

THE RESPECT SEXTET

FARCICAL BUILT FOR SIX (Roister Records, 2010)

I WANT TO BE CLEAR ABOUT SOMETHING: I am absolutely terrified of The Respect Sextet.

When Josh Rutner (who is credited here on "reeds, radio, and toys") asked me to contribute liner notes to this record, my first thought was, "But Josh, I'm an idiot." Have you ever had that dream in which you're taking a final exam in multivariable advanced calculus or particle physics or whatever, and everybody is feverishly scribbling equations to impossibly torturous theorems and formulas and theormulas and you're sitting there with a dull, eraser-free Dixon Ticonderoga pencil and eight pages of utter, mocking blankness and the clock is clacking and you're sweating like hogs sweat and also you're not wearing pants? It's like that.

And yet, those of us with or without subconscious insecurity problems can agree that this record is crazy great. I'm essentially a wildly transparent ugly-American Kyle Busch-tank-top-and-jorts-wearing foreigner in the world of jazz — your "improvisation" and "modal scales" and "time shifts" are weird and confusing to me — but if this is traditional jazz, I'm Lou Rawls (I'm not). These songs are freight trains blowing down convoluted tracks that twist over mountaintops and plunge underwater and rocket down the boulevard and sweep upside down; they're built from liquid parts dribbling in from all sides, their colors are added like a crazy person is clicking around in Photoshop.

But that's just how it goes for these guys — their previous record found them playing the music of Sun Ra and Karlheinz Stockhausen; you probably heard clips from that on "Jersey Shore." (According to their PR stuff, the band has been known to perform Bulgarian tunes, and if you've ever attempted to get a handle on Bulgarian jazz you know how tough that can be.) Ted Poor's "**Stray Alligator**" announces itself with great triumphant fanfare, which falls to pieces and then rebuilds again like a Transformer, Josh Rutner's boingy, upbeat title track is sheer delight, and James Hirschfeld's "**The Hinske Plow**" is a caffeinated romp which will appear on my next running mix (after Kanye, probably). But my personal favorite is "**Tony I**," ostensibly a piece of horn-kissed, jaunty Main Street USA Americana, which craftily subverts Main Street USA Americana while being a REALLY GOOD PIECE OF MAIN STREET USA AMERICANA. I know. I kind of just blew your mind right there, didn't I?

But hey, don't take it from some dude you don't know, take it from jazz writers at minor, fringe publications like the New York Times, Newsweek, Time Out New York, the Wall Street Journal, and the (shuffling papers) New Yorker.

My favorite story about The Respect Sextet regards their database of song titles, a spreadsheet first conceived in the days when Rutner, Asher, Wierenga, and Hirschfeld were temping at Bear Stearns and built in the way most great inspiration comes these days — via lengthy e-mail chains that unfold on the clock. A few outtakes:

- "Furry, With A Syringe On Top"
- "Branford Marsupial, On the Tenor Kangaroo"
- "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Get Right Back Up Again"
- "Bewitched Baubles, Bothered Bangles, and Bewildered Beads"
- "Ahhh!! Smoke Got In My Eyes!!"
- "You Must Take The A Train, Transfer At 42nd St. Times Square To The R, Transfer at 14th St. Union Square to the 6, Transfer at Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall For The 4, Transfer at Fulton St. To The C (That's the Slowest Way To Get To Brooklyn)"

...and I look forward to seeing them deployed in the future — except the ones that are inevitably stolen by Ke\$ha (what can you do, right?) — by this brilliant, dizzy, free, humorous, kitchen-sink jazz, sly little elf of an outfit that's suitable for exactly anyone, even those of us who are not wearing pants.

—Jeff Vrabel, www.jeffvrabel.com

Jeff Vrabel is a humor columnist for the GateHouse news service, editor-in-chief of Hilton Head Monthly magazine and a music writer whose work has appeared in Paste, RollingStone.com, Billboard, Playboy, All About Jazz, No Depression, the Chicago Sun-Times, Backstreets, brucesteen.net, and several furious Neil Diamond fan message boards.