



Chris Potter: the challenge seeker, by Arturo Mora

Chris Potter is one of the most talented young saxophonists in the current jazz scene. He met Arturo Mora in the hotel hall the morning before his appearance at Vitoria Jazz Festival with the Dave Holland Quintet and they talked about composing, soloing, the Dave Holland band and other topics.



Chris Potter, Arturo Mora
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ARTURO MORA: How's the current tour going?

CHRIS POTTER: We're almost at the end of it. Our first gig was in Montreal at the end of June, then three and a half weeks and we have one more gig tomorrow in San Javier. It's good.

ARTURO MORA: And after San Javier?

CHRIS POTTER: A little bit of vacation, and then some gigs at

the Newport Jazz Festival with different bands, then going to Israel with my band at the end of next month, a busy fall with my band and with Dave Holland's band and with some few other projects.

ARTURO MORA: How do American and European audiences compare?

CHRIS POTTER: Wherever there's an audience that it's enthusiastic about the music is a good place to play. It can be 1,000 people, it can be 15 people, it can be South America or Japan, here or the States. If you feel the energy, that the people are receptive and excited about hearing it then that's a fun place to play.

ARTURO MORA: Regarding the Dave Holland Quintet, Steve Nelson, Robin Eubanks and yourself have composed songs for the band, and they all feature the band's unique sound. Is it a challenge for you to compose in that group's style?

CHRIS POTTER: Yes, it's not the same as writing for my own groups, because I am thinking about the sound of this band and the direction of this music, so I try to combine what I do with something that fits the group. And, of course, it's an unusual instrumentation also, so you think about what these instruments would be good to do, you know, the vibes, the trombone, using that the best way.

ARTURO MORA: Does the use of odd meters influence you when composing for the band?

CHRIS POTTER: Yes, that was an area that I was beginning to explore before I joined the band. I think it's a sort of a process from where we're evolving, growing. Someone would bring in a tune in a certain meter, it feels uncomfortable for a while, and then we figure out we can get more and more comfortable with it, more free, and that adds to our vocabulary for the next song. I think it's grown over the years.



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ARTURO MORA: I suppose improvising on these odd meters must be a challenge too.

CHRIS POTTER: Yes, it's sort of a nice way to challenge ourselves, I think, just because you can't play the things that you already know, you have to find something new that would work over this, so it's a good challenge in a way, yes.

ARTURO MORA: The leader of the Dave Holland Quintet is, of course, Dave Holland, but how does the collaborative aspect influence the band?

CHRIS POTTER: It's very useful to have a leader, someone that's the final word: "OK, we're gonna do this, we're gonna go here", that can usually work the best. But within that there's a lot of freedom, and I like it. He gives us a lot of freedom, a lot of input and makes us all feel important, and we appreciate it. It's a good situation.

ARTURO MORA: You've got your non-bass Underground Quartet with Wayne Krantz, Craig Taborn and Nate Smith. Which is the feeling about playing with the Holland Quintet and with your own quartet?

CHRIS POTTER: I think there's a little different focus on the music. Maybe the Underground group, the way it's developed, it's a little bit less about... I mean, there's some odd meter and some forms that are complicated, but in general I think I'm trying to think more about the textures, and kind of finding a more organic storytelling way of playing, I think that's kind of a different focus. And it's also maybe more in the funk thing, you know, with the sound of the electric guitar and the Rhodes. For the past couple of years Adam Rogers has been playing guitar, and we have a new CD coming out also that was recorded at the Village Vanguard in New York, that's kind of a document of how it's grown too, I think it's grown a lot, in the past couple of years.

ARTURO MORA: I guess the absence of bass makes you compose a different way too.

CHRIS POTTER: Yes, I'm thinking a lot about how Craig will voice it. The reason that we do not have a bass is because of the talent of Craig that he's able to do this, it's a very unusual thing. I really like how he approaches the Rhodes and the sound of the Rhodes and that he's capable kind of like an organ player of playing some staff on the bass and also soloing and adding, but he doesn't play in any kind of traditional organ-based way, it's a different way of thinking, but it has that strength down there, so that's why the band works that particular way.



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ARTURO MORA: Jason Moran (piano and Fender Rhodes) recently replaced Steve Nelson (vibraphone and marimba) in some concerts of the Dave Holland Quintet. What has changed?

CHRIS POTTER: Since there were four out of five of the normal members, it still fell like Dave's band to me. Steve Nelson is one of my favorite musicians, I really love the way he plays, and we missed him, but I think Jason did a great job, he's an amazing musician also, and he found a way to fit in in a way that made a lot of sense, because he also doesn't play like kind of a normal piano player all the time, he can find some different way of getting to the same place.

ARTURO MORA: You're 36, which is a very young age. When you think about your life-long career, which are your ambitions, your objectives, where would you like to reach as a musician?

CHRIS POTTER: I would like, of course, to have the freedom to do more and more of my own music. I have many things written that I haven't had a chance to hear. The last few years I've been kind of trying to balance playing with Dave's band and doing my own projects, spending a few months out of the year doing both of those things, and also I do enjoy playing in other situations, I recently played in Paul Motian's band, and did some gigs with Herbie Hancock, various things, you know, and I got a fresh new perspective from that, so I wouldn't ever want to never do that, but I would like to concentrate more and more on my own music. There's also another new CD of mine that's coming out, kind of a dream that I had for a long time, it's kind of a larger ensemble, chamber ensemble kind of thing: three strings, three woodwinds, nylon string guitar, rhythm section, me. It was kind of an opportunity for me to explore writing a lot, having kind of a bigger palette to write.

ARTURO MORA: Did you write the whole score, the whole

arrangement?

CHRIS POTTER: Yes. It's gonna be out in the Fall, I think. This is in the short term, but I'm just hoping that I'm able to continue to be able to grow as a creative musician and be fortunate enough to have an audience who want to hear it, that's all I can ask.

ARTURO MORA: In 1994 you toured with Steely Dan. What did you get from that experience?

CHRIS POTTER: I grew up listening to that music along with other musics, but I never expected to play with them, they never played live until then. That was a very illuminating experience, just to see how that whole world works at that big scale.



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ARTURO MORA: In terms of production or in musical terms?

CHRIS POTTER: Production. Musically it was like another gig, they're very serious musicians, they want the music to be as good as possible, that was comfortable and fun to play those tunes, I really like those tunes. Eventually it was a bit

limiting, just because it was a big band, and not so much of an opportunity to express myself, that's why I had to leave, to have more freedom, but I was happy to be there. Also I was 22-23, I just kind of had moved to New York, so it was great.

ARTURO MORA: You offer online teaching in your website. How's this experience working out for you?

CHRIS POTTER: It's going well. I honestly don't really monitor it so much, I kind of talked into a recording device, kind of like this [pointing at the interviewer's][laughs], and I think that the people that are administering the website figure out how to make it into a coherent thing. But it's kind of useful just because there are many students who ask me for lessons and I don't really have time, so it's a way to get my philosophy about music.

ARTURO MORA: What do you look for when you start a solo, do you think in its structure, the harmony, the scales, do you just let yourself go?

CHRIS POTTER: It's always difficult to describe, I think partially because when you're thinking in music you can describe it in words later, but it happens so fast, it's an immediate thing, so you're thinking in musical terms, you're not thinking in language terms. The best solos always have that feeling that the music is playing itself, and I'm just there as something that is going thru, a lot of musicians described this process, and it's difficult to know how to get to that point everytime, you know. You have to be very, very comfortable, and you have to forget about everything, and not have a plan. You practice all these things, you think about these concepts very, very deeply, how to play the instrument, how you develop a motive, how to understand harmony, you know, all this kind of technical things, you have to master them to be able to play, but then, when you're actually playing, you can't think about any of these things to have to let it all go and let it be, what it is.



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ARTURO MORA: I still remember a memorable solo of yours with the Dave Holland Big Band in Madrid a few years ago. Even today people talk about this solo. Is it possible that playing in a big band situation (having only a solo in the whole night) may push you deeper into its construction, in a better way than when you know you'll play a few more solos?

CHRIS POTTER: Yes, yes. I think that there is a tendency to kind of think different if you just have one. For me I kind of prefer having a whole evening to try to tell the story, to have a lot of room, so that some of it can be a little bit like this, and there can be high points. But it's a challenge to be on a bigger scale, if you have one shot to do it you have to focus everything on that one thing. But it's also different from night to night. Of course I don't remember that at all, so I don't know what I played [laughs].

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