

BROWNMEN ELECTRYC TRIO

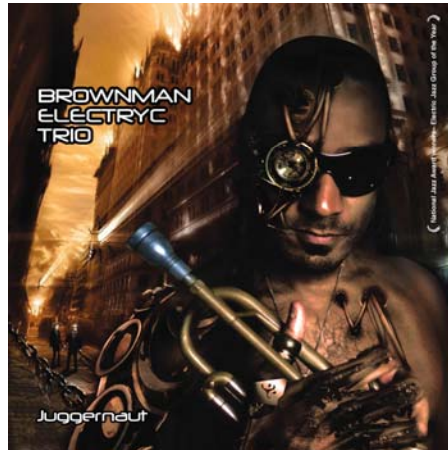
Juggernaut

[released Nov 28, 2009 on Browntasaurus Records]

Linear notes written by Daryl Angier:

This album captures trumpeter, bandleader and composer BROWNMEN (born "Nick Ali") and his Electryc Trio on a typical night in live performance at a packed small downtown jazz club. The recording provides ample evidence of why the group has become such a crowd-pleasing draw over the last few

years. The group's popularity led them to win a fan-voted Canadian National Jazz Award for "Electric Group of the Year" in 2007, virtually on the strength of their live shows alone. But before discussing the music on this record, it's worthwhile mentioning another show that is a particular highlight in the band's history.



In January of 2008, Toronto was ground zero for the jazz world as the city played host to the annual International Association of Jazz Educators Conference, an event that attracted a number of jazz luminaries to the city. Among the visiting dignitaries was trumpeter Randy Brecker, a pivotal figure in the controversial jazz-rock movement of the '60s and '70s, in town to play a show with his most devoted pupil and an expanded version of the Electryc Trio. Brownman has been one of Brecker's foremost disciples ever since he made a pilgrimage to New York City to study with him in the early '90s. A major part of Brownman's musical philosophy is inspired by Brecker's dedication to pushing the jazz tradition forward. "I came up through Freddie (Hubbard) and Miles (Davis), and Randy's the next evolution beyond those guys," says Brownman. The storyline for the show practically promoted itself: Master and Student on the same stage, set to battle each other in a display of improvisational skill, a passing of the torch from one generation of progressive musician to the next. The concert, which fully lived up to its billing, was recorded by CBC radio for national broadcast, certifying the Brownman Electryc Trio as one of the foremost jazz groups in the country today.

By the time of the show with Brecker, however, Brownman's credentials on the Canadian jazz scene were already well established. After he returned from his tutelage under Brecker in New York, he and his brother, alto saxophonist Marcus, became first-call players on Toronto's Latin jazz scene. Brownman's desire to assert his own musical personality led him to form CRUZAO, a five-piece Latin jazz funk band without a chordal instrument (piano or guitar) playing his original compositions, and co-led by Marcus. Following some struggles to get the innovation of his chordless concept noticed, things broke open for Brownman when he and the band won the GM Grand Prix de Jazz at the 2001 Montreal Jazz Festival. The prize included a one-record deal with Canada's leading jazz label, Montreal-based Justin Time Records. The resulting disc, *Shades of Brown*,

stayed at the top of the Canadian jazz charts for several weeks and garnered him his first National Jazz Award for "Composer of the Year" in 2002. In the years that followed, Brownman developed a career as a much-in-demand sideman and studio musician - he has amassed almost 300 recording credits - while leading a number of bands to satisfy his various overlapping interests in styles ranging from jazz and Latin to funk and hip-hop.

Not to be overlooked on his resume are his occasional engagements as musical director for major touring acts. It was his work in this capacity that led directly to his recent gig as the trumpeter in legendary rapper GURU's jazz-meets-hip-hop JAZZMATAZZ collective, a job that has taken him around the world and exposed him to a whole new audience of young fans. Guru, who had previously enlisted the legendary Donald Byrd and major American star Roy Hargrove to fill the trumpet chair, was impressed with Brownman's nasty, "Brooklyn" sound when the latter put a band together for a Toronto concert. He subsequently tapped him for a record date and a spot in the touring band. Jazzmatazz's relentless touring schedule over the last two years was one of the main impediments to Brownman finishing and releasing this long overdue debut record from the Brownman Electryc Trio.

As his musical vision has evolved since Cruzao first put him on the map, two trends have played out in how Brownman has assembled his own bands. The first trend might be described as Bigger is Better. This is evident in his creation of a 15-man version of Cruzao, and Marrón Matizado, an 11-piece salsa band. The other trend finds him moving in the opposite direction. His work in smaller settings includes playing in styles ranging from straight-ahead jazz, to freely improvised jazz and hip-hop, and of course the Electryc Trio that can be heard on this record exploring their own signature blend of thoroughly modern and accessible jazz fused with sophisticated funky urban rhythms and streetwise attitude.

In the last few years, however, Brownman's preference for playing in smaller ensembles has dominated. As his talents as an improviser have grown stronger, his desire to find a more personal form of expression has grown as well. "Most of the searching happens in the trios," he said in a 2007 interview for a magazine article. "It's hard to find a keyboard player who understands that." Similarly, the Electryc Trio was born when he decided to dispense with the vocal element in GRUVASYLUM, a group he formed with regular collaborator rapper MC Enlight that plays highly improvised jazz mixed with with hip-hop vocals.

"In that group, the grooves are very urban and the bass and drums function primarily as a platform for the rapper's improvised free-stylings, giving Enlight a solid sub-structure on which he can stand and preach. But when it was time for me to solo in that group, the rhythm section would switch to a more interactive 'jazz' approach, but in a funkified context. Around 2005, I got it in my head that I wanted to explore this texture more, but in a separate group. Without the constraints that come from providing vocal sub-structure, bass and drums can

take on very different roles, and the three of us end up in a sort of musical dance - and the exploration of that dance was what my objective was with the group.”

For fans of jazz from the last 40 years, the stylistic antecedents of the Electryc Trio are easy to discern. First and foremost is the music of Miles Davis, especially from the period that began with the 1969 albums *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, and that lasted until his death in 1991. On *Bitches Brew*, Davis took jazz music and made a hard right turn away from its acoustic traditions towards the electrified and amplified sounds of contemporary funk and rock music. This included “electrifying” his horn through the use of various effects (as Brownman does on this album), and, to borrow jazz historian Alyn Shipton’s words “abandoning the loose interaction of jazz rhythm playing for the taut, tightly controlled, on-the-beat sounds of rock.” On several albums in the early ‘70s, Davis married these elements with densely layered, hard blowing “free” playing that audiences often found puzzling and off-putting. But when he re-emerged in the ‘80s, Davis abandoned the avant garde elements in favour of a more accessible pop-oriented approach that allowed him to re-connect with a wider audience. It is this music from Davis’s electric period that most heavily informs the Brownman Electryc Trio’s musical philosophy. This is not to say that the Trio is simply aping the Davis band from this period. Brownman has been far too concerned with developing his own individual sound throughout his career to ever let that happen. Rather, the Electryc Trio carries forward Davis’s idea of making jazz music compelling and relevant to contemporary audiences by distilling it through the cultural touchstones of the day. Davis’s touchstones included Sly Stone and Jimi Hendrix, and later, Michael Jackson and Cyndi Lauper, whereas Brownman’s are artists of his own generation such as A Tribe Called Quest, Mos Def, Aphex Twin & Squarepusher.

To the conservative core of jazz traditionalists that fiercely guard the music’s acoustic roots and believe that jazz history ended in 1965 - not surprisingly, Brownman has had run-ins with the Canadian chapter of this cabal throughout his career - Davis’s later music is supposedly compromised by commercial considerations and does not merit serious discussion of its artistic merit. Nevertheless, his influence continues to ripple through the work of many of the most popular and respected jazz artists today. You can draw a straight line from Davis through Medeski Martin & Wood, The Bad Plus and even more acoustic-leaning players like Brad Mehldau. “It’s about the fearlessness and the ability to risk mixing genres,” says Brownman. “That’s what made Miles so brilliant for me - his ability to recognize what might work, then take a risk to try and make it work. I try and live by those tenets daily.” He says further, “That’s what my goal was with the group - to move sonically towards group interaction that was inspired and flavoured by Miles’s electric explorations, but still very much rooted in the sounds of today.”

Various first-call bass players and drummers from the Toronto scene have shuttled through the Trio’s lineup, dividing their time between it and other ensembles. What makes the current incarnation of the group (and hence this

album) special is that it has been constant since the beginning of 2006, facilitating the development of a high degree of group cohesion. It's clear from listening to the group interaction that each member of the Trio has developed a certain intuition about the musical personalities of the other two. Six-string electric bass player Tyler Emond was recommended to Brownman by drummer and Trio alumnus Larnell Lewis (currently touring with R&B queen Jilly Black), who studied with Emond in the renowned jazz studies program at Toronto's Humber College. A few weeks after Lewis's initial introduction, says Brownman, "I called [Emond] to sub into CHIVA, a Colombian Latin jazz group for which I'm the musical director, and he slaughtered that gig." Coincidentally, drummer Colin Kingsmore was a high school classmate of Lewis's who came to Brownman's attention as a member of KC Roberts and the Raw Blue. "This guy just killed me. He had great time, great feel, technique, and a real concept. And he HITS the drums, man! With authority. I only like working with drummers that REALLY hit."

The combination of the three players is a sound that often seems greater than the sum of its parts. "I can't believe there's only three of them up there" is a comment frequently heard at BET shows. They achieve that illusion through sheer musicianship on the one hand, and clever use of electronic effects on the other. At times, the electronics almost function as an additional member of the band. The following descriptions of the tunes on this record barely scratch the surface of how these human and electronic elements combine and coalesce. For a more complete understanding, multiple listenings will be required.

Yesteryear | by Brownman | 11:42

For the leadoff track, Brownman pays tribute to Jerome Kern's oft-recorded 1933 standard "Yesterdays" through wholly unconventional treatments. The doleful ballad is usually performed in a way that emphasizes the wistful, reflective quality of the lyrics and is rarely played any faster than at a medium tempo. But the Trio's rollicking version throws all that under the bus in favour of an approach that brings the nasty right from the start. Brownman transmutes the mournful melody into a dark-edged dance full of tension; a spurned lover crashing around the dance floor spoiling for a fight rather than drowning his sorrows at the bar.

It begins with bass and drums laying down a fast & funky beat. Brownman plays a brief preamble before stating the main theme that will still be familiar to jazz traditionalists even as it is propelled into the 21st century through the futuristic sound of his synth-wah pedal & syncopations. He then launches into a solo in his muscular, loquacious improvising style that deploys a barrage of notes in rapid-fire rhythmic motifs. He repeats his phrases and then modifies them in unpredictable ways, pausing only occasionally. Around three minutes in, when it seems he may have made all the points he wants to make and is on the verge of rapping up, he engages the super-shifter pedal and takes the proceedings to a higher level of excitement while drummer Kingsmore spurs him on. Emond then announces himself as an important new voice on electric bass with a well-structured, fleet-fingered solo that reaches several peaks as he explores the upper reaches of his instrument's range. Meanwhile, Brownman's use of an octave pedal to play a "bass" line behind him also provides an instance of

creating the illusion of a phantom fourth member of the band. The illusion is heightened during a series of trading between Kingsmore and Brownman where the latter employs a different effect with each exchange. He finishes off (in the full length unedited version) with a humorous quote from “The Flintstones” theme before bringing things back to where they started and then disappearing into the distance with short, reverbed tones.

Stolen Moments | by Oliver Nelson, arranged by Brownman | 10:44

Another jazz standard that is vastly re-worked by the Trio, Oliver Nelson’s classic tune from his 1961 album “Blues and the Abstract Truth” is usually played as a laid back, easy-swinging blues, similar to the manner in which it was originally recorded. (The original recording also featured trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, one of Brownman’s most important influences.) The three-note vamp that is the backbone of the song’s chorus proves to be an effective launching point for the Trio’s buoyant House music-inspired version of the tune. For the statement of the main theme, Brownman thickens his bright, brassy sound with a chorus pedal and adds some delay to provide another House element to the sound that is established by Kingsmore’s rolling high-hats & Emond’s fat bass line. The three of them get down to dancing again in Brownman’s synth-wah solo, while Emond works out furiously in Jaco-esque style behind him. The young bassist then follows with a heavily synth-effected solo turn that sounds like an entirely different instrument. Brownman layers on more rhythm with additional percussion as the whole thing treads into territory that will be familiar to those who enjoy the modern-day disco of bands like Jamiroquai. Bring your own glow sticks for this one.

26-2 | by John Coltrane, arranged by Brownman | 9:07

Master saxophonist John Coltrane composed and recorded this tune during his years with the Atlantic label when he was pushing his “sheets of sound” approach to chord changes as far as it could go. Even for virtuoso musicians like Brownman, the tune is difficult to master because it features a chord change every two beats. Not surprisingly, the Trio doesn’t re-invent this one quite as radically as they do some other standards. However, they still put their own unique spin on it, trading the original hard-bop rhythm for hip-hop back-beat. Brownman’s solo respects Coltrane’s original reading but is still flavoured with his own tart approach as he deftly runs the chord changes. Emond bumps along underneath him, shadowing Brownman in some spots and playing counterpoint in others. At the 3:50 mark, Emond provides a melodious backdrop to a measured cascade of notes from Brownman and then launches into his own solo. The tune provides an excellent display of the skill of the musicians in laying out a challenging melodic line without letting it become a dry academic exercise.

Evolution Revolution | by Brownman | 9:41

One of two original compositions by Brownman on the record, this track demonstrates that his ability to create deeply involving tunes of his own is every bit the equal of his interpretive strengths. The song, inspired by Brownman’s belief that there needs to be a revolution in the evolution of hip-hop music, opens with Brownman stating the main theme alone with the synth-wah pedal engaged.

Emond and Kingsmore drop in after eight bars with a mid-tempo hip-hop groove that is sure to get heads nodding on the downbeat, thanks to Kingsmore's hard hitting that Brownman loves so much. For his solo, Brownman engages his super-shifter pedal so that the open trumpet sound is mirrored by a tone a fourth below, and then pumps it up and down throughout to create a build and release of tension. Channeling the spirit of Miles and the teachings of Brecker, he begins his solo in atypical fashion for him with short statements of long tones separated by suspense-building pauses and then gradually becomes more verbose. As the solo builds to a series of flurries, Kingsmore helps drive the tune to ecstatic heights with crashing cymbals that indicate the Revolution has indeed begun.

Just when it seems like the tune is over, Emond's dark, wide bass line and Kingsmore's gradually building, increasingly frenetic drumming steer it into a drum'n'bass section. With the tone-doubling effect of the super shifter still engaged, Brownman adds layers of ambience over the rhythm with long tones and short bursts of notes that are made even thicker through the use of digital delay. The effect is thrilling and we're reminded of Brown's love for Squarepusher in these moments. By creating improvised sounds on stage that are normally only "played" using electronic means in a recording studio, the Electryc Trio proves the truth of the words of jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron; "the Revolution will be live".

Juggernaut | by Brownman | 5:44

Another Brownman original, this drum'n'bass flavoured "sci-fi" tune, as Brownman calls it, gets its inspiration from the Marvel Comics villain of the same name; an unstoppable force once he works up a head of steam. Likewise, the tune begins with a stop-start rhythm that darts and dodges around while Brown plays one of his longest passages of un-effected horn on the record. The Trio is joined on stage by Luisito Obregoso, the conguero from CRUZAO, who helps get the rhythm rolling in a Cuban influenced pace worthy of a \$200 speeding ticket underneath Brownman's ridiculously acrobatic solo displays an abundance of high-end technical facility. The whole band stops on a dime at the end of the solo for a brief interlude that features some tricky syncopations before dashing to a finish reminiscent of the old Spiderman cartoons.

The cover art for this CD features a photo-manipulation by California graphic designer Dean Shu, who was the winner of an international competition held by Brownman Music Inc. involving artist submissions from 17 countries. The artists were given a picture of Brown and asked to "borgify" him. The results of Dean's work were so evocative of a technological juggernaut that this album was renamed from it's working title of "Raw & Unadulterated" to it's current apt title.

Red Clay | by Freddie Hubbard, arranged by Brownman | 15:55

Alongside the obvious the hip-hop and urban influences, the Electryc Trio finds much of its inspiration in the jazz-rock era of the '70s, it's not surprising that many of their finest moments can be found in their interpretations of some of the classic tunes from that era. The Trio's funky deconstruction of Herbie Hancock's Headhunters hit "Chameleon," for example, seamlessly encompasses the entire

history of urban music and will hopefully make it onto the group's next record. For now, we have their equally worthwhile version of Freddie Hubbard's "Red Clay," a fitting encore. The tune is one of the high points from a series of albums Hubbard made with producer Creed Taylor for the CTI label and is a particular favourite of Brownman's. "There's something about 'Red Clay' that just speaks to me on every level as a musician. It's irreverent and funky yet soulful and introspective all at once."

The lengthy tune is anchored by Emond's statement of the classic bassline and Kingsmore's hip-hop prowess, halted here and there by emphatic stop-time breaks. Some writers have observed how Brownman's notey improvising style represents a continuation of the tradition of the great bebop trumpeters that runs from Roy Eldridge through Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown, Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw. While these comparisons are accurate, they risk putting in the shade Brownman's ability to play in a more relaxed, lyrical style as can be heard here. His solo is filled with space and considered pauses that necessarily recall the work of Miles. It also features some of the best use of the effects pedals on the entire record. In some sections, he seemingly twins himself, playing the open horn sound off against the synth tones, scoops and digital delay. He even sounds like two horns playing different lines simultaneously in spots. Emond takes a solo that begins in the same lyrical territory before ramping up to a swelling, rock-guitar attack that somehow retains a slightly wistful quality. All that's missing from the energetic finish are a couple of smashed instruments and amps in flames.

A lot has happened in the months since the performance on this album was originally recorded. In the jazz world, for example, the 2008 International Association of Jazz Educators conference in Toronto that brought Randy Brecker to town turned out to be the final gathering for that organization after it imploded in a cloud of financial malfeasance a few months later. The scandal foreshadowed what was to come in the wider world. By the end of the same year, the world had entered one of the greatest periods of economic uncertainty since the Great Depression with no clear end in sight at the time of this writing. These dour events are worth mentioning if only to point out the stark contrast between the irrepressible spirit of Brownman's music and the context in which it will be heard. Which makes me think that if the world is coming to an end, I can't think of better music than Brownman's to get down to at the final party.

-- Daryl Angier | Aug 2009, Toronto

Daryl Angier is the former editor-in-chief of the acclaimed Canadian jazz magazine CODA and is currently a freelance jazz journalist in Toronto. He is both one of Brownman's most favourite wordsmiths and people, and - though quick to deny it - jumped up and down when asked to write these linear notes.

Brownman would like to thank:

Tyler & Colin first and foremost - my brothers. The chemistry the trio has always astounds me, and I think it's in no small way due to the tendrils of connectivity that exist between the 3 of us. I appreciate their genius as much as their friendship. Mike Auty at the Central, without whose idea to record that night, this record would not exist. Ashton Price (& Gerardo) for their mixing brilliance in Logic. Nick Blagona - the mastering wizard. Dean Shu for giving me a prosthetic eye (so cool!). Kristy Morin, whose endless supply of love and support demonstrates she's truly my number 1 fan (and the hottest). Luisito Orbegoso for being un juggernaut de congas. Andrew McIntosh for being my right-hand man. Daryl Angier for his mastery of the language. Mama Brown for instilling the insanity in my genes to pursue my increasingly maddening visions no matter how they may be perceived. Papa Brown for teaching me the rigors of logic, pragmatism & chess... & that our time here is limited - so get busy living. Marcus Ali, my older-younger brother, who I always miss when he's not beside me on stage. Randy Brecker (my other father) for being my musical hero... in many many ways without him, I would not exist. Aaron Staebell & Rodney Appleby - the USA permutation of B.E.T. - and everyone in Buffalo who has supported us over the years at the Allen St. Hardware Cafe (thank you Mark Goldman, Clayton & Scotty!). The Trane Studio & The Rex for letting me use your venues as incubators for my growth. JazzFM, CBC Radio, The Toronto Star (Ashante) & The Sun (Eroll) for their support of my projects over the years. Eliana for being my friend through everything. Plato, Aristotle & Socrates whose tenements I live by. Miles Davis... for being. To everyone who ever played in B.E.T. - Mark Rogers, Larnell Lewis, Aubrey Dayle, Pat Kilbride, Paul DeLong, Jeff Halischuk, Dane Wedderburn, Ross MacIntyre, Max Senitt, Daniel Barnes, Paco Luviano, Ian D'Souza, Ben Miller, Jack Kulp, Greg Chudzik, Daniel Powell, Lionel Williams & anyone else I may have forgotten. But most of all I want to thank YOU. For having this record in your hands and reading these words right now. I hope you'll stick around for the ride. My deepest thanks. :)

A'ight, I'm out. Peace.

- Brownman