

Biography



Musicians, by trade, are lifelong students. It's a simple fact that respected Kansas City bassist, bandleader, and composer **Bill McKemy** embraces with every fiber of his being. And as the 37-year-old carefully explains, you always have to be ready for that next lesson – no matter the source or the circumstances.

“The greatest thing about getting to play with high caliber people is the opportunity for growth that there is for me,” McKemy says. “The best way to learn is to be in bands with people that are soundly superior to you, whether it's a technical thing, a knowledge thing, or more of an internal energy or spiritual thing. The main thing is the opportunity to cross paths with

somebody who constructs their world as an improviser in a completely different way.”

For McKemy, that journey has brought him in contact with an impressive roster of musical mentors, including such renowned players as guitarist John Abercrombie, percussionist/*conguero* Pablo Batista, saxophonist Ted Nash, trombonist Bill Watrous, and 3-time Grammy Award-winning trumpeter Randy Brecker. But even considering how closely McKemy grew up to the traditional crossroads of jazz and the blues, it's still pretty remarkable that he embarked on this journey at all.

“I grew up on a farm a little over an hour outside of Kansas City and I had never heard anything that was presented to me as jazz until I was maybe 13 or 14 years old,” McKemy recalls. “There just wasn't any jazz in the schools or the community.”

Even at that age though, it wasn't the more digestible sounds of big band, swing, or cool bop that drew McKemy into a jazz orbit like so many others before him. Instead he was quickly enthralled by more challenging fare thanks to a generous teacher and the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*.

“The stuff that really stuck with me right off the bat was the selections from Ornette Coleman on there and the Charlie Parker tune ‘Koko,’” McKemy remembers with a grin. “That stuff just knocked me out. With tunes like ‘The Blessing’ or ‘Lonely Woman,’ it had something to do with the freedom but also the relaxation that they had. Contrast that with the Parker cuts that had this crazy frenetic sound with the zillion notes of virtuosity and overwhelming energy. Both had lot of power and impact. They were really breaking loose from the herd and weren't afraid to be outsiders. It was infused with so much personal energy and I heard that as such a liberating force.”

After completing his music degree, it didn't take long for McKemy to take the ultimate leap – from the quaint quietude of the Midwest to the bustling bandstands of Philadelphia.

“I went out to Philly and continued this habit of woodshedding three hours a day that I had done for years and had some lucky breaks right off the bat getting work,” McKemy says. “And I also got schooled in many different ways.”

After a few years in the Philly scene, a stint that was primarily built on the connections he made through AMLA

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(the *Asociación de Músicos Latinoamericanos*) and punctuated by a healthy exposure to that city's vibrant free jazz scene, McKemy began to feel the pull back to his Midwestern home. It was also a decision based on more distressing circumstances.

"I moved back to Kansas City in 1997 with some technical problems on the upright due to not studying the more classical traditions of the bass – tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome – to a pretty severe chronic level," McKemy recalls. "My wife and I came back to our families and I knew that the scene was robust, so I took about six months off and then slowly started to come back with some gigs."

However, McKemy's stint on the coast left him looking at the Kansas City scene in a whole new light.

"The kind of work that I found in Kansas City was playing standards in a mostly straightahead, conservative style," McKemy says. "That was fine, I still had lots to learn and I still do, but I got to a point pretty quickly where I had over 30 bookings a month but becoming more dissatisfied with the artistic level of what was happening. In Philly, the art aspect was so strong in the scene I ran in. So I got involved with Malachy Papers and started doing really adventurous free improv/rock-oriented improv by touring and recording with them."

But again, lifestyle decisions kept McKemy yearning to be closer to home but remaining committed to carving out a niche for himself as a player while also trying to draw in more contemporary sounds into the traditional Kansas City scene. It was within these next steps of the journey that McKemy found himself moving from his roll as a sideman to occupying the spotlight as a bandleader, a title that McKemy claims with modest apprehensions.

"My bandleader concept is essentially borrowed from Miles Davis and Joe Henderson," McKemy says. "I once read in an interview where Henderson once said 'I don't want to be a bandleader that tells people where to make an entrance or this or that. I just want to be a conduit of energy.' If there's anything I have a talent at, it's being able to spot in other musicians things that I can work well with, things I can amplify and play off."

McKemy now looks at such opportunities regardless of categorical style as part of his ongoing education, both for himself and his audiences.

"One of my new projects is a free improv/hip-hop trio with a turntablist and beat producer," McKemy says. "The reason I did it was because I hadn't done it yet. I thought maybe there's some stuff there I can learn. Sure, it's a completely different aesthetic than whatever people call straightahead jazz, but I don't really think of being a musician that wears different hats and tries to be this kind of guy one day and this other kind of guy the next day. Instead I want to be the same person but with so much integrated experience that I can be really rich and informed by everything else, even if it is a particular stylistic thing I might attempt only one time."

May 2004

[For booking information or other inquiries, please contact Bill McKemy at bill@billmckemy.com.]

Discography/Awards/Performance Credits

Recordings:

- Gillham Park Orchtet, *While Half Moon Swims to Shore*, 2004, Spoonbender Labs
- Toni Gates, *Outside the Lines*, 2003, independent
- Bill McKemy, *Om Nidrah*, 2003, Spoonbender Labs
- Bill McKemy, *Duende*, 2002, independent
- Malachy Papers, *Burning Parasol*, 2001, Audible Surgery
- Malachy Papers, *Demons*, 2000, Endless Records
- Malachy Papers, *Adult*, 2000, Burnt Orange
- Stan Kessler, *Jazz Meets Chant*, 1999, Standing Bear
- Malachy Papers, *Bone & Horn*, 1998, independent

Special Recognition and Awards:

- Best Local Jazz Album of 2003: *Om Nidrah ~ The Pitch*
- Featured Track: "Constant Conflict [Constant Evidence]" (from *Om Nidrah*) ~ NPR's "All Songs Considered"
- Top Ten of 2002: *Duende ~ Kansas City Star*
- Best Jazz Ensemble: Malachy Papers, 2000-2003 ~ *The Pitch*

Performance Credits:

- John Abercrombie
- Bobby Durham
- Edgar Bateman
- Pablo Batista
- Ted Nash
- Bill Watrous
- Earl Harvin
- Matt Chamberlain
- Fred Hamilton
- Khan Jamal
- Dave Pietro
- Skerik
- Carl Fontana
- Sam Dockery
- Randy Brecker

from *The Pitch* (October 9, 2003)

Best Local Jazz Album

Om Nidrah by Bill McKemy

Former Malachy Papers bassist Bill McKemy's debut disc, *Duende*, stuck to straightforward short-song structures, with mixed results. The tunes impressed even in their abbreviated form but felt as though they'd been snuffed shy of their full potential. For *Om Nidrah*, McKemy went into the studio with three skeletal compositions and fleshed them out with the help of Brian Baggett and Jake Blanton on guitars and Tom Morgan on drums. The tracks benefit from the additional breathing room, which allows for epic ebb-and-flow dynamics. — **Andrew Miller**

from *The Pitch* (August 14, 2003)

Naturo-Electro Musicians take on Paradise.

Bass players are always the artsy ones. Maybe it's because of their introverted souls. They did, after all, select an understated instrument. You'd be hard-pressed to find a longhaired guitar player giving a musical interpretation of contemporary art. Local bass player **Bill McKemy**, however, is doing just that.

Inspired by Greg Rose's landscape paintings on display in an exhibit called Paradise Redux at the Kemper Museum (4420 Warwick), McKemy and mixmaster Sterling Holman have paired for some very experimental jazz.

"I liked [Rose's] work, and I wanted the opportunity to put music to it," McKemy says. "We'll try to invoke the general kind of environment that he takes you to."

We're not sure where that environment is, but we think it's populated by Hawaiians who trip on acid. Rose's landscape paintings aren't quite landscapes. They're more like Japanese woodcarvings wearing L.A. tourist shirts. The flat, minimalist renderings represent trees and flowers but look like well-designed computer graphics. McKemy and Holman aim to reflect this with an ear to the synthetic as Holman samples, loops and manipulates McKemy's bass.

The Friday performance runs from noon to 1:30 p.m. Admission, which includes a boxed lunch, is \$8. Call 816-573-5784 for reservations.

– Sarah Smarsh

from *The Pitch* (May 15, 2003)

The Bill McKemy Quartet

In the seven months since the release of his solo debut, *Duende*, area jazz artist and former Malachy Papers bassist **Bill McKemy** has continued to grow. Whereas his previous effort was a moodily sentimental affair that featured a fistful of concise cuts, a sort of waking dream of ideas and notions shared among confidants in quiet conversation, his current *Om Nidrah* features a quartet of expansively ethereal tunes that allow for the sort of free breathing and free wheeling his compositions deserve. McKemy entered the studio with mere sketches of three of the disc's tracks, relying on the technical prowess and capable chemistry of bandmates Brian Baggett and Jake Blanton on guitars and Tom Morgan on drums. The disc's fourth tune, "Constant Conflict (Constant Evidence)," was a set-break sketch that arose from a jam-session gig this past December with the group and served as the impetus for McKemy's latest foray into the studio. Incidentally, *Om Nidrah* also marks McKemy's maiden voyage with the newly formed Spoonbender Labs label, a creative co-op recently founded by local musicians to promote Kansas City's quietly burgeoning art-music scene. — **John Kreicbergs**

The Bill McKemy Quartet. Thursday, May 25, at the Blue Room.

from the *Kansas City Star* (May 9, 2003)

McKemy's way

Bassist Bill McKemy has done it again. His first CD, "Duende," was one of last year's best surprises. Now, just nine months later, his second is another delight. The new one, "Om Nidrah," is full of hypnotic grooves and shifting chords. McKemy describes it best: "Kind of trancey and meditative in some ways, kind of country in another way."

Guitarists Brian Baggett and Jake Blanton intertwine and play off each other brilliantly. (Blanton's in the left channel, Baggett right.) Drummer Tom Morgan ("the best-kept-secret drummer in the region," McKemy says) propels and colors it with spirit and taste. And the whole thing dances over the leader's authoritative bass lines. All the tracks were recorded live in the studio.

About that title. McKemy says he chose it for two reasons: First, "It sounds vaguely yogic or Hindu, and I'm really big into all that stuff, for exercise and philosophy." Second, it's his hometown, Hardin, Mo., spelled backward.

McKemy will celebrate the album's release at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Blue Room, 1600 E. 18th St. There's no cover charge.

"Om Nidrah" comes to us from a local cooperative record label called Spoonbender. Let's hope they can give us many more of this quality.

And you thought two CDs in a year was a pretty good pace? McKemy says he's on track to release a third, "solo bass, and bass and electronica," very soon, for three in a year. — **Joe Klopus**

from *The Pitch* (December 19, 2002)

Bill McKemy's Loop Duo

One part jazz bassist and one part avant-garde experimentalist, area musician **Bill McKemy** has been busily forging his own path in 2002. With an ear for straight-ahead jazz, dub reggae and a wide array of Latin-American styles, McKemy synthesizes his influences into a unique sound. His solo debut, *Duende*, qualifies as one of the strongest creative statements to emerge from Kansas City in the past year. McKemy's upcoming performance at the Cup and Saucer in KC's historic River Market showcases the former Malachy Papers bassist alongside Lawrence guitarist Brian Baggett and will feature live sample- and loop-based improvisation. Sure to challenge traditionalists, McKemy's music injects the city's beleaguered jazz scene with a much-needed dose of artful daring. – **John Kreicbergs**
Bill McKemy's Loop Duo. Friday, December 20, at the Cup and Saucer.

from *The Pitch* (October 3, 2002)

Stone Free

Bill McKemy embraces his freedom and finds his *Duende*.

By John Kreicbergs

Despite Kansas City's resilient reputation as a jazz town, inconsistent audiences make Thursday-night gigs notoriously nerve-racking affairs for loyal players. For former Malachy Papers bassist Bill McKemy, a decent draw for his CD release party at the Blue Room must be a welcome sight. But as he circulates through the room between sets, McKemy remains on guard, as if the crowd could bolt out the door as soon as he turns his back.

McKemy slowly makes his way back to the stage for the evening's second set, moving from standards to cuts from his first solo outing, *Duende*. Becoming a frontman, he's learned, has its pros and cons.

"You've got about a thousand extra things to worry about besides the music," McKemy says. "The greatest thing about it is, I get to call the shots. I pick players who are great listeners, and that has amazing musical benefits. The creative control is a wonderful thing, but then on the other side, you have to do the legwork, promote the gig and take care of business."

The spotlight might be new to McKemy, but being onstage is definitely old hat. From the solemn quietude of Kirksville, Missouri's Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State University) to the never-ending bustle of the East Coast, McKemy has anchored a number of professional bands for more than ten years. Yet it was his work with KC's avant-garde free-jazz trio Malachy Papers that garnered him a healthy amount of local notoriety. Since leaving that outfit, he has continued his propensity for tonal daring with *Duende*.

"I had some material and some people I thought would work well together," McKemy explains. "It was a group that had never performed together, but I had performed with each of the people in a different context. No one had really seen the tunes before. We went to a place that's just a big open room -- a good-sounding room and good performance space -- where we could just play live and have it recorded. It didn't feel like a studio, and that, I think, worked to our favor. We read through the charts of the tunes, just doing a couple of rehearsal runs. By the time we were ready to do a real take, it was sounding the way I wanted."

McKemy's taste stands as a departure from the more traditional tones typically emanating from Kansas City clubs, and his choice of instrumental colors and collaborators on *Duende* represents an even more radical break from the norm.

"Brian Baggett played in Einstein Electric, a popular jam band," McKemy says of the disc's electric guitarist. "But his musical sensibilities are way beyond that. He's an organic player. Jeffery Ruckma is from a different scene completely," continues McKemy, with regard to the disc's accordion and melodica player. "He's played keyboards in rock bands, but he's spent most of the past twenty years doing new music and composing contemporary classical-type stuff." Rounding out this crew are Chicago-based drummer Ryan Bennett and Sterling Holman, who add electronica to *Duende's* final track.

As diverse as the disc's lineup sounds, it's nothing compared to the final product. Aptly titled, *Duende* takes its name from the Spanish word for spirit or muse, a word that carried some strong associations for twentieth-century Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. In Lorca's view, *duende* describes the ethereal life force that artwork possesses on its own. Ranging from rhythmic Latin numbers to eclectic spaciness, McKemy explores this mystical territory, even if the seeds of his ideas come from more traditional fruit.

"When I wrote the stuff, I was thinking about a traditional piano/bass/drums rhythm section with trumpet and tenor playing the lines, so it'd be like a Blue Note quintet," McKemy says. "Once I had written it, I was looking at what I had and thinking to myself, how could I make this more interesting and bring in some influences that really turn me on outside of mainstream jazz? Some of those influences are strong ambient rock, dub reggae and the tango compositions of Astor Piazzolla. At the time I made the recording, I was playing in a tango band and getting to see all these great Piazzolla compositions for the first time, so that was a big magnetic pull."

At least half of the tracks, however, were improvised, a challenge for any group but especially one without an established history of performing together.

"'Shard,' 'Phantom Necklace Made Entirely of Human Teeth,' 'Siesta in Bad Tolz,' those were all completely free," McKemy reveals. "Those were recorded with no discussion about anything: about key, about tempo, about the mood of the piece, who would play the lead."

Although *Duende* reflects the gift for free-

form dialogue McKemy and company share, it also challenges the ears of the traditionalists and preservationists who dominate Kansas City jazz audiences. Yet the younger listeners, those who have found their way to the fringes of contemporary jazz through groups such as Medeski, Martin and Wood, will find themselves right at home.

"The young audience is completely OK with free improvisation," McKemy enthusiastically offers. "They don't have any qualms about it. They're not going to raise their eyebrows for a second. If we're vamping over a certain chord and the guitarist and I are both sampling ourselves and playing over it, the young guys are with us all the way. There seems to be among that audience, for the most part, an incredibly open and receptive feeling about all music. When they go to hear things, they seem to carry with them this attitude of, 'Lay it on me; I want to hear what you have to say' rather than 'I'm here to hear this certain kind of thing, and if I don't receive this product as I perceive it, then I'm not going to be satisfied with my experience.' They're like, 'Yeah, freak out, go for it, do whatever.'"

When it comes to scaring off audiences that might not be as accepting of McKemy's atmospheric explorations, the young bassist takes an optimistic stance. "Kansas City has incredible potential, for the most part, because the musicians are here," he says. "There are musicians here that could be doing anything anywhere, and they're here, and that makes a great potential for something big and bold and new to happen in the future."

Although Kansas City's talent pool runs deep, McKemy tempers his enthusiasm when considering the uphill battle he often faces when booking gigs for his brand of cutting-edge jazz. Questions from club owners range from the inane ("So why don't you have a singer?" or "Will you guys play 'Satin Doll' and other requests?") to sheer skepticism ("Are you guys a jam band or something?").

"What Kansas City really needs is a club that is willing to take some chances because of its love for music," McKemy says. "I'm convinced that the majority of the audience for art music of whatever sort, but new jazz in particular, is largely untapped." McKemy pauses for a beat, then continues. "Part of it is also a historical perception of what Kansas City jazz is that might not always be so incredibly accurate. It could fit a number of different definitions depending who you are talking to. What is Kansas City jazz? That's a great question by itself."

from **JAM** (October/November 2002)



Bill McKemy
DUENDE

Personnel: Bill McKemy, double bass; Jeffery Ruckma, accordion, melodica; Brian Baggett, electric & acoustic guitar; Ryan Bennett, drums, cymbals; Sterling Holman, effects ("In the Grip")

Tracks: Hymn 4/1; Jacmel; 5 Years Gone; Crooked River; Shard; Phantom Necklace Made Entirely of Human Teeth; Siesta in Bad Tolz; In the Grip (Chicken Milk Mix)

Recorded at Wheeler Audio, Kansas City, KS; Korey Ireland, engineer; and Audible Surgery, Kansas City, MO; Sterling Holman, engineer.

Bill McKemy's new experimental CD, *Duende*, is a fully-formed work of art. From its hip three-fold cardboard cover, with artwork by Peregrine Honig and Brady Vest, to its eight tracks of mystical avant guardism, all originals, all art on this album appears to center from that improvisatory, instinctual force the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca called *duende*: "...that irresistible effectiveness of instinct....the roots held fast in the primitive slime we all know...from which comes everything that is substantial in art."

Thus cites Bob Mielke in the album's liner notes. And unity of vision and action seem to be the hallmarks of this album. As for vision, we get McKemy's master plan of uniting the somewhat asynchronous instrumentation of accordion (or melodica, its sister instrument), electric

guitar, double bass, drums, and electronic effects. However, oddly, beautifully enough, it works. As listeners, we are not jarred by this odd coupling, but instead a new pallet is added to the scene. I, for one, have heard nothing quite like it.

First, the album begins with a plaintive cry of accordion (or melodica) and bass, slow and easy-moving, followed by an explosive but gradual build, driven by bass and drums. It's energetic and forward-moving, always, something sometimes overlooked in experimental music, as is its temperance. Seldom are we taken over the walk stroll feel. A stroll in Rio, perhaps. At dawn.

Brian Baggett's subtle finger-pluck work on acoustic guitar on track three is a blend of flamenco and American classical guitar. It is beauty in simplicity, executed in runs that turn back upon themselves, completing the circle. And this is to accompany accordion, behind which we get a dramatic and roll-filled performance by Ryan Bennett, rolling over toms and cymbals reminiscent in style to Elvin Jones' backing of Coltrane on "Acknowledgment," the first track on *A Love Supreme*. It is in three words true balladic beauty.

This only goes to highlight one of the main strengths of this album, overall, which is interplay. These folks are really with each other here. They're in the pocket. They're calling and responding. They're leaving openings in their own solos so that true dialog, true musical conversation happens, interplay as intermeshed as on one of Keith Jarrett's many trio "standards" albums, where Jarrett, Peacock and DeJohnette turn three voices into one.

True beauty for a rhythm section. That is what McKemy and his group have achieved here.

-- Kevin Rabas