



# PER-ÅKE HOLMLANDER

BY JOHN SHARPE

Per-Åke (pronounced *Per-Oak-eh*) Holmlander's first meeting with the tuba happened almost by chance. When his school wind band was looking for someone to play tuba, the 12-year old Swede was one of the few students physically developed enough to cope with the brass behemoth. It's just as well that he was, otherwise many of the world's finest large improvising ensembles would be the poorer for his absence. Holmlander has been a fixture in the Barry Guy New Orchestra (BGNO), the Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet, Mats Gustafsson's Nu Ensemble and Fire! Orchestra, Ken Vandermark's Territory Band and Resonance Ensemble, and Paal Nilssen-Love's Large Unit, as well as smaller outfits like Swedish Azz. He's also a prolific writer and musician for theater.

Although it was as a drummer that Holmlander first started playing jazz with friends, he began to incorporate the tuba too, and it gradually took over. However, role models were hard to come by: "Almost no one plays the tuba. At that time in the '70s-80s, it was a lot of Bob Stewart, of course, and Howard Johnson. My favorite is Joe Daley. I think he's amazing. I listened to other kinds of music and got inspiration, but not so much from tuba players. Not much stealing licks." He attended the classical conservatory in Stockholm while still playing in jazz bands, and eventually gravitated towards the Swedish Radio Jazz Orchestra, where he accompanied guests including Swedish trombonist Eje Thelin and American tenor saxophonist/bass clarinetist David Murray. But meeting English bassist Barry Guy was a pivotal moment in his career. Holmlander explains, "They started a new project in this Radio Jazz group with more modern big band music, and one of the first guests was Barry Guy."

Guy was quickly impressed: "I first heard Per-Åke's playing in a workshop band performing my composition 'Harmos' for the Swedish Radio. The tuba part is very important in this piece, and his assured reading of the part, plus original improvisations,

marked him already as a potential future collaborator. And so it transpired that Per-Åke was the natural choice when I was formulating the personnel for the BGNO. Per-Åke contributed so much energy and unique musical colors to the ensemble interplay and performed my scores to perfection. The balance of flexibility and intensity ensured a solid foundation in the BGNO."

Gustafsson, his partner in Swedish Azz and elsewhere, is similarly full of praise: "[He's] the best tuba player I have ever had the pleasure to work with. The technical skills are beyond good... One of the best hidden secrets on the scene. His musicality and imagination is OUT. And IN at the same time." Such proficiency meant that Holmlander proved a good fit for other bands exploring the intersection between composition and free improvisation. Already a part of Gustafsson's Nu Ensemble, a musician exchange between Stockholm and Chicago introduced him to Ken Vandermark. He first joined Vandermark's Territory Band and then the Resonance Ensemble in Europe.

Later came the Brötzmann Chicago Tentet. Holmlander waxes enthusiastic: "Peter called me and then he would make a completely new formation of the Tentet. So, myself and Paal, and also Magnus Broo, joined the group. [The Tentet] is the group I have played most with, 120 gigs or something. Peter is something special, he's really amazing." Holmlander's arrival coincided with the group abandoning charts. "I just played some written stuff in one rehearsal," he says, "but then we played for so many years and all improvised. And it worked really good in that group."

Involvement in such an array of touring bands led to a decline in Holmlander's theater work. "For many years, I made a lot of music for the theater," he reports. "Mostly I was acting on stage too. That's where Mats and I really played the first time. I did this in parallel for a long time, but then the tuba, the music, the improvisation took over more and more. In the theater, you play for months and you have strict schedules, so it's hard to combine."

In spite of appearing on over 100 recordings, Holmlander doesn't crave the spotlight. Is that something he would like to change? "No, that's not so important," he says. "But it's nice to play with smaller groups—then you can have your own voice and you can hear it." However, there is one project where he is indisputably the leader: his wryly titled *Carliot: It's Never Too Late Orchestra* (Carliot is his

middle name). "It started off in Krakow where you have Not Two Records," Holmlander explains. "I've been in so many of these projects with Barry, Ken, Peter and Mats. So then I asked the organizer (Marek Winiarski), perhaps I can do it once? He said yes, of course. In this band was two of my groups: Inner Ear with Mikołaj Trzaska, Steve Swell, Tim Daisy and me, and also Parti & Minut, the trumpet player Johan Norin and drummer Christopher Cantillo, and then I also had some more musicians. I had written so much music over the years. You write for theater and then you play it for some months, and then it's down to the cellar and never played again. And there were some nice tunes and I thought, 'Ah, I can take this'. The oldest tune I think I wrote in 1980." After a week in Krakow, they also performed in Italy, Norway and Denmark, before Covid hit.

What next? "I made some small things with Mats, and our main thing in the Oslo Jazz Festival is Hidros 9, with more than 20 musicians, and I'm one of the solo players. A Fire! Orchestra recording with 34 or 36 musicians will come." He adds, "I go to Norway to play with [Nilssen-Love's] Large Unit. We have a ten-year anniversary with the Large Unit, so three days in Oslo and then some concerts around Norway. Six or seven Ethiopian musicians and one Brazilian. Akira Sakata on alto, and Terrie Ex. We will do lots of activity with the Large Unit because it's ten years, and things are starting up again after Covid." Since 2005, Holmlander has played NYC twice: with the Brötzmann Chicago Tentet at the since-defunct Tonic and in 2015 with the Large Unit at Brooklyn's First Unitarian Congregational Church. Here's hoping for a Holmlander stateside return sooner than later, regardless of context.

For more info visit [carliot.org](http://carliot.org)

#### Recommended listening:

- Fredrik Ljungkvist—*Yun Kan 12345* (Caprice, 2003)
- Parti & Minut—*Från klart till haloklart* (El Dingo, 2011)
- Per-Åke Holmlander/Tim Daisy—*On The A and On The B* (Not Two, 2013-14)
- Per-Åke Holmlander—*Carliot: It's Never Too Late Orchestra* (Not Two, 2017)
- Mats Aleklint/Per-Åke Holmlander/Paal Nilssen-Love—*Fish & Steel* (PNL, 2018)
- Agustí Fernández Ensemble—*Via Augusta* (Sirulita, 2019)

## LEST WE FORGET



# RAY DRAPER

BY PIERRE CRÉPON

In 1969, on day two of the Amougies Festival, an unannounced figure carrying a bulky instrument stood on the stage in the Belgian countryside. It was cold and misty and late on that October day. The musician in question, guesting with Don Cherry's trio, was tubist Ray Draper, 29, there by virtue of several leaps across space and seas, but mostly time: a "revenant" as one report noted.

In a way, Amougies, with its never-to-be-repeated-again lineup mixing the latest free jazz and current rock music, was where Draper was supposed to be. A jazz tubist, composer and arranger, he had nonetheless spent the past year leading a rock combo

on the West Coast. The band, Red Beans & Rice, had made a mostly unsuccessful LP for Epic, with Draper contributing vocals. In that capacity, he had also scored a soundtrack placement in the movie *Last Summer*.

Draper had also been there at the beginnings of free jazz as a movement. Back in 1963, seemingly ages ago, the music was not heard much farther than Greenwich Village. Draper played in a band through which passed Cherry, Clifford Thornton, Ed Blackwell, Billy Higgins and Ferrell Sanders when he was not yet Pharoah.

"We were very crazy then, you know, and New York was very wild that summer," Draper told British photographer and writer Valerie Wilmer. "There were things beginning to happen new music-wise; cats were beginning to be more *daring* and do their thing out loud, whereas before they were holding back and you could only hear this music through walls or windows. But to walk into a club, man, and everybody just be *blowing*—that was something that hadn't been done!"

Yet Draper was not in complete harmony with 1969's happenings. He was not at ease with free music's latest developments, the abandonment of

the structures still found in Ornette Coleman's music or the discarding of the beat. It was as if something had passed him by while he was out West, away from *this* music's epicenter, but close to the emerging psychedelia, putting him in a position of observer.

Another leap in time had preceded the Cherry and Sanders days. A jail sentence following a drug arrest engulfed Draper's early twenties, on the heels of a promising late '50s career start. Often considered a prodigy, Draper made his mark between the ages of 16 and 18. A bass-line instrument in early jazz, the tuba had been chased off the scene by the bass in the '30s, before Miles Davis' landmark 1949-50 *Birth of the Cool* reintroduced it as an ensemble member. But it was the young Draper (who cited Bill Barber, tubist on those Davis sessions, as a reference) who moved the instrument into a starring position.

"I met Ray at Birdland during a Sunday afternoon 'battle of the bands' in 1956," pianist Jon Mayer told *The New York City Jazz Record*. "He knew his way around the jazz scene in NYC. He asked if I would join his band, which had Pete La Roca on

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drums. Ray and I became very close and I got to know Ray's family pretty well. His father was a Swing era trumpeter named Barclay Draper. The family home on 106th Street and Manhattan Ave. hosted a lot of players. I particularly remember meeting Milt Jackson there one night and him teaching me 'Round Midnight'. Ray was an easygoing, gentle soul who enjoyed life."

Draper's late-'50s moment in the spotlight included a recording debut with Jackie McLean, followed shortly by a date under his own name while still only 16, appearing in the "Miscellaneous Instrument" category of *DownBeat* polls, having John Coltrane as a sideman on two more leader dates, and joining Max Roach's band.

A move to Los Angeles ca. 1964 preceded extensive travels that found Draper, around the Amougies moment, playing in Paris with Jamaican saxophonist Kenneth Terroade, embroiled in London in Michael Abdul Malik's Black House and picked up in Amsterdam by New Orleans musician Dr. John. This association led to his presence, with Mick Jagger and Eric Clapton, on Dr. John's opium-fueled *The Sun, Moon & Herbs*, as well as in some episodes of the pianist's tell-all autobiography.

More leaps in time followed. Draper's name rarely appeared in print or on back covers in the '70s. Some exceptions included Archie Shepp's *There's a Trumpet In My Soul* (1975) and a "rag 'n' roll" effort by vocalist Cathy Chamberlain. As twilight was about to end on November 1, 1982, four figures stood outside 234 W. 111th Street in Harlem. One raised a gun and Ray Draper was dead at 42. Night fell on New York, shrouding a murderer still faceless to this day. The list of musicians who attended the benefit held for Draper's two children, Kyela and Hakim, is too long to reproduce. "What are you here for? do it, fool / and everything will be cool / don't wait, the hour grows late," Draper once wrote.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Jackie McLean & Co.—*Introducing Ray Draper & Tuba* (Prestige, 1957)
- Ray Draper Quintet—*Featuring John Coltrane* (Prestige New Jazz, 1957)
- Jackie McLean—*Plays Fat Jazz* (Jubilee, 1957)
- Ray Draper—*A Tuba Jazz* (Jubilee, 1958)
- Max Roach—*Deeds, Not Words* (Riverside, 1958)
- Sonny Criss Orchestra—*Sonny's Dream* (*Birth of the New Cool*) (Prestige, 1968)

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**TNYCJR:** Bob Stewart on Arthur Blythe's albums, that style that anticipates Zooid—was that part of your development?

**JD:** I think that was later, because I was getting introduced to that type of playing when I started playing with Henry (Threadgill) and figuring out Chicago (style), that type of open stuff. Those guys are geniuses. Take your music (holds his fingers together tightly) and make it expand.

**TNYCJR:** In Zooid, you're playing such an interesting contrapuntal role. You're in the bottom range and it's more like a baroque bassline, an independent melodic line.

**JD:** Yeah, it's like that: rhythmic counterpoint. Everything bounces off everything; everybody has a very independent nature and it all adds to the rhythm. But at the same time you're not in charge. This is a collective contrapuntal rhythm gel that

starts to happen. It's developed itself that way, I think because of the way Henry has heard us play over the years.

Definitely, I'm feeling things in a whole different way. Henry's always suggested so many ways of interpreting the music that we have. He has made it so I can either ground it, or it does bounce, which is that dance. Again, I don't mind playing a regular bass battle. In that group there are plenty of places in that music where it just feels so good, just leaving it alone. Henry's been super open, letting me find things in the music as well. As long as you're within the harmonic structure, as long as we all understand that, he allows for a lot of freedom. There's a lot of trust.

We all manage to contribute in some type of rhythmic and harmonic way, at the same time not getting in anybody's way. Because that can happen very easily. You don't have a guitar playing straight chords, because that can just demolish everything. But he doesn't—he plays all this other stuff. The same thing with (cellist) Chris (Hoffman) and myself, because sometimes we switch that role. I go into the middle and he goes to the bottom, which is something I started playing and Henry was like, "Oh man, that sounds cool." There's so much that we've evolved into to realize the Zooid project—it's really taken it to incredible levels. It's extremely modular: take one piece out, you can bring it back, put it around and flip it around—you can just do whatever you want to do.

With Henry, there is a very precise nature to his composing. In rehearsal sometimes he'll say, "These bars are boom, boom, boom, boom." But the way all those pieces fit has a sort of precision; working together becomes essential, even when it's loose. It's very, very cool.

**TNYCJR:** What are your own things you're working on?

**JD:** I'm concentrating my efforts now on composition. I have a recording that will hopefully be released by somebody. So that's in the works. And then music for continued projects—and start moving myself out into the free world.

*Davila is at Mark Morris Dance Center with Very Very Circus: The Music of Threadgill May 7 as part of Bang On A Can Long Play Festival. See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Henry Threadgill Zooid—*Up Popped The Two Lips* (Pi, 2001)
- Steve Lehman Octet—*Travail, Transformation, And Flow* (Pi, 2008)
- Henry Threadgill Zooid—*In for a Penny, In for a Pound* (Pi, 2014)
- Henry Threadgill—*Double Up, Plays Double Up Plus* (Pi, 2017)
- Liberty Ellman—*Last Desert* (Pi, 2019)
- Ray Anderson Pocket Brass Band—*Come IN* (Double Moon, 2020)

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talk about the label, and it is clear that Boomslang is a community and has a collective identity: the musicians cross-pollinate, record on each other's releases and share gigs. To the outside world they represent a real cohesive force. As Vogel notes, "A lonesome wolf doesn't create as much attention in a forest as a whole pack. If we all howl together, somebody might hear it out there." And howl they do.

For more info visit [boomslangrecords.bandcamp.com](http://boomslangrecords.bandcamp.com)



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