Practical, versatile and uncompromisingly dedicated to their art, Taylor Ho Bynum, Mary Halvorson, Jessica Pavone and Tomas Fujiwara typify the new generation of New York downtown jazz via their group

The Thirteenth Assembly

By **Howard Mandel**. Photography by **Nicholas Haggard**

Sign of four

The Thirteenth Assembly photographed in Brooklyn, January 2010. Clockwise from top left: Taylor Ho Bynum, Mary Halvorson, Tomas Fujiwara, Jessica Pavone

They are musical friends, which brings with it very practical benefits. "We started this group essentially as a touring collective," cornettist Taylor Ho Bynum says of The Thirteenth Assembly, whose name derives from the rather prosaic fact that the names of its individual members all contain 13 letters: Bynum, plus drummer Tomas Fujiwara, guitarist Mary Halvorson and violist Jessica Pavone. "Mary and Jessica have a duo, and Tomas and I have a duo, and I'd been doing a trio with Tomas and Mary," he continues. "Touring, in the US especially, is such a shoestring operation we thought it would only make sense for us to do it together, as a small enough group to fit in one car.

"Once we decided we'd tour together, it seemed like a natural thing to do a quartet since we all were playing together in other contexts. All of us bring in compositions and represent a little bit of each of our personalities to contribute not just our singular resources but also the aesthetic resources of our separate sub-ensembles. Though we're very close personally, musically we exist in many different scenes. The Thirteenth Assembly gives us an opportunity to see how each of us can push the others into a direction we wouldn't take on our own."

And how has that worked out? Quite well, by the evidence of last year's *(un)sentimental* CD and the *Thirteenth Assembly* DVD in the *Free Jazz From The Sanctuary* series, as well as the approximately two dozen other albums Bynum (age 34), Fujiwara (32), Halvorson (29) and Pavone (33) have released over the past five years. As soloists and in duets, trios, quartets, a sextet, a tentet, individually, all together and in diverse intramural matchups, they bring contrasting but complementary histories of artistic heritage, influence and preference, as ingredients to stir into a very 21st century mix. They are completely informed and utterly uninhibited by almost everything that's gone before. In creating their sound, they are heroes for our time, but they don't consider what they do unusual. It's just the matter-of-fact life of musicians now.

In fact, The Thirteenth Assembly's members have found themselves at the core of a fresh young cohort of New York based instrumentalists. The community is Manhattan/Brooklyn-centric, but extends to include an international coterie of cross-genre, composing-and-improvising specialists who treat getting gigs and documenting their work as a game. They stand as an avant garde generation abjuring ideology other than 'music is good', resistant if not impervious to financial pressures, and not overly concerned, yet, about the commercial marginality to which they seem to have been consigned. They might be proud to be identified as the next wave of jazz, if everyone wasn't so nervous about attitudes adhering to the 'J' word.

This crew don't hang around waiting for big contracts; they're self-motivated entrepreneurs, eager freelancers looking for the next agreeable venue or upstart indie label. The Thirteenth Assembly members are genuinely modest, not claiming to epitomise anyone but themselves. Yet being that way they're also prototypical: unassuming but self-confident, smart and well-educated, professionally skilled and talented, sometimes superficially snarky, but deep down idealistic.

Not that their careers began in cutting edge collaborations or bookings at prestigious festivals abroad. How this Assembly assembled is as instructive as it is mundane.

Bynum and Fujiwara met when they were both in high school in Boston; Bynum organised a Miles Davis tribute, and ever since they've stayed in touch. Fujiwara had taken up drums at age seven and advanced to study with the dean of jazz drumming, Alan Dawson; throughout the years he's gained finesse plus power. Bynum started playing trumpet when he was ten and switched to cornet in his early twenties "just to try something different". Their album *True Events* (on 482 Music; *Stepwise*, the follow-up, is due soon on NotTwo Records) is reminiscent of *Mu Parts 1 & 2* by Don Cherry and Ed Blackwell, in terms of its interpersonal gestures, oblique lyricism, familiar call and bravado response. "We've been playing together 17 years, and we're only 19!" Fujiwara jives. "Do the math!"

As a cornet player, Bynum is particularly enamoured of hollers and smears, muted, squelched, squeezed, stretched and vocalised tones and phrases. He cites Rex Stewart "making beautiful solos in the Ellington orchestra out of half-valves and farting sounds", cornettists Bobby Bradford and Olu Dara, and sound-focused trumpeters such as Bill Dixon and Lester Bowie. On *True Events* Fujiwara plays timbre at least as much as time; he gets more chance to propel grooves and kick up a storm in Positive Catastrophe, the uproarious little big band Bynum co-leads with percussionist Abraham Gomez-Delgado. The drummer also has his own quintet The Hook Up (in which Halvorson plays guitar), performs with saxophonist Matana Roberts, is in the Steve Lacy tribute group Ideal Bread, the brass and percussion bhangra outfit Red Baraat… He sees no contradiction in the variety: "Saying you're a jazz musician is becoming less and less cool, but I think a jazz musician in the best sense is someone who is open to do *whatever*. Rock 'n' roll comes out of jazz, does it not? So I can beat the hell out of a backbeat and I'm still a jazz musician. I'm happy to be a jazz musician, to try to be a part of that tradition, because to me that tradition is not just 4/4 swing, it's a mindset that includes openness to developing and learning. That's what I'm trying to do."

Taylor Ho Bynum is the most gregarious personality of the Assembly, its frontman though not its leader, as the others acknowledge and want to be sure is understood. Interviewed in the New York news bureau of National Public Radio and later at the Housing Works bookstore-cafe in SoHo, Fujiwara, Halvorson and Pavone tease Bynum about his constitutional assertiveness and he goofs on himself about it, too, but they all know he'll talk the most even when he resolves not to.

Married and living in New Haven – *"45 minutes from Broadway"* by train, as the old George S Cohan song has it – he's a multi-band leader and now vice-president of New York's ongoing Festival of New Trumpet, as well as a hot and thoughtful player, steeped in history and forward-thinking, who first came to many listeners' attention by recording a CD of duets with Anthony Braxton, his Wesleyan University professor, when he was 26. He is a partner in Firehouse 12 Records, which released his sextet album *The Middle Picture* (featuring the Assembly team plus tenor saxophonist Matt Bauder and guitarist Evan O'Reilly), his SpiderMonkey Strings CD *Madeleine Dreams* (on which Pavone plays, but none of the others) and *Dragon's Head*, Halvorson's acclaimed trio debut with bassist John Hébert and drummer Ches Smith (*Saturn Sings*, by Halvorson's trio and quintet, comes out in August).

Halvorson and Bynum share a story. As she says, "We did all of the same things but never knew each other. We grew up in the same town [Brookline, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb] and went to the same high school; because he's five years older than me, we didn't overlap. But we went to the same summer music camp, two of the same colleges [Wesleyan and the New School in Manhattan], lived in the same house in Brooklyn at different times and didn't know each other through any of this."

"Of course my legend lingered in Brooklyn," Bynum says, mock vainly. "I'd heard of him," Halvorson concedes, "but we first came face to face in Anthony Braxton's band in 2004."

Like Bynum, Halvorson studied with Braxton; unlike him, she's quiet, contained and exudes exactitude. This may not be readily apparent in her guitar playing, because the only way to characterise her style is as continuously shapeshifting and unpredictable. *Dragon's Head* comprises ten compositions, from which she summons plenty of mystery, tricky patterns, compelling lines and explosive energy. "I like things clean and consistent," she declares. Musically, her articulation is neat, but consistency seems trumped by immediacy, curiosity and risk-taking.

"I'm not a huge jazz guitar fan," she continues. "I'm a huge jazz fan, but my role models when I was starting out were not guitar players. I liked Wes Montgomery and Grant Green, but horn players, drummers and bass players shaped my guitar sound, which I think made it easier for me to come up with something unique." And while she admits to appreciating such maverick guitarists as Derek Bailey, Joe Morris (with whom she studied briefly), Marc Ribot and Nels Cline, her style is a singular one, characterised by crisp, understated figures, accentuated strums, spare use of distortion that throbs with implication, explosions from the collision of the offhand with the wound-tight.

An unhappy Suzuki violinist in childhood, Halvorson got interested in her father's jazz records and fascinated with the guitar when she heard Jimi Hendrix. Her parents bought her a black and white Stratocaster when she was 12, and she connected with a teacher who happened to be a "jazz guy". She's never had an acoustic guitar, but considers her Guild archtop "like an acoustic, because I play it acoustically a lot and it has a really big sound". She met Jessica Pavone, who attended Hart School of Music in Connecticut (not far from Wesleyan), through mutual friends at a party in Brooklyn in 2002. "And we also both lived in the same house that Taylor lived in, at different times," Halvorson explains. "I was moving out when she was moving in. We were neighbours after that."

"We lived in the same neighbourhood for three years," adds Pavone, whose demeanour toggles between polite reserve and eyebrow-raised scepticism. "Because we were neighbours we started spending a lot of time together. Then we started casually playing music once a week, then writing pieces, and it evolved from there."

Pavone and Halvorson have recorded three duet albums – *Thin Air, Prairies* and *On And Off*, on which they sing without pretense, besides playing their strange, folksy co-composed pieces – and the quartet CD *Calling All Portraits* with Ches Smith and bassist Devin Hoff. Pavone has also released the solo *Walking Sleeping Breathing* (described as "three indeterminate pieces for viola that highlight functions that are easily taken for granted but essential for survival"), *Quotidian* (four chamber works of Morton Feldmanesque restraint and suspense, performed by the quintet Till By Turning), and the string quartet *Songs Of Synastry And Solitude* (referring to Leonard Cohen's *Songs Of Love And Hate*) for John Zorn's Tzadik label. In January, at Zorn's East Village recital room The Stone, she led yet another ensemble, Army Of Strangers, a string-band-with-drums quartet named for her composition that's a Thirteenth Assembly signature tune.

Pavone began on violin at age five, switched to cello in her early teens, drawn by its lower timbre, and settled on viola, in part "because the viola has a quirkier sound which I'm attracted to because it goes with my personality". Taylor Ho Bynum can relate to this. "I think of the cornet as the viola of brass," he says. "Every instrument carries with it its own set of stereotypes. Trumpet players are assumed to be loud and brash and arrogant, on top of everything. The cornet frees me from that stereotype to some extent. And what we're trying to do with The Thirteenth Assembly is escape the cliches, the roles that the instruments force upon us, to reinvent what the instrument does in our ensemble.

"You can hear the differences in our personalities and backgrounds in the compositions we bring to the ensemble," he asserts. "We might have something of a contemporary classical nature that we have to figure out how to deal with using electric guitar and drums, or something with an R&B flavour that we have to figure out how to do without a sax or bass, or something with jazz flavour that we have to do without a piano. The instrumentation and our differences force all of us to challenge ourselves.

"I can't think of another ensemble that has cornet, viola, guitar and drums. Our unusual instrumentation forces us to do certain things because there are holes in the music we need to find a way to fill. There's not a bass, so how do we maintain the momentum that one usually gets from a bass? How are we going to use our instruments?"

On *(un)sentimental* they knit them together for a group gestalt that also lets them shine as individuals. Take "Army Of Strangers". It's built from a simple lead line that Bynum and Pavone play more or less together at first – she diverges after it's stated to bow across it – and a contrasting riff. Halvorson plucks an ostinato on low strings while Fujiwara executes a mid-tempo backbeat with syncopated snare flourishes and cymbal-crash accents. The whole thing flows. Bynum's cornet picks up a couple of notes of Halvorson's part, then bleeds the chromatic four-note lead, and Pavone harmonises; Fujiwara struts some splashy stuff in a break, then the cycle of lead line, which Pavone states, and guitar ostinato returns. Bynum riffs while Pavone melodicises, but Halvorson gets the second break, suspending time and coming to a climax with beadlike harmonics. Pavone reintroduces the theme, which Halvorson takes outward before returning to her 'bass' part so Bynum can begin a smoochy solo that extends through *his* break. Again the cycle returns, thanks to Halvorson, with Pavone bowing against it. When her colleagues drop out, Pavone fashions a brief episode from three notes, which she strokes as if they are whiskery tree bark. After that, the song's DNA is reprised and the five minute track ends in a satisfying snap.

The composer of "Army Of Strangers" has a Masters degree in composition. "Not that that means very much now," Pavone says dryly, "but I've spent a lot of time composing chamber music with traditional notation. I was brought up studying classical music, taught to read and play, not learn by ear. I came into free improvisation and writing music at the same time, towards the end of college. I got together with people to improvise and started with the tactile feeling of my instrument and pure sound. I wasn't drawing from anything."

The Thirteenth Assembly work up repertoire organically. "For our last tours we each contributed two pieces," says Pavone. "We get together, hand out the music and say, 'What are we going to start with?' We work through all the material we have, make suggestions on each other's pieces and discuss ways we can develop them. But for the most part we just play."

Is it really so simple? "A collective is always a difficult endeavour," Bynum answers. "One of the strengths of the larger community we're part of is that there's a shared aesthetic sense, a sense of camaraderie and companionship, but not in the way the AACM or the Jazz Composers Guild was a defined collective. We have the freedom to avoid the politics and controversy that comes with those kinds of organisations. The vagueness of our definition allows us to create our own definitions.

"One interesting thing about our generation of musicians is that we've come up with a sense there's nothing radical to do any more. The big political statements have been made. We don't have to fight about a vision that allows us to play jazz or klezmer or rock. I'm hugely indebted to mentors I had, like Braxton and Bill Lowe, who were able to break those rules for me. We can take advantage of the breakthroughs they made and look for a way to make music in an increasingly complex world. We can investigate what it means to be human and make music for ourselves.

"We have different fights. We have to argue for our music's basic viability, for our right to be creative individuals in an increasingly consumerist age. The strength and weakness of being as underground as we are is that we escape the currents that dominate the institutionalised scenes. By the grass roots nature of the music we do and the community we're part of we can free ourselves from the constrictions of existing jazz or classical or rock scenes, which are institutionalised to the extent that those genres are about making lots of money."

What about money? Can they make a living? "Call us crazy," Pavone shrugs. "In actuality, the music chooses you. You can't help but do it, and you find ways to do it. I teach private lessons, so I don't have to sacrifice artistic vision to feed myself."

"It's nice to get paid," Bynum agrees, "and we work hard to be paid and treated correctly. But our first priority is the integrity of what we're doing artistically. Our second priority is to make a living. We work day jobs, live with roommates in inexpensive places, juggle our finances, but it's worth it. It's easy to bemoan the poverty of the artist, and true, it *does* suck, but it's a conscious choice. There are joys we get from doing this we can't get from anything else."

"The tough thing," Halvorson chimes in, "is you have to constantly make decisions. I have several projects I want to prioritise, a few groups I want to focus on, a couple of records coming out which I want to put my energy into. I hope these things don't all overlap. If they do, I'll have to make some hard decisions."

Will The Thirteenth Assembly exist in five years? After a pause Bynum replies, "Evolution happens naturally to your musical ideas; there's a time when an ensemble works and a time when you need to move on to something else. There's always going to be sort of a natural evolution of that, and you can't plan it out too much in advance. I think all of us want to get to a point where we can spend all of our energies making music. I want to get to the point where I have the resources to pursue more ambitious things, whether interdisciplinary or larger ensembles – where I have the success and freedom to articulate all the artistic ideas I have.

"As Mary was saying, we're all at a point where we have tons of different projects. Sometimes I'm jealous of how it was 40 or 50 years ago when you could just be in one band. The Miles Davis Quintet played 350 days a year, and the level of innovation that came from it was amazing because it was the one focus for the creative energies of all the musicians. Today we can't have one focus for all our creative energies – we need to have 15 focuses. Keeping an overarching aesthetic that's consistent in those different projects, yet still allows a diversity of artistic expression, that's tough. But my long term goal is to keep doing what I'm doing while doing it better, with more support and more opportunity." The other three members of The Thirteenth Assembly nod in agreement. □

(un)sentimental has just been issued in a vinyl edition by Important

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