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LIVE REVIEW

Peter Urpeth and Evan Parker at Hundred Years Gallery

ON 9 FEBRUARY 2023 · (LEAVE A COMMENT)

Peter Urpeth and Evan Parker

(Hundred Years Gallery, 28 January 2023. Live Review and drawings by Geoff Winston)



Evan Parker. Drawing by Geoff Winston. All Rights Reserved

Poet **Peter Urpeth** and saxophonist **Evan Parker** go back a long way, some 40 years, to when Urpeth joined Parker as pianist in an improvising trio. Their evening at the intimate Hundred Years Gallery celebrated Urpeth's new book of poems, *The 4000 Nights of New York in 1988*, which he introduced as an autobiographical collection, written for performance and relating to significant times in his life in Dalston, New York, and the Cairngorms where he now lives.

'Evan plays, then I read,' he explained before reciting *Scald – A Mouth Rune*, a poem riven with the earthly textured imagery which runs through a strand of his works: 'To you / who soaked a bird corpse / in pine sap / to make a winter lamp'.

Urpeth's plain-speaking delivery of his richly crafted texts and upbeat anecdotal commentary, alongside Parker's mesmerising playing on soprano sax held the audience's rapt attention throughout

Many poems were reflective, formulated on long walks in Cairngorms, as he came to terms with the death in 1997 of writer Kathy Acker, with whom he was close for several years. Their friendship took in the Makeshift Club which he ran in Dalston in the '80s, the subject of his second reading, *Quixote in Dalston*, 'that scene of dykes and bois / and art jazz noise' (Dudu, Moholo and Dyani are mentioned) and their time living in New York, where, when it came to reciting the poem that gives the collection its title, 'not everything went to plan.' New York, for Urpeth is, as he wrote in *Morton Street*, '... the city / that always weeps.'

Evan Parker's multi-phonetic, multi-layered playing on soprano sax was intense, transcendental and technically extraordinary, yet underlying it all there is a profound clarity in its essence. As always, concentration on the part of the listener yields a mesmerising experience and an appreciation of the emotional and structural complexity of his playing as layers are identified and revealed.

Between Parker and Urpeth there was a relaxed understanding, and their reflections on players in the New York jazz scene were amusing and insightful. Urpeth read a series of poems drawn from jazz-related notes, titled with consecutive numbers. In *One*, Parker is the subject: 'Evan Parker was walking by Central Park. His hand was holding the handle of a battered sax case ... brother Evan played a thousand notes to the passing skyscrapers ...', and in *Three* 'Evan ... could not tell where his sax began and his lungs ended,' which prompted a 'yeah' from Parker. Others focussed on John Coltrane, Albert Ayler in Stockholm with Cecil Taylor, and Sunny Murray.

Parker countered with a story which had Coltrane entering the mens' room at the Half Note playing 1,000 notes, followed by his own encounters with Cecil Taylor which led to them recording together, but characterised by Taylor's disappointment that fellow revellers couldn't keep up with him at 6am 'when things were just warming up!'



Peter Urpeth. Drawing by Geoff Winston. All Rights reserved

Urpeth also talked about the vital Manna House Workshop, set up in 1967 by Gloria De Nard, to teach jazz and dance to youngsters, forming a lifeline for deprived families with hopes for their children, about which he made a fascinating short film, *Manna – Jazz and Survival in East Harlem* ([Link](#)). Jazz musicians at the highest level taught there, including Cooper-Moore, Craig Harris and Henry Grimes, at which point he delivered the sad news that Margaret Grimes had died that week.

Walking forms a link for Urpeth between daily routine and the poems in which the act of walking is integral to the evocation of memories and a means of constructing sense out of incomprehension. *East River Blues* begins 'Walking ... walking ... walking' which took us all over Manhattan and then focussed on the activism of Lee and Grace Lorch and the opposition they experienced from conservative educational institutions and the House Anti-American Activities Committee.

Parker placed his own musical poetry between each episode, bringing with it a sense of meditations on infinite space and time as he wove ever more intricate patterns, pushing the boundaries of continuous breathing, sounding like three saxophonists playing simultaneously, only occasionally tempering the flow with brief decelerations. Equally comfortable working with melody, he would also improvise on contemporary jazz standards, notably a beautifully rendered, stripped back version of Monk's *Let's Cool One*, and Eric Dolphy's *Miss Ann*, with its cues to break out with intent, which he claimed he would 'get right one day!' He got it right.

Urpeth covered much ground in the two sets and ended with a nice touch of wrong-footing, delivering the poem, *Essex Man (prepares for Death)*, from his new collection, based on his fondness for Romford and Dagenham.

With thanks also to **Graham MacKeachan**, Hundred Years Gallery Director & Music Programmer, for hosting a remarkable evening.

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Julian Siegel Jazz Orchestra at Birmingham Symphony Hall

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