

Sharel Cassity

► Ignoring Restrictions

In January 2008 Sharel Cassity attended a New Year's Day party that would change her life. An alto saxophonist unknown outside New York, Cassity hadn't been invited to the party at bassist John Lee's house in northern New Jersey. Her boyfriend, trombonist Michael Dease, received the invitation, and she went along as his date.

That night Cassity sat in during a jam session and took a solo turn on Dizzy Gillespie's "Be Bop," following trumpeter Roy Hargrove and saxophonist Antonio Hart. She more than acquitted herself. Jimmy Heath and Hargrove would ask Cassity to join their respective big bands. Lee, who directs the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band, followed suit last year, and also released Cassity's second album, *Relentless*, on his Jazz Legacy Productions imprint.

"You know how they say your life can change in a minute, or change overnight?" Cassity said. "It did that day. From that moment on, that was when everything took off. Since then I've been able to be a part of this legacy and learn from all the greats that are around [the Gillespie] band. It's a blessing."

Cassity grew up in Yukon, Okla., and moved to New York in 2000. By 2007 she had earned jazz performance degrees from the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music and the Juilliard School. She recorded an independent release while performing with the Diva and Fat Cat big bands and trumpeter Ingrid Jensen. Though hardly insignificant, these gigs fell short of the national spotlight.

To this end, *Relentless* could provide a boost if not a breakthrough. The album recalls the hard bop recordings of the 1960s. Cassity composed six of the eight tracks, and the sidemen include trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, pianist Orrin Evans and drummer E.J. Strickland. In addition to showcasing Cassity's chops, the album demonstrates her talents as an arranger, a knack that has impressed Jimmy Heath and James Moody, her peers in the Gillespie band's reed section.

"Moody dubbed her 'Sectionette,'" Heath said. "Because she's a section player. Sharel has learned a lot about the language of jazz. And she has the ability to speak it. The only thing



she needs is more exposure to speak it to more people. She's always interested in new things and what she's hearing, and in the history of the music. She's great now. But she is always searching, like all of us. The sky's the limit. She's a worker."

While Cassity is among a small number of female horn players in jazz, she attaches little importance to this issue. She enjoys camaraderie wherever she performs; this is especially true in big bands.

"When I was growing up I was always the only girl in the saxophone section," she said. "For some reason I never realized that it was anything different or anything unusual. Actually, it's a strange experience for me playing in Diva [whose membership is restricted to women]. You would think I would feel like I'm at home with all women; but it's so unusual to me. It's definitely a different experience."

Cassity would like to translate the camaraderie of big bands to her own small groups. "When all the cats get together it's like a family," she said. "And I think that's important because the young musicians can learn from the older ones. I wouldn't get that if I weren't in big bands. I'd love to have a small group one day that felt like we were a band, where we trust one another. But I think that takes time and that comes with the group aging, and I haven't had enough work yet as a leader for that to completely come together."

—Eric Fine