



Larry Grenadier, Mark Turner, Jeff Ballard

Fly

It's the night after Valentine's Day, and the members of Fly are warming up—with cups of herbal tea—in the Village Vanguard's austere furnished back room. Drummer Jeff Ballard, bassist Larry Grenadier and tenor saxophonist Mark Turner are about to play the final sets of a week-long run, but the mood is one of beginnings rather than endings. Their self-titled debut on Savoy is just arriving in stores, marking the public introduction of the band. And this gig—their first since recording eight months ago—has bolstered their hope that the music will be warmly received.

"What we do in this band," Ballard says, "is work collectively. I always use gears and mechanics as an analogy. The way we've written the tunes, there are these functional elements. A bass arpeggio may be outlining the chords, but it's also laying down the rhythmic foundation, which any of us might respond to. It's wide, it's not constricted. But what I love about it is the interdependency."

Turner expands the idea: "We're trying to distill that element of interdependency within the repertoire. We've been writing music where the tunes themselves will make that apparent. And the solo sections are engineered, in a sense, with that in mind."

The music bears out his point. Earlier in the week, the band had opened a set with "Fly Mr. Freakjar," which at one point features a round robin of solo statements over a roiling polyrhythmic pattern in 10/8 time. Born out of a percussive concept, appended with a melody and fleshed out through several rounds of revisions by each member of the group, it stands as a testament to collaborative creative energies. (The song title, an anagram of the musicians' three first names, also inspired the band's name.)

The roots of Fly stretch as far back as the late '70s, when Grenadier and Ballard first met as high school students in Northern California. Their musical kinship was solidified in college, and while they went separate ways upon reaching New York—Grenadier usually with the Brad Mehldau Trio, and Ballard most visibly with Chick Corea—the two musicians maintained a deep rapport. Turner, who also spent formative years in California, crossed paths with both of them, often sharing a bandstand with Ballard in the Kurt Rosenwinkel Quartet.

Ultimately, the three musicians took their first steps as a band under Ballard's name, on Corea's 2000 compilation album *Originations* (Stretch).

Turner, who was until recently a Warner Bros. artist, helped arrange the trio's record deal. Called upon by Savoy's then-A&R man Steve Backer to sign on for a solo album, the saxophonist demurred. "As a leader, you have to think about musical and extra-musical issues," he explains. "And I didn't want that. Yet I wanted to have an influence on the music. So this trio really seemed like an ideal solution."

Grenadier enthusiastically echoes the thought. "Because we've all been sidemen a lot, the idea of playing in a collective band—it's completely inclusive of everything we've done. All the experience of all the different bands we've played with is absorbed in this group. It's unique, it's free, it's democratic. It's beautiful. And it can be harmonically rich or very bare bones and stripped down."

As demonstrated both at the Vanguard and on disc, Fly does span a range of dimensions. Turner's "Stark" begins almost as a lullaby, its gentle pulse derived from a four-note ascending bass figure—then tumbles into a coolly frantic double-time, before returning to quietude. Ballard's "Child's Play," inspired by a Ghanaian rhythm, rides successive waves of crescendo and decrescendo, like a small craft at high sea. And Grenadier's "JJ," dedicated not to trombonist J.J. Johnson but to session bass ace Jerry Jemmott, delivers a frankly funky solo vehicle, albeit one with occasionally irregular meters. All told, this is music that expands and contracts, effortlessly and dramatically—and that balances the cerebral components of group improvisation with the more gut-level elements of groove.

Fly does face some imminent challenges, especially where collective identity is concerned. "The record's going to be in his bin," says Ballard, gesturing in Turner's direction. The saxophonist nods with grim recognition and say, "It says 'Mark Turner Trio' on the marquee outside."

Turner, the only one of the three players with a solo discography, is bucking a tenor-led trio tradition made famous at the Vanguard by Sonny Rollins. But Fly has a different formula in mind, both musically and conceptually. As for public perception, Grenadier gamely if cryptically sums up the band's intentions: "We're working on that." **NATE CHINEN**