

## Antonio Ciacca

By Eric Nemeyer

**JJ:** Could you discuss your new album, *Rush Life*, on the Motema Music label that will be release on June 24? Tell us about how you developed the repertoire and your choice of personnel.

**AC:** Since 2004, I have had Kengo Nakamura in my band. I met him through saxophonist Wess Anderson when I played at the Village Vanguard, when Wynton was part of the front line. Joe Magnarelli played on an earlier album of mine in 2002. Ulysses Owens is a young, brilliant drummer from Juilliard, and he has that kind of vibe of learning through playing, rather than through books and transcriptions. He knows how important it is to play with the jazz masters to get this language together. He plays with Lonnie Smith, and Mulgrew Miller. He's on the same wavelength as me. I spent most of my last ten years with Steve Lacy and Benny Golson, to get a direct source of information, not second-hand information. Stacy Dillard is my man from Michigan. I was told about him by Wynton, and I went to check him out. He's the kind of real improviser – not the kind of super-polished, clean saxophone player who works out at home what they're going to play on stage. This man is a real improviser. When we get on stage, he is playing in that moment. He is not going to perform something that he has worked out. He is not going to deliver licks that he worked out at home. He's really a real musician. The repertoire comes from them. I learned from Benny Golson that it is really the musician who tells you how to write music – the kind of harmonic progression they like, the kind of tempos and grooves they like. Some people feel comfortable playing Latin music. I don't, because I don't know that music. Some players like mainstream music. Some people like odd meters. I adjust my repertoire to try to get the best out of my musicians. That's why I have tunes where Kengo is playing the melody. I hate the stereotyped roles of instruments, where the horn is playing the melody all the time, and the bass is playing 4/4. I like the bass to be in the spotlight on one tune, and the next tune is maybe going to be a solo piano, featuring him on intros.

**JJ:** How did your relationship with Motéma develop?

**AC:** Part of my role as Director of Programming at Jazz at Lincoln Center is to go out and scout talent to present at our three venues. I went to hear a gentleman from Detroit named Calvin Sholar, who is a brilliant piano player, who happens to know very well the contemporary hip-hop scene. He has played with Wallace Roney, Sonny Rollins and others. I thought it was worth it for me to go check him out, because here's someone who knows enough about the music to be respected in what he does. Since I had no idea about what hip-hop and rap is, and since I think that we have to deal with it because it is out there, I felt it was important. So instead of criticizing it and

denying the existence of this music, I would rather talk about things that I know. So I went to check out this concert at the Langston Hughes House. Then I got to meet Jana Herzen, the President of Motéma. They had a beautiful Fazioli in the Langston Hughes House, and I couldn't resist trying to play it. I played a couple of songs and she approached me and asked me if I was interested in recording some of the tunes that I was playing, which were my tunes. I gave her three of my last CDs – a trio, a quartet and a quintet. She really liked the quintet sound – the Horace Silver, Benny Golson Jazztet kind of vibe. She said, "I want the quintet." And, I said, "You got it. You're in charge, you tell me what you want." So I started to write music for the quintet, and I brought back Joe [Magnarelli] into the band, and we did it.

**JJ:** She's a musician herself, so she has a keen ear and a deep understanding.

**AC:** The reason why I think the quality of recordings has gone down is because we don't have people like Teo Macero or Orrin Keepnews in the studios anymore – people who knew about music. Now you're dealing with someone who is more concerned with how nice you look, and how that will enable them to get you on the cover of this or that, instead of listening to how you play. I was fortunate because I had Todd Barkan in the booth producing this album. He is such an unbelievable personality. Just to have him there, made me feel so good. The musicians were so happy to have someone who has been at 2,000 recording sessions and won four Grammy Awards as a producer. He taped our rehearsals and we would listen and figure out the right tempos, the right arrangements.

**JJ:** Talk about your role with Jazz at Lincoln Center.

**AC:** The first six months of my year at Jazz at Lincoln Center, I tried to explain to musicians that Jazz at Lincoln Center is not a jazz festival where you can bring your band and we give you a stage. We are producers. Our Artistic Director, Wynton Marsalis gives us ideas for us to implement. My job is to find the right actor who can implement his visions and his ideas. So, we hire musicians who can work on specific projects. There is no point for us to present what the JVC Jazz Festival does, or what any other festival does. What is the point of putting on the stage a trio that is playing in every other club in the city? So, I'll get calls from people who will say, "I sent you a CD two days ago. Can I get a gig?" So I have to explain

Antonio Ciacca's new CD is entitled *Rush Life*, on Motema Music, and will be available June 24. Hear Antonio Ciacca on Thursday evenings at Roth's West Side Steakhouse.



that we are working on ideas and we are trying to present the whole spectrum of the jazz repertoire and jazz history, so we need people who can implement our concept and ideas. We try to present the largest variety of what this music is all about, since it is over 100 years old.

**JJ:** How does your role with Jazz at Lincoln Center, away from the piano, create support or create challenges for your own artistic pursuits?

**AC:** This role is pure gold for me as a pianist and as a jazz musician because I am dealing with music. I'm dealing with the music of Bill Evans, Benny Carter, and many others, and I'm dealing with musical scores and musicians and jazz masters. Yesterday I was speaking with Bob Wilber, and three days ago I went to visit Ahmad Jamal about his performance at the opening of the coming season in October.

**JJ:** Could you talk about integrity in the music, and show versus substance?

**AC:** I carefully choose the people that I want to be with – and the people I want to be with are people like Wynton Marsalis, Benny Golson, and Ahmad Jamal. These are people with a total devotion to this music. When I meet somebody and I see that they confuse the word quality with popularity, I stop the conversation right there. One of my heroes was Herbie Nichols. Nobody knew him. Monk was dropped by Blue Note because he couldn't sell records. I come from a part of Europe, in Italy, where we know the difference between quality and popularity. If you tell me that popularity in itself means something is quality, I'm not with you. In some cases, like with Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole, they were popular and they were quality artists performing quality music. So the musicians have to make a choice. Either they want to be loyal to their art form and have

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integrity or not...and quality sometimes won't go together with popularity. The reason Wynton Marsalis is Wynton Marsalis is not because he is very popular, but because of the great artist that he is. Record labels want to sell records. So they don't care how you get to sell a record. They just care about selling the record. So if that's the level of the conversation, if you want to deal with them, you have to sell records. But, if you want to do music, if you want to talk to me, then you have to be a great musician – with integrity and not sell out your art for a few hundred dollars.

**JJ:** Tell us about your background and how you became interested in this music.

**AC:** I was studying mechanical engineering in Bologna, Italy, studying mathematics and physics. When I was 20, a friend of mine, Lucio Ferrara, took me to the Bologna Jazz Festival. I had never heard jazz before in my entire life. There were about 4,000 to 5,000 people, and the Artistic Director was Max Roach. Wynton Marsalis was playing with Marcus Roberts, Wycliffe Gordon, Wess Anderson and that whole episode turned me upside down and changed my whole life. I felt something that I had never in my life felt before. Up until that moment, for me, music was entertainment. After that, for me, music became art. The level of virtuosity, and the feelings, and the presentation was a shock. So that's where I got the virus. Every time after that, when I would see the word jazz, my heart connected to the emotion I felt at that performance. As luck would have it, one of the greatest saxophone players, Steve Grossman, had just moved to Bologna. So the second concert I heard after Wynton was Steve Grossman, live in a small club. He blew me away like Wynton did. Prior to that, I had just had some basic piano lessons. I told him I want to play the piano and I want to play this music. And, he said, "Come home. I'll teach you." Steve, Wynton, Benny Golson and Steve Lacy have been the most generous people I have met in my whole life.

**JJ:** Could you tell us about some of the ideas that some of these artists shared with you.

**AC:** At one time I was very concerned about forms in writing my music. After we had played "Stablemates" by Benny Golson, we were in the dressing room and I asked him how he developed that unusual form. He said, "Let the melody tell you the form. Don't try to force the melody into a set form." After that, everything was pure gold. He used to tell me that when he would write assignments for composition class, he would use all sorts of different forms. His teachers would routinely give him "F's" and mark up his compositions in red. He called me a couple of weeks ago and said, "You know those people who use to fail me all the time? They just gave me an honorary degree. Steve Lacy was a big influence too. One time I asked him, "How do I know if I played well on a gig?" He said, "As long as you play something that you've never played before, it is going to be great." So, every time I play, I try to play something that I have never played before. ■

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I like that family feel of people coming in to pitch in on each other's projects. We are sort of out-of-the-box thinkers here at Motéma. We're always looking for ways to expand the market for jazz and to reach out to communities that are maybe not aware that they would love jazz, and to get the jazz in front of those people and therefore expand its market. There is a lot of gloom and doom about the music industry, and sometimes I fall into it too because it is definitely challenging, but my focus is very often on working with the community. Right now, in fact, we are producing an event with the Harmony Festival in Santa Rosa, California. This is traditionally a jam band and folk and world beat Festival where they focus on health issues and green living and that sort of thing. It's a 30-year-old festival, actually. We are doing the first ever jazz attraction at this Harmony Festival and it is happening June 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>. We have Roni Ben-Hur and KJ Denhart who is our current release which we are very excited about. And also my band will play. We are bringing Charnet Moffit out and he's going to show a variety of different sides to himself."

This sense of community is the essence of Motéma, and for label's artists like Roni Ben-Hur, it's all about giving back. Roni is involved in a duo project with Gene Bertoncini to raise money for the Dizzy Gillespie Fund that's associated with the Jazz Foundation of America. Dae Bennett of Bennett Studios is donating his mixing and recording skills and studio. The photographer, John Abbott, volunteered his photography and Herzen is volunteering Motéma's marketing arm. They are all working together to raise money for the Dizzy Gillespie Fund over at Englewood Hospital in New Jersey that is for musicians that don't have the means to afford the kind of healthcare that they need. "We're calling the album Jazz Therapy, Vol. 1," said Herzen. "So that's a project that we're really excited about because it gives us the opportunity to really put our hearts into something and create something with the community."

At five years young, Motéma Music has an exciting roster of artists from different genres of music. "I consider myself a citizen of the world and I've been to so many places," shared Herzen. "The one way I've been able to communicate was through my music, so my hope is for Motéma to reach out to many different cultures—not necessarily in the jazz idiom. Reaching out and expanding in ways little by little. For me the message of the label is about music that comes from the heart and it comes from the essence of the people. It's very organic. Most artists are the A&R people. They're out there and they talk to people and they send things in. It sort of forms itself." 'Nuff said. ■



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