

DOWN BEAT Editors' Pick July 2012

Genius is not about perfection: It's about invention. Drummer Dafnis Prieto's new, globally inspired trio date is a cultural prophecy, an oracle that presents a broad, awe-inspiring vision of the jazz future. The MacArthur Foundation awarded Prieto a fellowship last year, and on his first album since he received the \$500,000 grant, we see that his brand of brilliance stems not from premeditated musical storyboarding, but from the unexpected. Recorded in six hours, this strictly improvisational, highly collaborative album features thoughtful interjections of organic trip-hop, transnational grooves and highly textured electronic keyboards that add explosiveness. The level of telepathy between Prieto and keyboardist Jason Lindner, whom he met in 1999, is evident throughout. Their musical bond and ability to back off the mix when needed leave plenty of breathing room for further experimentation. Prieto interjects free-and-loose techniques on some tunes, such as "You And Me," and on-the-fly time-signature changes, leaving ample space for Lindner to showcase his skills at rhythmic layering. On other songs, such as "Talking Too Much," Lindner leads the pack with bubbling biomechanical joyous noise while Prieto toys off-the-cuff with unorthodox percussive sounds. Kokayi adds organic vocals that settle perfectly at the top of this rhythmic concoction. His pipes are their own cadenced instrument, a calliope of mouthed drum rolls, fills of energy and reflections of myriad influences—West African chanting, street corner beatboxing and cool-as-ice scatwork. The music on this album flows like that of a three-piece orchestra, sounds like an intimate club date and yet feels front-porch casual. This trio's artistry possesses a maturity and composure that the typically raucous jam-band romp lacks. (Hilary Brown)

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This audaciously fresh improvisational collaboration among drummer Prieto, keyboardist Jason Lindner and vocalist/poet Kokayi braids together funk, ambient, jazz, hip-hop, classical, rock, etc., into an exhilarating collection of tunes determined to lift the spirit. Lindner's big-band experience allows him to orchestrate remarkable textures and stretch the compositions harmonically. Clean, fast, complex and soulful, Prieto takes a similarly orchestral approach to his kit. Speaking of soulful, Kokayi brings dazzling energy, playfulness and deep feeling to his rhymes and vocals. Together, the three groove into blissful abandon. *Proverb Trio* should reach across genres and bring isolated musical camps together in resounding acclamation. (Mel Minter)

ALL ABOUT JAZZ

It has long been said that "there's nothing new under the sun," but this record counters that particular proverb's proclamation. Drummer/composer Dafnis Prieto has birthed an album unlike anything else in his own discography—or anywhere else, for that matter. The self-titled debut from Prieto's Proverb Trio is a triumphantly trippy album that's built around the notion of jazz as a collectively improvised modern melting pot. Prieto, keyboardist [Jason Lindner](#) and singer/rapper [Kokayi](#) came into the studio without preconceived pieces and, relying solely on their firm skills in on-the-spot composing and playing experiences with one another, managed to close shop six hours later with a modern-day masterpiece under their collective belt.

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ALL ABOUT JAZZ, cont'd:

The trio presents a unified aural front across all twelve tracks on this record but never repeats itself, starting out with "Into The Light Love," framing Kokayi's powerful neo-soul vocals with Prieto's driving drumming and Lindner's the-future-is-now keyboard sounds. "You And Me" comes next, serving as a mellow palette cleanser that clears the way for Kokayi's Konnakol-meets-beatbox on "The Magic Danzouette." The spacious "Extasis" is the least-focused number on the record, but proves to be a welcome contrast when placed next to the fun and funky jam environment of "You Got It." Lindner's Bach-like keyboard work and Prieto's martial snare drumming introduce "In War," which features Kokayi's melodic, freestyle rapping, while the fusion of spacey keyboards and one-of-a-kind groove comes to the surface on "Vamos A Jugar" and "Talking Too Much." "What Have We All Done" takes the energy level down a bit, but "Dirty Us" more than makes up for it with its hard-hitting grooves and declarative vocals. As the album comes to a close, the trio touches on two very different ideals; "Mystery Man" comes off as ambient minimalism, while "Mother Nature" sounds like manufactured Latin folk music, with Prieto's "Afro-Andino" groove backing up Lindner's flute-like keyboard sounds. While the "Proverb" part of this band's name may appear to seem ill-suited to the whole, it makes perfect sense when viewing the working parts. Prieto and company borrow musical ideals in everyday use, but twist them for their own purposes, creating something unpredictable at every turn. While Prieto has nothing to prove to anybody, this album is just one more example of why he so deserved the MacArthur Fellowship—a.k.a "genius grant"—that came his way. (Dan Bilawsky)

BLU NOTES – Larry Blumenfeld's blog on jazz and other sounds:

(includes Dafnis Prieto interview, see next 3 pages)

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Proverbial Challenge: Three Together, Up in the Air

Keyboardist Jason Lindner kept his head down as he coaxed a synthesizer into issuing a throb, then a hum, then rough-edged sonic textures. He played suggestions of a melody atop that as drummer Dafnis Prieto—a slim and gentle presence with an unruly shock of hair—used mallets to shape rhythms, first soft, then insistent, through and around Lindner’s sounds. Carl Walker, an imposing presence with a shaved head and full beard, who goes by the single name Kokayi, rocked silently back and forth. After stepping up to the microphone, he sang in a disarmingly gentle voice, establishing something like a melody, only to dissolve that into wordless scatting, which then gave way to words. He was freestyling a riff about texting and tweeting, both the pleasures and disorientation of such communication. But mostly, he seemed just to be having fun with the sounds of words (and isn’t that the best promise of a tweet?). On it went, through pieces that veered toward ballads, jazz-rock, calypso and nothing quite so clear in style. Occasionally, Kokayi would drop out, clapping or pumping a fist or just listening. Lindner would, here and there, solo or just mine a groove. Once or twice, Prieto took over, building, combining, and deconstructing rhythms with astonishing command: beats came feather-light and propulsive, always finely calibrated. He has a graceful, often confounding, way of slowing down and speeding up a tempo. Yet even these displays were fleeting moments. This was music with no center or end, all fluid process.

Proverb Trio, as the band is called, is the latest in a series of inventive contexts Prieto has created for himself. Shortly after arriving in New York from Havana, via a year in Barcelona, Prieto began realizing his musical ambitions, which straddle jazz and Afro-Cuban traditions and lean resolutely forward. (In the context of this new trio, even those stylistic references seem quaint.) Prieto worked with saxophonists Henry Threadgill and Steve Coleman, whose brands of jazz are distinctly challenging and worldly, and with pianist Eddie Palmieri, whose distillation of Afro-Cuban dance music is as bold as it gets. Now, 13 years after his arrival, Prieto’s own impact is undeniable. It seeps out through several bands under his leadership, a steady stream of innovative compositions, and continuing work as a versatile, in-demand sideman, not to mention his role as adjunct professor at NYU’s Jazz Studies program.

Such influence and creativity have increased since Prieto, then 37, was among last year’s recipients of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, often referred to as a “genius grant”—an unrestricted award of \$500,000, distributed quarterly over five years. “The award has helped me concentrate more on what I want to work on, which means less time on the things that aren’t as important,” he told me. “I can focus on refining my artistic goals, and I can find the right ways to support those goals.” Just now, that means Proverb Trio and his independent label, Dafnison Music, which has just released [the group’s eponymous CD](#). And the MacArthur grant has enabled time to complete a forthcoming book about drumming. “I’m editing it now,” he said. “It’s not a technical book. It’s analytical and philosophical, which is basically the way I teach. It is not all about sitting down and playing the drums. There is a lot that can’t be taught. It has to be revealed.”

We talked some more about his new band:

How did the Proverb Trio take shape?

It began back in 2004, as a duet with Kokayi. The first time I heard him it was in Cuba, around 1995 or '96, when I was still living there. He came to Cuba with Steve Coleman. I liked his way of freestyling on top of different rhythms and his ability to invent things. And his working with Steve—it was a way for me to understand that he was open to challenging himself.

When did you begin performing together?

During one trip to a festival in Austria [the Saalfelden Jazz Festival], we had a chance to perform on one of the small stages. It was completely improvised. We had no prepared music. From the beginning, he was somebody that I could connect musically on a level where we don't need any preconceived ideas. That was the idea, and that is still the idea of the Proverb Trio: To emphasize spontaneous composition, but do it in a way where it seems to be composed.

So, this week at the Jazz Standard was utterly improvised, unplanned?

The three of us are 100% improvising at the moment that we start playing. It's very unpredictable, what we play and what we hear. One of the most important things about this project is that we, as players, have to believe in each other and to really listen to each other in order to know where we go next. That balance between giving and receiving, between the three of us, is what makes that connection.

What does the name Proverb Trio signify?

Interestingly enough, that name was suggested by Steve Coleman. Kokayi and I were doing duets and Steve asked us, "What will you call it?" We didn't know. He suggested a few names and one of them was "Proverb Duets." I liked the idea. I didn't look at it like mythology or religion or anything like that. I just liked the sound of Pro-verb... This was a project featuring words.

Well, verbs do suggest action...

Yes, well I just liked it for that reason. I think it really reflects what I've been going through, musically speaking. This is the most sincere way for me to represent how I feel. I'm not trying to imitate or reconstruct anything preconceived because I never heard such a thing before. If I feel a cha-cha, I play a cha-cha. If I feel a second-line groove or a funk groove I play them. But that's all a result of what I've been going through.

Why did you want to go this route? Were you feeling constrained in other musical settings?

We all have a certain underlying thinking about the past and the future. But it's good to be more conscious of what you do and to enjoy what you have—to be fully present. That's what has inspired me, personally.

Funny—though I've tried, I really hadn't been able to embrace that idea until my son, Sam, came along. With him, I have no choice but to be in the moment...

Yes, fatherhood has done that for me as well. But I have been moving toward this feeling in many ways, and especially through my music for a long time. You can't do it with everyone. And it will turn out differently with different musicians. Once, I had a gig and Kokayi couldn't make it. And it was completely different journey. The same thing happened when we had someone sub for Jason. What makes that distinctive sound is the combination of the three of us.

When did Proverb become a trio?

At the beginning we had Kokayi and myself, and we started having special guests. We had Steve Coleman. We had Henry Threadgill. Those were great experiences. But then I thought of the possibility of adding a third person in a more stable way, someone who could become a consistent voice. I met Jason not long after I got to New York. I always felt a great empathy with him, musically. I love what he does in terms of sound and, rhythmically, we really connect. We feel identified with each other. In many circumstances, you can be playing with great musicians, but it's hard to find somebody who is really open to throwing himself up in the air and find solutions while you are still up there, just in the air. And that's what I found in Jason. Now that we are specifically doing this, we are really developing.

How did this feeling of being in the air translate into the recording studio, which can sometimes feel stiflingly airless?

Somehow through the experience of live performances I knew a few things that definitely were going to work. So I knew I wanted to have two sections to our sessions. In the first section, for a few hours, we did completely open things. We played longer, the same way we do in live performance. We did long tracks just for ourselves, to feel more identified with what we do. In the second section, we took the same idea but consciously created shorter tracks. All of us focused the same way, but but with less time—5 or 6 minutes for a take. The recording is a mixture of stuff from both sections. For the longer takes, I just edited them down to something that seemed to fit.

Did you do anything else after the initial recording?

No, just editing. Nothing was added. Nothing was changed. Nothing was fixed. Every time I hear it, I kind of laugh, because it has a contradiction in it. How can we be so close that it sounds preconceived, but it's not? It's just like this conversation. I don't have these answers planned.

Yeah, but I've got a pretty firm roadmap of what I'm asking you. So while we could have a free-form conversation, this isn't really that. If what you're doing were guided by anything, I'd guess it's common knowledge and experience.

The most important thing for me is that we each accept who we are, that we are not trying to do something. We are just doing it. Because we accept who we are and who we are results from many different influences, we are not trying to represent a genre. There have been many genres in the past and there will be a thousand more genres in future, and maybe this is one of them. I don't know. But I'm not trying to be any genre.

That sounds liberating...

I like adventure. Life without adventure, without challenge, is just a dead body or dead mind or dead spirit. I have dreams, and then I try to fill those dreams with reality. We make those dreams come true. If I have only one sound, I am not dreaming.