

Robin Eubanks Releases First Big Band Album *More Than Meets The Ear*

**Album Features The Trombonist's Arrangements of Songs Originally Written for
Dave Holland Quintet & SF Jazz Collective over Past Two Decades**

**A Yearlong Sabbatical From Oberlin College Allowed Eubanks Time to Write, Arrange and Plan;
Each Section Features One Oberlin Graduate**

Five-time *DownBeat* critics poll winner and electric trombone pioneer **Robin Eubanks** has covered vast terrain in the course of a 30-plus-year career, but until this year he'd never made a big band album. That changes with the release of *More Than Meets The Ear (ArtistShare)*, a groundbreaking collection of Eubanks' muscular, interleaved compositions, featuring an all-star lineup.

For those less familiar with Eubanks' body of work, this album offers a perfect primer, almost serving the role of a "best-of" collection: Most of these pieces have been played in various contexts over the years, and were originally written for groups like the **Dave Holland Quintet** and **SF Jazz Collective**, where Eubanks has been a longtime member. But *More Than Meets The Ear* also ups the ante: Benefitting from a 19-piece band and a yearlong sabbatical from his professorship at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Eubanks built the most harmonically and rhythmically layered work of his career.

"The big band allowed me to really flesh things out," Eubanks said. "When I originally wrote most of the stuff on here, I was actually thinking of a larger group than I was writing for. Even the stuff I first did with Dave Holland, I was hearing more horns."

More follows last year's *Klassik Rock Vol. 1*, a paean to the incendiary rock, funk and fusion of the 1960s and '70s that Eubanks grew up on. Indeed it picks up where that record left off, bridging the diverse enthusiasms that have always guided Eubanks, while expanding his palette even further. Many of the world-class sidemen from *Klassik Rock* (his first album on ArtistShare) have returned to play in the **Mass Line Big Band**, including saxophonist **Antonio Hart**, acoustic and electric bassist **Boris Kozlov** and drummer **Nate Smith**. And there's some extra star power: **Marcus Strickland** fills the first tenor chair, and the late **Lew Soloff** takes lead trumpet duties. (Eubanks included a special dedication to the jazz-rock trumpet trailblazer in the album notes: *More* ended up being one of his final recording sessions.)

The entire group executes Eubanks' arrangements with ardor, as precise as it is freewheeling. It's a testament to the power of a united front, and the importance of a strong leader's vision. This all relates to the album's title, which ties back to Eubanks' time studying **Marxist theory** as an undergrad at Philadelphia's College of the Arts. "**Mass Line**" is a concept that originated in **Mao Zedong's China**; it suggests that a country's rulers must keep citizens fully aware of their vision for the future—and likewise, the citizenry should play a central role in deciding upon and executing that vision. (The first tune Eubanks ever wrote was titled "Mass Line," though that piece doesn't appear on the new album.)

"In theory I think it's really a great concept," Eubanks says. "I went to China for the first time in November with the Mingus Big Band. Things have changed so much in China, they didn't have a lot of good things to say about Mao. But some of the concepts I think are still applicable: about getting a political line from the masses, rather than the few corporate folks who throw money at the system."

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“And I think the big band was a good forum for exploring that musically—letting people really express themselves in the music, as opposed to limiting them to what’s written on the paper in dots and lines and spaces. I wanted to let them really breathe life into the music and give it their full expression.”

Arranging these nine tunes for big band and recording them with eighteen other musicians was a major undertaking—one that Eubanks only accomplished with the help of a yearlong “research status” sabbatical from Oberlin. “There’s a competition across the whole school, with scientists and other professors, for this status,” Eubanks said. “I wasn’t mapping the human genome or anything. So I was like, ‘Are they gonna care that I’m going to want to do a big band record?’”

Turns out, the administration was as excited about the project as Eubanks was. It surely helped that Eubanks had committed himself to using one recent Oberlin graduate in each section of the big band. And indeed, *More Than Meets The Ear* attests to Eubanks’ accomplishments as a teacher and mentor, as well as his own talents as an arranger, composer and trombone innovator.

Eubanks’ roots as a charter member of the **M-BASE** collective and an early experimenter with electric technologies are borne out in a fresh format on *More Than Meets The Ear*. In opener “More Than Meets the Ear,” he dances through an agile melody, his trombone smeared with wah-wah and effects pedals. Behind him, the vast horn section builds a scaffold of staccato rhythms, simultaneously surging and pulling against itself. On the ballad “Full Circle,” a steady, quarter-note melody breathes momentum into an off-kilter, sixteen-beat pattern. On “Bill and Vera,” **Lauren Sevian**’s bass clarinet insinuates a whispery undertone into the drifting bed of horns while **Mike King**’s organ offers sweetly soulful lines over top. The result falls somewhere between early-1970s Miles Davis, classic Gil Evans, and a sultry D’Angelo side.

It makes sense that Eubanks knows a thing or two about mentorship: Born into a musical family in Philadelphia, he and his brothers Kevin and Duane learned from their mother Vera, a classical and gospel pianist, and their uncle, the famed jazz pianist **Ray Bryant**. **Kevin Eubanks** went on to become the bandleader on the Tonight Show for 15 years, and **Duane Eubanks** is a respected trumpeter who’s played with acts as varied as Oliver Lake, Alicia Keys and Orrin Evans. (Duane plays on *More*, contributing an affable and funky solo on “Mental Images.”)

As a young trombonist, Robin Eubanks got his start playing in a number of large ensembles around Philadelphia: the Sun Ra Arkestra; McCoy Tyner’s big band; the Change of the Century Orchestra, featuring Byard Lancaster and Grachan Moncur III and Khan Jamal; John Minnis’ Big Bone Band; and others. He went on to put in time with Slide Hampton and Art Blakey & the Jazz Messengers, and since the 1980s has been one of the trombone’s top standard-bearers.

He’s held down membership for the past seven years in the prestigious SF Jazz Collective, while also fronting innovative bands like EB3 (he and two band mates play loops and computerized percussion in real time, along with their primary instruments) and Mental Images, a mid-size fusion ensemble. With his Mass Line Big Band, he brings his vision into even more ambitious terrain—and the result is among the most exciting albums Eubanks has yet produced.