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## **The Bay Area's Sarah Wilson emerges as one of most promising composers and trumpeters on the scene**

Derk Richardson, special to SF Gate

Thursday, July 6, 2007

If a Louis Armstrong–Ella Fitzgerald song hadn't come on the car radio at exactly the right moment, Sarah Wilson might be teaching anthropology or curating museum exhibits instead of emerging as one of the most intriguing and promising composers and trumpeters on the contemporary music scene.

The tuneful turning point came as Wilson was driving through New York State state with a friend and talking about the possibility of parlaying her bachelor's degree in anthropology from UC Berkeley into a master's or Ph.D. "Suddenly, Ella and Louis came on the radio," Wilson recalled between sips of iced tea in on the patio of a north Berkeley cafe, "and I had this epiphany: no, I need to go for music."

That was 1993. Today, Wilson -- who leads her all-star Bay Area quintet through two sets of original music at the Intersection for the Arts in San Francisco on Wednesday, July 10, -- has two CDs to her credit, peoples her projects with established virtuosos, including (for this gig) bassist Devin Hoff, guitarist John Schott, drummer Scott Amendola and clarinetist Ben Goldberg, and garners ringing endorsements from such modern masters such as Dave Douglas and Myra Melford.

By tuning into and honoring her instincts at critical moments, Wilson has cultivated an authentic path through the thicket of commercial considerations and crass careerism that threaten to choke off creativity in jazz as well as mainstream popular music. Her most recent CD, *Music for an Imaginary Play*, released on Phillip Greenlief's Oakland-based Evander Music label, is an occasionally thorny but refreshing accessible collection of tunes, several of which feature Wilson's cool, unaffected vocal renderings of her own poetic lyrics.

Wilson recorded the album in Brooklyn, N.Y., in early 2005, around the time she decided to end her 12-year stint in the Big Apple and return to her native northern Northern California. The music sounds wholly original, although discerning ears might detect the influences of trumpeter Douglas, keyboardist Melford (and one of Melford's mentors, Henry Threadgill) and guitarist Bill Frisell, all of whom rank high in Wilson's pantheon of inspirations. Played by the Wilson New York quintet, with tenor saxophonist Peck Allmond, guitarist Steve Cardenas, bassist Jerome Harris and drummer Kenny Wollesen, the pieces don't sound like conventional jazz. They are often defined by contrapuntal bass and melody lines, rather than identifiable chord changes; they move through sections that morph in idiosyncratic fashion; and their harmonies have a sleek yet spontaneous feel. Comparisons with the music of Carla Bley wouldn't be far-fetched.

"I don't even think I'm a jazz trumpet player," Wilson said. "I just don't identify myself that way." Indeed, for a long time Wilson didn't identify herself as a trumpeter at all. She took up the instrument as a kid growing up in Healdsburg, Calif., but put it aside until she graduated from Cal and moved to the East Coast to work with the Vermont-based Bread & Puppet Theater. There, her involvement in circus-style bands and her introduction to Dave Douglas got her back on the horn, into contact with New York City's fertile "downtown" scene and eventually into study with trumpet-playing educators John McNeil and Laurie Frink.

"In August '93, I moved to New York and Dave Douglas hooked me up with John McNeil, and he really took me under his wing," Wilson recalled. "I was working full time at the Museum of Natural History -- that's where the 'ology' came in handy -- and then I would go home and practice trumpet for two hours at night. I became really serious about it. I remember after three or four months studying with John, he said, 'What's up with you? You're practicing like you're a professional.' He couldn't really figure me out, but he took me really seriously."

Eventually, Wilson cut her museum work back to part-time and started "playing out" in a variety of theater and puppet-theater contexts, including what became an annual gig in the Lincoln Center for the Arts Out of Doors Puppet Pageant with the Puppeteers Collective of Boston and New York.

Her hired collaborators on that show included drummer Wollesen and saxophonist Allmond (both former Bay Area residents) and guitarist/bassist Tony Scherr (of Sex Mob, the Lounge Lizards, Jesse Harris and the Ferdinandos, and other bands). "It was amazing to be this almost beginning trumpet player and have these heavyweight musicians playing my music," Wilson said. "As an improviser I couldn't really stand in my shoes with them."

But she was rapidly gaining confidence as a composer. "There was this time when I was writing songs and asking myself, OK, what am I? Am I a jazz artist? I was having a little bit of a crisis. I went to this event called 'A Great Day in New York,' a program of a hundred living composers, from Morton Feldman to John Zorn to Meredith Monk to Steve Reich. I went to eight of the nights in the series and then I realized, oh, I'm a composer, that's what I am."

By the end of the 1990s, Wilson was ready to take her compositions into the studio with some of the musicians who had become her peers. (Her cohorts at that time included bassist Lee Alexander and his girlfriend, Norah Jones "before she was 'Norah Jones.' ") Allmond, Wollesen and bassist Jesse Murphy joined Wilson to record the debut CD *Sketches In Motion*.

"The musicians started asking questions like 'Where are you from? Are you from Mars? What planet are you from?' " Wilson remembered, laughing. "The jazz musicians who play my music say it isn't jazz," Wilson noted, "and other people say, this is jazz. When you don't fit into the box, it's the most interesting place to be."

Less than two years after recording *Sketches in Motion*, Wilson's writing took another turn -- in a vocal direction. Again, the shift was more of response to circumstances than a conscious scheme. "My mother died in February 2000," Wilson explained, "and when I went back to New York after being out here I couldn't deal with the trumpet. I think I had been on the path of trying to be this 'real jazz' trumpet player, but that didn't really seem to fit me so well."

In turn-of-the-21st-century New York, Wilson went out to listen to the singer-songwriter performances of Jesse Harris (who wrote the smash hit "Don't Know Why" for Norah Jones) and Tony Scherr. "There was something about hearing that music that reminded me

of home, of California. I felt myself getting back into hearing pop music and thinking about songs.

"I went to hear Tony Scherr play one night and started listening to his record and got inspired to write," Wilson continued. "So I wrote a song and sang it into my friend (bicoastal violinist) Jenny Scheinman's answering machine. I wasn't doing any performing out at the time, but I was playing songs into people's machines. She came back from a gig and called Tony and said, 'Tony, you've got to come over and hear this song that Sarah wrote, inspired by one of your pieces.' So he came over and heard it the same day. That was 'From the River,' which I haven't recorded yet, about the Russian River."

Since moving back to the Bay Area ("I decided to come back because it felt like New York was taking more out of me than it was giving to me"), Wilson has fallen in with the West Coast branch of the not-solely-jazz family of musicians who were her pals in New York. Goldberg, Schott, Amendola, guitarist Will Bernard and bassist Hoff and drummer Ches Smith are of the same generation and run in the same circles as Scheinman, saxophonist Jessica Jones and trumpeter Steven Bernstein.

"I had no idea what would happen to my music by moving," Wilson said, "but once I'd made the decision, even when I was still in New York, it was very liberating. Even improvisation-wise, I felt free from the restraints that New York can place on you. It's been great to be here and hook up with these musicians who are part of the same community as the musicians out there. The first time I had a rehearsal at my house, it was such relief to feel that there was no difference from the playing level of the New York people. In terms of vocabulary and stylistic and intellectual approaches to music, they are practically the same people."

Although she has opted for "slowing down a little bit" and enjoying the West Coast quality of life, Wilson still maintains a somewhat bicoastal career. She is a member of Wollesen's marching-style band Himalayas, which has major U.S. and European gigs this summer, and she recently went back to New York to lead her improvisation-inclined "Trapeze Project" with violinist Charlie Burnham, trombonist Art Baron and bassist Todd Sickafoose.

Wilson is thoroughly cognizant of the fact that no female trumpeters have scaled the same heights as Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, Chet Baker or Wynton Marsalis. At an ensemble audition at New York University she heard male musicians say, "Give her something that's not above the staff" (i.e. something not too high for a woman to play). That blatant chauvinism momentarily dismayed her, but the unwavering support of her male collaborators like Wollesen and Allmond, as well as consoling advice from Laurie Frink (who played lead trumpet with Benny Goodman), kept Wilson on track and in touch with her own creative process.

"When I'm writing music, it's a euphoric, almost ecstatic, experience," she said. "It feels even more powerful now that I'm not in New York, where it really is cutthroat and all about being virtuosic," she said.

The final affirmation comes from listeners. "There are a lot of people who don't like jazz but like my music," Wilson said. "It can be very complicated music with a lot going on, yet they can connect to the strong sense of melody."

And now that she sings -- carrying on the underpopulated trumpet-vocal legacy of Louis Armstrong and Chet Baker -- the audience leans in even closer. "Instrumental music, especially abstract music, can create a wall, but then all of a sudden I'm singing to them and it becomes so much more intimate."

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