to bring that Native sound back.”



Indigenous Individualist

Trumpeter DELBERT ANDERSON takes inspiration from Navajo culture

When Delbert Anderson formed a trio with bassist Mike McCluhan and drummer Nicholas Lucero in 2013, the group immediately grappled with its musical direction. Having found no fruit in a brief pursuit of standards, the trumpeter turned instead toward a concept built around cultural identity. “I was doing some research in a library in Aztec, New Mexico, and I found a tape of Navajo spinning songs,” Anderson relates. “I asked my grandparents about them and they explained that they were basically social songs that taught manners and how to treat people, things along those lines.”

Intrigued and inspired, the Delbert Anderson Trio (DAT) would go on to use the melodies of those age-old pieces as

a springboard for creation. Bracing lines bridging Indigenous elements, jazz language, and funk would inform the music on that outfit’s debut, 2014’s *Manitou*; and the addition of hip-hop vocalist Chris-

topher Mike-Bidtah (a.k.a. Def-i), who entered the mix a year later (and added another “D” to the band name), amplified a punchier slant on D’DAT’s eponymous set in 2018. Those two projects, which kicked off a continuing journey, deepened a connection to a heritage both rooted in Anderson’s upbringing and moving beyond its scope.

Though Anderson was born within the Navajo Nation in Shiprock, New Mexico, his family moved away from the reservation—and certain traditions—when

he was only a few months old. Growing up in nearby Farmington, he had a life-changing encounter watching a jazz combo that inspired him to first pick up the trumpet in fourth grade. As a teenager, he branched out into jazz ensemble work, and he received a scholarship to study music performance and education at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales. After his time at ENMU, Anderson returned to Farmington in 2010, eventually connecting with McCluhan and Lucero, and found his way back to an ancestral history that had largely escaped him during his youth.

Since the release of *D’DAT*, in the periods bookending the COVID-19 calamity and during the pandemic’s quieting quarantine, Anderson has developed a slew of spin-off projects that have quickly gained notice and rightly marked him as a community-minded Indigenous individualist. They include a forthcoming concept album, *Born in an Odd Time*, produced by Grammy winner John Lindemann and featuring South Africa-raised percussionist Dan Chiorboli and Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera; the Franklin Piland-arranged *D’DAT Suite*, dressing three Anderson originals in symphonic attire; *Spirit Coalescent*, a multidisciplinary work blending music, painting, dance, poetry, and photography; and *Naat’aanii*, a stage musical concerned with both modern Western mindsets and Native American mores.

Add to that a steady demand for performances with his trio, increased interest in the quartet (with its current vocalist, James “Just Jamez” Pakootas), educational residencies, teaching commitments at the university level, and propagation of the music he values most through work with the San Juan Jazz Society (which he founded), and it becomes abundantly clear why he’s drawn heavy praise and recognition from near and far. In the past three years alone, Anderson, his wide-ranging activities, and the trio have garnered awards from the Western Arts Alliance, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and Chamber Music America. And all of it, essentially, can be traced back to one single influence: “Those spinning songs really shaped our careers. It’s pretty cool and pretty crazy to think and realize that all of this was based off of that concept, and now it’s just been in every single project we have. We just want to bring that Native sound back, keep bringing that Indigenous side out.”

—DAN BILAWSKY

NEW MUSIC

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SEPTEMBER

Chick Corea Akoustic Band LIVE (Concord Jazz): Recorded in 2018, this two-disc set reunites the late keyboard giant with bassist John Patitucci and drummer Dave Weckl in an acoustic trio format for the first time in more than two decades.