

## ARTS NEWS

### PLAYING FREE

an interview with Charlie Kohlhasse

“You should decide artistically what’s best for you, not what some DJ says,” Charlie Kohlhasse told me in a recent interview. So, hip-hoppers, take heart, you don’t necessarily have to follow the lead of this post modern saxophonist who also hosts “Research & Development,” on WMBR, 88.1 FM Mondays from 2:00-4:00 pm. Besides a Classic Tenor Corner, the show features “forward-looking jazz of every decade with a special emphasis on the overlooked masters of the 60s and 70s.”

That makes sense, when you learn who Charlie Kohlhasse is, musically speaking. A self-taught alto, tenor and baritone saxophonist, he leapt right into the listening world of Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy when he was in high school, eventually going back to explore the history of jazz when he met Roswell Rudd.

Kohlhasse has always loved post modern jazz. It was his first listening experience; Coleman Hawkins’ sound, when he finally got to it, was an “unrecognizable” waver, and Paul Desmond did not sound delicate and contained, but small. Interesting how the ear, or rather the mind, builds its own status quo through its listening experience; normalcy is relative. Before Roswell Rudd explained the significance of Louis Armstrong to him, Kohlhasse told me, “I just thought he was someone who played ‘Hello Dolly.’” But Roswell told me he heard Louis in concert, and after he played just two notes, the hairs on the back of his head stood up.”

Kohlhasse, bespectacled, professorial-looking, with a wry and unfailing sense of humor, is a native of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He moved to Boston in 1980 after private study with Stan Strickland and Roswell Rudd, and he has added a tremendous amount to jazz in this city since then. His large discography is made up of groups he has either led, co-led or graced as sideman, including the grammy-nominated Either/Orchestra. One of the mainstays of his work is his creative relationship with Matt Langley, tenor and soprano saxophonist, whom he met at a jam session in Concord, New Hampshire when he was 20 and Langley was 18. The musical synergy shows – listen to the CD of duets, “You Start” to see how closely alike they think and work.

If Langley’s presence is a constant, there is always creative growth – into new groupings of personnel, new orchestration, and new compositional approaches. You would in fact have heard these approaches at Charlie’s latest concert on July 30 at the Zeitgeist with his newest groups, the Explorer’s Club and the Saxophone Support Group. Each of these groups did a month-long residency at the Hyde Park Artists-at-Large series. While the Explorer’s Club played no special concerts during its March residency – the repertoire was Kohlhasse, Monk, and some ballads – the Saxophone Support Group did a solid week of Hemphill tunes in April, and finished up the month with John Tchicai compositions in honor of Tchicai’s 69th birthday. “We moved the Tchicai party over to the Longy School on his actual birthday where the SSG shared a concert with my Longy MAM Rep,” Kohlhasse wrote in an email. He directs the Longy Modern American Music Repertory Ensemble at the school.

The Saxophone Support Group is an exquisite grouping of Kohlhasse on alto and baritone; Sean Berry on tenor and alto; Daniel Blake and Matt Langley again on tenor and soprano saxophones; Jared Sims on tenor and baritone saxophones and flute; Josh Sinton on baritone saxophone and bass clarinet, and Chris Veilleux on alto and soprano saxophones. One of the best numbers in the 7/30 concert was Julius Hemphill’s “The Painter.” It was a treat to hear the composition live, especially Jared Sims flute floating over the wall of sax sound.

The Explorer’s Club also played on the July 30 date, adding a kick of double drums to personnel that are already fine-tuned and hard driving. It features Matt Langley on tenor and soprano saxophones; Eric Hofbauer on guitar; Jef Charland on bass; and drummers Miki Matsuki and Chris Punis. Precise playing, great trading, and dynamic energy define this group. Charlie brought up the Saxophone Support Group for a finale with all eleven musicians to play his tune “Pigpile.” You can hear this tune on Charlie’s “Play Free or Die,” or in a slight variant on “North Country Pie.”

Over time, Kohlhasse has witnessed the transformation, or, better put, shrinkage, of the Boston scene, and is angry about the “marginalization of the jazz musician... There are fewer talented people,” he laments, and, of course, fewer places for them to play. What he feels Boston needs is something like a series he played in Syracuse – a community center arranged monthly jazz concerts. (Is there organizing energy in Malden to start such a project here?)



Aside from his music, Kohlhasse has established himself as a radio presence, and is remembered for his late-night jazz program on WBUR from 1996-1998. After downsizing from five nights a week to one, it bit the dust as tastes and budgets changed. "Now they pay me more to read the news and weather than play jazz." But you can still catch him on "Research and Development" - Monday afternoons from 2:00-4:00 PM on WMBR, 88.1 FM.

I asked Kohlhasse what impact, if any, being gay has to the music he makes. "It's very important, *and* it's inconsequential," he replied. "It's hard to account for this paradox," beyond the possibility that while the world has changed enough so that being gay is less of a big deal, it is after all a defining part of oneself, and so it has to influence one's music.

Kohlhasse will also be teaching a course in Jazz Compositional History at Longy this fall. It will compare African examples of music using improvisation over set structure with improvisation over European figured bass. For a serious student, this would be a valuable course, given the perspective and career of the instructor. "The great thing is that Longy has given me *carte blanche*" in curriculum design, he told me.

Inevitably, in an interview with a musician, you discuss his or her formative influences. When I told Charlie that I heard a lot of Mingus in him, he said, "Yes, he was on my turntable a lot" in the early listening years. "He had compositions of great emotional range, yet he was always identifiable as himself." The same can be said of Charlie Kohlhasse.

For more information on Charlie Kohlhasse, see <http://www.charliekohlhasse.com/>

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[fiction](#)

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[links](#)

[archives](#)

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