

Floratone II

Improvisation is sometimes described as spontaneous composition. But in the case of *Floratone*, the collaborative project of guitarist Bill Frisell, drummer Matt Chamberlain, and producers Lee Townsend and Tucker Martine, improvisation is the source of raw material for an extended process of assemblage, arrangement, and augmentation: Call it composition over the long haul.

Floratone II, like its 2007 self-titled predecessor, was some two years in the making. “These are long-term, labor-intensive projects for Tucker and I,” says Townsend, who has produced more than 30 projects with Frisell, as well as recordings with Carrie Rodriguez, Loudon Wainwright II, Kelly Joe Phelps, Vinicius Cantuaria, Dino Saluzzi, and others. “It’s the type of thing that takes a while and you wouldn’t want to do every year. But it’s also sheer fun.”

The concept arose in 2005 when Frisell and Chamberlain turned themselves loose in a Seattle studio for a session of free improvisation. Townsend and Martine then manipulated the tapes and created new musical structures; bassist Victor Krauss threaded lines into the bottom; Frisell wrote horn and string arrangements for cornetist Ron Miles and violin/viola player Eyvind Kang; and Frisell and Chamberlain overdubbed more guitar and drum parts. Townsend termed that initial sound “futuristic roots music.”

Floratone II may be the result of a similar methodology, but it is far from more of the same. For one thing, the instrumentation is even more varied. “We both came with a few more options,” Chamberlain says. “I think Bill brought out several more guitars and tons of crazy effects pedals, and I had a few kits set up as well as a bunch of percussion and devices so I could make loops on the fly.” While longtime Frisell cohorts Miles and Kang are onboard again for the lush orchestrations, this time Mike Elizondo—known for his work with Dr. Dre, Eminem, Fiona Apple, Alanis Morissette, 50 cent, and Alex and Nels Cline—played the basses, both acoustic and electric. And multi-instrumentalist/producer/film composer Jon Brion (who has worked with Aimee Mann, Robyn Hitchcock, Brad Mehldau, Sean Lennon, Of Montreal, and Spoon, and scored *Magnolia*, *Punch-Drunk Love*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and more) created additional aural magic with sampler and keyboards. “Mike came up with great parts within the song structure,” says Townsend, “and Jon was super excited, loose, and spontaneous—it was like watching a kid in a candy store.”

The final product is an exciting collection of 13 richly textured, musically complex tracks with immediate pop appeal. Whereas the *Floratone* debut, according to Townsend, had a fairly

consistent “rootsy, swampy, bluesy, Southern kind of vibe,” the improvisational foundation for *Floratone II*, he says, was “a little more multifaceted. There were some more ambiguous time signatures as well as some busier grooves, and interludes that are more about live playing.” But if the source material was less unified, the collaborative compositional process yielded a remarkably cohesive album.

Much of that quality comes, of course, from the distinct musical voices of the primary players. Ever since his earliest recordings for the ECM label, Frisell has wielded one of the most readily identifiable, albeit kaleidoscopic, guitar sounds in contemporary music. Whether he is playing solo; in intimate settings with such jazz giants as Dave Holland, Elvin Jones, Ron Carter, Paul Motian, Jim Hall, and Fred Hersch; alongside vocalists including Elvis Costello, Petra Haden, and Robin Holcomb; or in his eclectic groups, ranging from the Willies, the Intercontinentals, and Beautiful Dreamers to the chamber string ensemble 858 Quartet, there’s no mistaking Frisell’s unique guitar timbres and phrasing.

Similarly, Chamberlain has established an inimitable presence on the drums, flexible enough to drive the music of artists as different as Edie Brickell, the Wallflowers, Fiona Apple, the Saturday Night Live band, Tori Amos, and the Seattle-based jam band Critters Buggin’, and powerful enough to retain a singular personality. He expresses and focuses that versatility in his solo electro-acoustic project, Company 23, and lets it run wild and free in *Floratone*.

“Playing with Bill, whom I consider to be one of the greatest living improvisers and composers, is a process of simply getting together and doing it,” Chamberlain says. “It is wide open, and tons of ideas are constantly being created. I usually work in the world of songwriters so I love the freedom of just going for it in a totally free improv situation. Bill’s musicality is so vast that he makes you feel like a better musician just by playing with him. Then, having Tucker and Lee there to edit and throw our ideas back at us in a whole other form is really interesting on a lot of different levels. Sonically and arrangement-wise they pick the most unexpected parts of our improvs and arrange them into something totally different.”

Frisell also finds the *Floratone* “system” liberating and surprising. “Getting together and playing with Matt was really effortless,” he says. “We just played for hours with no thought, no preparation, just having fun and generating all this stuff. It’s this kind of guilty pleasure: ‘OK, Lee and Tucker, now you have to deal with all of this.’ If it was my record I would be involved every step of the way, so it was a cool feeling to give that over to them and let them go full tilt

and do whatever they do, without worrying about it. The whole process went through so many stages—I'm not sure if the first one went through quite as many over such a long period of time—that I have no idea what might be on those original recordings.”

For Martine, who has applied his creative production touches to the work of Laura Veirs, Spoon, R.E.M., Sufjan Stevens, Jesse Sykes, and the Decemberists, as well as his own Mount Analog recordings, Floratone is “a process of constantly discovering and being surprised. It’s not so much a matter of doing what is right for the song,” he explains, “as it is inventing the song as you go, which isn’t typical for records that I’ve worked on.”

Martine finds fabricating something so ambitious with such stellar collaborators especially inspiring. “Both Matt and Bill play with such intention, and they both have astonishing tones. It was from Matt that I learned that the key to great drum sounds is a great drummer, and the very same is true of Bill and the guitar. And when I get together with Lee, my inner 17-year-old music fan comes to the foreground, and I sense the same in him. He is as excited about somebody else’s good idea as he is about his own. That’s the mark of a great collaborator.” And great collaboration is the essence of Floratone.