

# Matt Small

## Bassist / Composer

San Francisco bassist and composer **Matt Small** creates music that blurs the boundaries between divergent musical styles, producing a uniquely fresh sound. With a deep dedication to his craft and an unrelenting spirit of curiosity, Small explores a wide variety of musical genres while exercising "a strong aesthetic sensibility" (*DownBeat*). Small has found inspiration from a vast array of music, including Western classical, jazz, popular, experimental, and indigenous music styles from around the world. In his work Small challenges the expectations of traditional and non-traditional musical worlds, creating music that is compelling, viscerally attractive, and accessible. As performer, composer and producer, Small currently leads three distinct ensembles: The Crushing Spiral Ensemble, Matt Small's Chamber Ensemble, and The Bedlam Royals.

**The Crushing Spiral Ensemble**, originally formed by Small in 1998, is re-emerging from a long hiatus with a new cast of players and a repertoire of new music written by Small between 2006 and 2008. As before, the Ensemble features a rotating cast of Bay Area players with a core of Ensemble regulars. The new core group consists of Steve Adams (saxophones), Sylvain Carton (saxophones), Mitch Marcus (saxophones), Henry Hung (trumpet), and Micah McClain (drums). From 1998 to 2002, Small wrote for, performed in, and produced the original version of this band. The group's performances included appearances at the San Francisco Jazz Festival (2001), the Monterey Jazz Festival (2000), the San Jose Jazz Festival (2000), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2000), and numerous appearances at Bay Area venues, such as Yoshi's, Bruno's, Jupiter, Café Du Nord, and others. Small and his music were also featured on National Public Radio's "West Coast Live" in 1999 and 2000, which included live performances and interviews on air.

Small released two albums with the original group, *Pictures of an Inhibition* (1999), and *The Count of San Francisco* (2000). "Beautifully surreal and hauntingly languid...demonstrating Small's affinity for wry humor and quiet grandiosity" said the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* of the first release. The *San Francisco Weekly* described the second album as "seductive and mysterious...shifting effortlessly among klezmer, pop, rock, and improv jazz...Small infuses his quirky compositions with both breadth and intimacy." In a live concert review, the late, revered Phil Elwood of the *San Francisco Examiner* raved "Small's magnificent and imaginative bass playing creates a kaleidoscope of impressive sounds...the music (the Crushing Spiral Ensemble) plays has an integrity and excitement about it that many of the veteran jazz giants seem to have lost over the years."

**Matt Small's Chamber Ensemble** has been heard in performance since 2002, including its 2005 Carnegie Hall debut. Born of the composer's desire to write complex material with a strong improvisatory concept, the quintet (bass, piano, saxophone, clarinet, violin) / sextet (with the addition of drums) blends elements of a modern classical ensemble with those of a flexible jazz/improvisatory group. Paula Dreyer (piano), Kymry Esainko (piano), Mitch Marcus (saxophones), Steve Adams (saxophones), Rachel Condry (clarinet / bass clarinet), Sarah Jo Zaharako (violin), and Micah McClain (drums) are some of the Bay Area's most talented players, assembled uniquely for this project. The Ensemble's repertoire is comprised of Small's compositions, many of which can be heard on the group's two CD's, *On the Verge of Sentiment* (2005), and *The Royal Collection of Exotic Beasts* (2006). Matt Small's Chamber Ensemble is also a member of Intersection for the Arts' Incubator Program.

Small's newest project, **The Bedlam Royals**, is an exciting amalgam of cabaret-style theatrics, pop music, and art song aesthetics. The group is a vehicle for Small's vocal songwriting, which uses off-beat and comic storylines

matched with vivid lyric imagery, resulting in a wild blend of catchy tunes with philosophical undercurrents. These evocative songs utilize both spoken-word narratives and challenging modern melodies, making it a tour-de-force for charismatic front man Walker Lewis. Lewis is a gifted singer and actor who breathes life into Small's quirky storylines with an adept directorial hand and masterful voice. Small plays electric bass in this project and the band features Steve Adams (saxophones), Kymry Esainko (piano), and Micah McClain (drums). Excelling in many musical settings, these instrumentalists are hardly "sidemen" in this project. They develop, create, and improvise many of their own parts within the framework of each song, adding a sense of vitality and spontaneity to the group's repertoire. This group's debut CD is entitled "Popular Music Night at the Glee Club."

Compositional honors for Small include 2005 and 2007 Subito Awards, the quick advancement grant program of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of the American Composers Forum (ACF). Small was awarded a 2006 Northern California Composers Commissioning Program Award, also under the auspices of the ACF. As an instrumentalist, Small performed in the 2007 season with The Feinsmith Quartet, lead by composer Daniel David Feinsmith, along side Jennifer Culp (cello), Christopher Taylor (piano), and Gyan Riley (guitar). Small performed on Feinsmith's *Elohim*, which features a virtuoso electric bass part, originally written for Michael Manning.

In June 2005, Small participated as a composer and instrumentalist in the Banff International Jazz and Creative Music Workshop. While there, he had a chance to collaborate with Dave Douglas, Greg Osby, Don Byron, Mark Dresser, Han Bennick, and many other fine musicians from around the world.

Small had his Carnegie Hall debut as a composer in April 2005, when Matt Small's Chamber Ensemble was chosen to participate in a workshop sponsored by The Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall and led by renowned trumpeter/composer Dave Douglas. The week long workshop focused on developing the Ensemble's repertoire, expanding the compositional scope of the music, and broadening the improvisational capabilities of the Ensemble. Along with Mr. Douglas, the workshop sessions were led by Greg Cohen (bass), Marilyn Crispell (piano), and Andrew Cyrille (drums). The workshop culminated with a public concert in Carnegie's Zankel Hall, in which the Ensemble premiered three, eight-minute works composed by Small.

In September 2004, Small's multi-faceted musical personality was honored when he made his Carnegie Hall debut as a performer. Small was selected as a participant in a unique summer workshop co-sponsored by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall, and Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project. Sixteen musicians from the United States and abroad were selected through a competitive application process to join the Silk Road Ensemble at Tanglewood Music Center in Lenox, Massachusetts. The workshop was led by Yo-Yo Ma and virtuoso musicians Alim Qasimov - the legendary Azerbaijani vocalist, Chinese wind instrument master Wu Tong, Indian tabla virtuoso Sandeep Das, and Iranian kamancheh master Kayhan Kalhor. Each helped guide the innovative workshop aimed at training a new generation of musicians in the performance practices of music from Silk Road regions. Participants spent ten days at Tanglewood working on existing music as well as newly commissioned works by Silk Road composers, culminating in four evening concerts, multiple daytime demonstrations, and panel discussions at Carnegie Hall.

Small drew inspiration from his exposure to the music of the Silk Road, especially from traditional two and three-stringed instruments native to those regions, developing new bass techniques to mimic the sounds of the morin khuur, pipa, tanbur, komuz, and tabla. After sharing these concepts with the SRP Ensemble, Small was invited by Mr. Ma to participate in a featured spot on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," was interviewed by the NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) for a documentary on the Silk Road Project, and was selected to help lead a public educational forum along with Mr. Ma and Mr. Das at Tanglewood. While in residence at Carnegie, Small

performed in *Journey to the South*, a video navigation of an 18th-century Chinese scroll brought to life through narration and improvised musical accompaniment. Pipa (Chinese lute) virtuoso, Wu Man, also invited Small to share the Carnegie stage with her to perform a structured improvisational duet. This experience was an ideal opportunity for showcasing the bassist's breadth of musical knowledge and exploring his passion for non-Western music.

With that same spirit of open exploration, Small's commitment to his own technical growth has led the bassist in recent years to alter the traditional formats of his instruments. Desiring more chordal possibilities for the electric bass, he designed an instrument with Northern California luthier Mark Garza, which expands the range of the electric bass by adding two additional high strings, giving it the range of a guitar as well. Small has developed many original and extended techniques to take full advantage of the expanded range. With his upright bass, Small also wanted to expand its higher register and so added a single higher string, turning his upright into a five-string bass. This has allowed him to access the range of a cello while maintaining all the qualities of a standard four-string bass.

Small's professional freelance work around the Bay Area has included performances with the Berkeley, Monterey Bay, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, Modesto, and California Symphonies, as well as the San Francisco Symphonietta. As a member of Nik Phelps' Sprocket Ensemble, which performs live original music for short films and animation, Small performed Phelps' scores mostly, but also composed some for the group and premiered these works live at film screenings at the Castro Theatre, Roxie Theatre, and at the San Raphael Film Festival. Small was also a member of the legendary Oakland, CA-based art rock band Eskimo before the group's dissolution. Previous collaborators and musicians Small has been proud to work with over the past decade include Wes Anderson, Andy Borger, Scott Amendola, Gino Robair, Chris Sipe, Jon Curtis, Sheldon Brown, Phillip Greenlief, Rob Sudduth, Ben Goldberg, Tom Yoder, Jeff Cressman, Jenny Scheinman, Carla Kihlstedt, Matt Brubeck, Marika Hughes, John Shiurba, Myles Boisen, Deirdre McClure, Pamela Z, A.C. Lewis, Jewelia Eisenberg, David Cooper, Dan Rathbun, Katy Stephan, and Sylvia Bloom. As a session player for commercial music, Small has worked at Skywalker Ranch, Earwax, and Spark Studios, recording music for TV and film. Small also regularly collaborates with sound designer Andrew Roth, recording and manipulating bass pieces for a variety of media productions.

Before arriving on the West Coast in 1997, Small attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and College of Liberal Arts in Ohio. At Oberlin, he studied classical music as well as jazz with Richard Davis and Chuck Israels. To facilitate the creation of his own ensemble on the West Coast, the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts awarded Small the Charles Cinnamon Achievement in the Arts Award grant, which laid the foundation for The Crushing Spiral Ensemble.

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(August 2008)