

yellowjackets

Profile

Time changes everything. It's a simple piece of wisdom that's inescapable. Music – like every other aspect of our culture – is subject to various dynamic forces: technology, commerce, fashion, politics, you name it. The result is an evolution that is barely perceptible at any given moment, but inescapable over the long haul.

The Yellowjackets, cutting-edge purveyors of innovative, eclectic jazz for more than twenty-five years, are no strangers to this change. Indeed, they are *agents* of change. With every recording since their 1981 debut album – indeed with every note they've played in the studio and onstage since then – the Jackets have pushed the boundaries of improvisational jazz, and have been leaders in the music's inescapable evolution.

The story of the Yellowjackets' genesis is admittedly convoluted – a series of creative lefts and rights with fortuitous results. Keyboardist Russell Ferrante, bassist Jimmy Haslip and drummer Ricky Lawson first assembled as session players for jazz guitar virtuoso Robben Ford's 1977 instrumental release, *The Inside Story*. Although Ford's label wanted him to follow up with a more pop- and vocal-oriented album, the band – then known as the Robben Ford Group – preferred the instrumental approach. They renamed themselves the Yellowjackets, and released an album by the same name in 1981. Ford made appearances on their first couple recordings, then moved on to other projects. The band and its former leader parted on amicable terms after the release of *Mirage a Trois* in 1984.

"That was a very exciting time for instrumental music," Ferrante recalls. "It seemed like a lot of people were open to mixing and matching various musical styles. There wasn't the strict compartmentalization that you see in radio now."

With the success of innovative instrumental bands like Weather Report around the same time, crossing and merging genres had become a successful strategy, artistically as well as commercially. "There was no thought about whether this style should go with that one," Ferrante adds. "Nothing was genre specific. It was just the music that we had all played – R&B music and electric music and acoustic music, blues, pop, the whole thing was just all music. We just did what came naturally."

By 1987, Lawson had left the band and was replaced by William Kennedy, whose polyrhythmic sensibilities opened doors to an even greater sense of exploration – and a further departure from the familiar, Haslip recalls.

"During that time, I had been listening to a lot of African and Afro-Cuban music," he says, "and I started writing in a lot of 6/8 patterns and experimenting with that kind of thing. I brought it over to Russ, and he was really interested in it. We started experimenting with a lot of polyrhythmic composition."

The result was *Four Corners*, an album with a distinctly world music sensibility, and one of the Yellowjackets' most commercially and artistically successful albums to date.

Subsequent albums – *Politics* (1988) and *The Spin* (1989) – dispensed with some of the multi-layered intensity of *Four Corners* and took a more acoustic direction. *Greenhouse*, released in 1990, welcomed tenor saxophonist Bob Mintzer into the Yellowjackets lineup. Mintzer's dedication to the jazz tradition, along with his highly developed skills as an arranger, have since taken the 'Jackets to a new level of sophistication over the past twelve years.

"It was very interesting," Mintzer says of his early days with the band. "I was challenged. There was a way of playing and writing that had been in place for a while. I basically tried to step into that, acknowledge what had already been going on and add to that in some way."

Haslip's high praise picks up where Mintzer's modesty leaves off. "Bob is an amazing musician," he says. "He has a very distinct voice. He's seriously steeped in the jazz tradition. He

also has a very wide, eclectic view of composing, so he lends himself to what we are trying to do. He's very much into experimentation, and he has his own big band, so his skills as an arranger are also very good to have on board."

Throughout the '90s, the 'Jackets continued to explore a diverse cross-section of sound and rhythm. The relaxed and mellow *Dreamland*, released in 1995, marked a brief reunion with Warner Brothers that also spawned *Blue Hats* in 1997 and *Club Nocturne* in 1998.

The Yellowjackets entered the new millennium with their self-released *Mint Jam*. Recorded live at the Mint in Los Angeles in July 2001, the two-disc set was nominated for a Grammy for Best Contemporary Jazz Album. Backing up the regular lineup of Ferrante, Haslip and Mintzer on *Mint Jam* is drummer Marcus Baylor, who has since become a permanent member of the band.

Time Squared, the followup to *Mint Jam*, was released on heads Up in May 2003. Their first studio recording in five years, *Time Squared* captures much of the energy and spontaneity that made *Mint Jam* a formidable Grammy contender.

In response to countless requests from fans over the years, the Yellowjackets released their first Christmas album in September 2004. *Peace Round* includes several traditional holiday songs, each with a unique contemporary jazz spin. *Altered State*, released in March 2005, continues to merge the traditional with the progressive by exploring unusual time signatures and exotic rhythms.

The Yellowjackets celebrated their milestone 25th anniversary with the CD/DVD release of the aptly titled *Twenty-Five* in May 2006. The CD portion of the two-disc set featured a live 2005 performance in Paris, while the DVD includes a second live performance filmed at the Naima Club in Forli, Italy, in October 2005. In addition to the concert footage, the DVD also included interviews with current and past band members, retrospective performance footage and several other features.

In the summer of 2007, the Yellowjackets were joined by guitar virtuoso Mike Stern for some electrifying performances at the Montreal Jazz Festival. The dates served as the catalyst for *Lifecycle*, a Jackets/Stern studio collaboration that promises to be one of the most innovative and memorable jazz albums of 2008. The first Yellowjackets recording in 15 years to feature a guitar player, *Lifecycle* illustrates the kind of energy and creative brilliance that results when five talented players pool their individual skills as songwriters and musicians and merge into an entity that's far greater than the sum of its parts.

"We've all been a fan of Mike's for a long time," says Yellowjackets keyboardist and charter member Russell Ferrante. "Our goal was to make a recording that sounded like Mike had been in the band forever, and I think we accomplished that. It's a cohesive record by five musicians with a genuine rapport."

Lifecycle is set for release on May 20, 2008, and the band is scheduled to play a series of tour dates with Stern throughout the year.

"I can't wait to play some of this music in concert with Mike," says Haslip. "He's a great artist with so much enthusiasm, and we're honored to have had the chance to make a record like this with him. For a good part of this year, the Yellowjackets will be a quintet, and we're very much looking forward to every minute of that experience."

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