

Sam Ospovat: Getting Angular

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On his leader debut, Ospovat finds a place in the current crop of drummer/composer royalty



(photo: Ginger Fierstein)

With the release of *Ride Angles* (Skirl), his first album as a leader, Sam

Ospovat has joined the ranks of forward-looking drummer/composers like Ches Smith, Kate Gentile, Dan Weiss, and Tyshawn Sorey: artists who are fearlessly going against the jazz grain.

Sipping a beer at a bar near his Sunset Park, Brooklyn home base, the 41-year-old Ospovat—an acrobatic heavy-hitter whose command of proggy intricacies and rock-informed grooves has helped propel left-field groups like Enablers, Ava Mendoza’s Unnatural Ways, and guitarist Brandon Seabrook’s Die Trommel Fatale to the next level—is sizing up his place among his peers now that he’s striking out on his own. Does he fit in with the current drummer/composer movement? “Compositionally, yes,” he says, “because these pieces are totally a part of that but also unique within it, so I feel like I’m really contributing something to the heart of that movement.”

Featuring a core of bassist Kim Cass and pianist Matt Mitchell plus special guests Seabrook, alto saxophonist Nick Lyons, and scat vocalist Lorin Benedict, [*Ride Angles*](#) is nestled in a sonic space somewhere between the [*Matthew Shipp Trio*](#), Tim Berne’s Snakeoil, and Mitchell’s recent work. Ospovat directs the music’s shapeshifting dynamic pulse and off-kilter melodic thrust with the poise and aplomb of a veteran bandleader—an indication that this moment has been a long time coming.

As a fledgling percussion student, the Nebraska-born Ospovat first found his calling out west at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and Mills College under the tutelage of drum sages Daniel Brevil, Peter Magadini, and William Winant. From those three giants he gleaned respectively the techniques of Haitian drumming, a deep knowledge of polyrhythms, and an interest in the avant-garde. His immersion in the Bay Area creative music scene also turned out to be path-shaping, connecting him with collaborators like Mendoza and Smith, whom he would eventually follow to Brooklyn (where he’s resided since 2013).

But it was the bond forged with Cass that would serve as the launch pad for *Ride Angles*. In fact, the new album’s seeds were first planted way back in

2010 in San Francisco, when Ospovat and Cass joined Anteater, a trio with alto saxophonist Jacob Zimmerman. Anteater would release one album in 2012 before disbanding, but its bassist and drummer just kept on playing together. “We were both interested in polyrhythms and a certain approach to them, so we worked on that a lot in Oakland,” Ospovat recalls. “Kim has really been a partner in studying polyrhythms, and also a guide. He’s a musical genius, basically, and has a really individual way of hearing things.”

With a telepathic rapport built up over years of practice, Ospovat and Cass navigate the complex patterns of *Ride Angles*’ seven compositions with relative ease. Pieces such as “Off the Shelf Self (head voice)” and “Beynon’s Bounce (chest voice)” may be rhythmically mind-bending, but there’s also no mistaking the rapid-fire, infectious melodies that define them, thanks to Mitchell’s visionary piano work. As Ospovat tells it, the addition of Mitchell was seamless: “He’s challenged himself so much with his own music, and our interests overlap enough, that it was really easy for him to jump into this. He got it intrinsically and understood it instantly”—he snaps his fingers—“with no explanation.”

Though the cameos made by Seabrook, Lyons, and Benedict change up the piano-trio template, the drums are always at this album’s heart. And as its title suggests, the polyrhythm-obsessed Ospovat is indeed riding the angles. “The language of the music is really coming from the drums,” he acknowledges. “Each piece is basically written on the drums and then expanded from there, so that [title] was a clever way of saying that it’s drum-based.”

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