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Communications

NEWS RELEASE

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Saxophonist/Composer Jason Robinson Takes A Mythic Journey With New Album *Tiresian Symmetry*

Featuring Robinson with All-Star Band: George Schuller, Ches Smith, Marty Ehrlich, Liberty Ellman, Drew Gress, Marcus Rojas, Bill Lowe, JD Parran

A ubiquitous and often pivotal figure in the stories and myths of ancient Greece, the blind prophet Tiresias was blessed and cursed by the gods, experiencing life as both a man and a woman while living for hundreds of years. In saxophonist/composer **Jason Robinson's** polydirectional masterpiece *Tiresian Symmetry* he doesn't seek to tell the soothsayer's story. Rather for his seventh album as a leader, he's gathered an extraordinary cast of improvisers to investigate the nature of narrative itself in a jazz context. The music's richly suggestive harmonic and metrical relationships elicit a wide array of responses, but ultimately listeners find their own sense of order and meaning amidst the sumptuous sounds. For Robinson, a capaciously inventive artist who has flourished in a bogging array of settings, from solo excursions with electronics and free jazz quartets to roots reggae ensembles and multimedia collectives, *Tiresian Symmetry* represents his most expansive project yet. Cuneiform releases the album in September 2012.

"I was attracted to the myth of the soothsayer, who tells the future even when it's not welcome information," Robinson says. "But on a more technical level I was intrigued by the numerical relationships. Tiresias lived seven generations and spent time as both male and female, which gives you 7/2. The pieces I wrote for the album embody those numerical relationships in a variety of forms. Of course, in the end there's the litmus test. The music has to sound good and feel good."

Featuring some of the most vivid and inventive improvisers in jazz, the nine-piece *Tiresian* ensemble is built upon the volatile trap set tandem of **George Schuller** and **Ches Smith**. The music surges, swells and crests upon a thick carpet of rumbling textures created by nimble bassist **Drew Gress**, tuba expert **Marcus Rojas**, and **Bill Lowe's** tuba and bass trombone. With reed masters **JD Parran** (alto clarinet, tenor sax and contra bass clarinet) and **Marty Ehrlich** (alto sax, c flute and bass clarinet) soaring and spelunking, **Robinson** weaving through the mix on alto flute and tenor and soprano sax, and guitarist **Liberty Ellman** serving as a rhythmic catalyst and textural free agent, the group turns every track into a slippery aural odyssey full of surprising metrical shifts, thick harmonic passages and careering melodic lines.

"Liberty has a really broad set of experiences," Robinson says. "He's a consummate jazz guitarist, but he's played hip hop and funk. He'll do a groove-oriented thing one minute, referencing reggae or funk, but then goes off to a more dissonant place. I love that flexibility."

In many ways, the *Tiresian* ensemble builds on the concept and personnel of Robinson's acclaimed 2010 Cuneiform release *The Two Faces of Janus*, another project informed by Greek Mythology featuring Gress, Ellman, Schuller and Ehrlich. Reflecting his interest in larger ensembles, the band is clearly inspired by Henry Threadgill's brawny Very Very Circus ensemble, which introduced the double tuba configuration. "That's been a touch point," Robinson says. "I'd been hearing Threadgill's stuff with the two tubas and combining that with some of the natural trajectories of the Janus ensemble."

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Much like the soothsayer who inspired *Tiresian Symmetry*, **Robinson** is a protean figure who constantly reappears in different guises. Deeply connected to the creative music scenes of California, and now an assistant professor of music at Amherst College, Robinson's forged strong creative bonds on both coasts. As an academic, he explores the shifting relationships between cultural identity and improvised and popular musical forms. His work as a performer is equally expansive.

Weaned on psychedelic rock by his father, veteran Northern California guitarist and songwriter Amos Robinson, he gravitated to the music of R&B pioneer Louis Jordan, Jimi Hendrix and Charlie Parker as an aspiring musician, and jumped into the Sacramento jazz scene as a teenager. After a year at USC, he transferred to Sonoma State, studying jazz and philosophy with bassist/composer Mel Graves.

Always looking to extend jazz practices, he co-founded the hip-hop jazz combo Cannonball, and introduced saxophone to the roots reggae band Groundation, with whom he continues to tour. Already well established on the Bay Area jazz scene, Robinson experienced an epiphany when fellow saxophonist Marco Eneidi introduced him the roiling music of avant-garde piano patriarch Cecil Taylor. Looking to develop improvisational and compositional ideas beyond straight-ahead jazz, he was drawn to UC San Diego by heavyweight faculty members like Anthony Davis and trombonist/composer George Lewis.

San Diego provided fertile ground for Robinson on and off campus. His connection with Groundation opened the door to recording collaborations with reggae giants such as Don Carlos, Ras Michael, Marcia Higgs, Eek-a-Mouse, and Toots and the Maytals (who featured him on the Grammy-nominated 2007 Fantasy album *Light Your Light*). He launched the cooperative quartet Cosmologic with fellow music grad students, trombonist Michael Dessen, bassist Scott Walton and Skeleton Key Orchestra percussionist Nathan Hubbard. While initially devoted to exploring the rambunctious compositions of Ornette Coleman, the group quickly morphed into a composer's workshop, a role it's continued to play over the course of four albums.

A founding member of Trummerflora, an influential San Diego musician collective, Robinson seeks to bring experimental music to audiences largely cutoff from vital creative traditions by the homogenizing force of the music industry. In San Diego, that has often meant looking south. He's toured across Mexico as part of the collaborative transnational Cross Border Trio with bassist Rob Thorson and drummer Paquito Villa, and he joined the Spanish-English bilingual Latin-reggae band Elijah Emanuel and the Revelations.

"I feel uncomfortable with singularity," Robinson says. "The musicians who turn me on the most are artists who have many sides. There's always a certain pressure to market yourself as having one kind of focus, but most artists are plural people. I'm the same way."

Robinson fully expressed this manifold creativity in 2010 with the release of three albums. In addition to *The Two Faces of Janus*, he documented his expansive duo with long-time collaborator Anthony Davis on *Cerulean Landscape* (Clean Feed), and released *Cerberus Reigning* (Accretions), the second installment in a trilogy exploring sweeping electro-acoustic soundscapes on saxophones, flute and laptop (the album is named after the three-headed dog of Greek mythology who guards the gates of Hades). What unites his far-flung endeavors is his expressive eloquence on the saxophone. Whatever context he's performing in, Robinson is a ruthless self-editor who distills the essential idea at hand. Essentially an all-star ensemble featuring a cast of artists who have each made significant contributions to the music, *Tiresian Symmetry* weaves singular musicians into a thrilling orchestra.

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jasonrobinson.com

Jason Robinson — *Tiresian Symmetry* Band Members

Much like the soothsayer who inspired who *Tiresian Symmetry*, Jason **Robinson** is a protean figure who constantly reappears in different guises. Deeply connected to the creative music scenes of California, and now an assistant professor of music at Amherst College, he's forged strong creative bonds on both coasts. As an academic, he explores the shifting relationships between cultural identity and improvised and popular musical forms. His work as a performer is equally expansive. (See full bio in project press release.)

A performer, composer, producer and educator, bass trombonist and tuba player **Bill Lowe** has been a major force for nearly four decades. He has worked with numerous masters of African-American creative music, including musical legends like Dizzy Gillespie, Eartha Kitt, and Clark Terry; avant-garde leaders like Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, and Cecil Taylor; and under-heralded masters George Russell, James "Jabbo" Ware and Bill Barron. He has co-led the Boston Jazz Repertory Orchestra and composed several major works, including his opera, *Reb's Last Funeral*. As an educator, Lowe teaches at top-tier universities, lectures internationally, and has mentored countless young players.

A brilliant reed player who has developed a distinctive voice on alto sax, clarinet and bass clarinet **Marty Ehrlich** quickly established himself as one of the most versatile and valuable players on the New York scene in the late 1970s, appearing on more than 100 recordings by an array of musicians representing a broad range of improvisational idioms, such as saxophonist Julius Hemphill, pianists George Russell and Muhal Richard Abrams and clarinetist John Carter. While he has gained widespread recognition as a player, he has also distinguished himself as a composer, with several NEA grants and commissions from the Lydian String Quartet, the Rova Saxophone Quartet and the New York String Trio.

A longtime educator, **JD Parran** is a highly versatile musician who has recorded with John Lennon and Lena Horne. As a vital participant in New York's cutting edge jazz scene, he's worked with many influential composers, such as Anthony Davis, Henry Threadgill, Oliver Lake and Julius Hemphill. Capable of playing with a light and pretty sound or a searing, gritty tone, Parran knows how to capture the essence of a composer's work while contributing his own sensibility.

One of jazz's most sought after bassists, **Drew Gress** performs extensively with artists on the cutting edge of contemporary improvised music. Also a respected composer, he has recorded a series of critically acclaimed albums under his own name. He's best known as an invaluable collaborator who has toured and recorded widely with brilliant improvisers such as John Abercrombie, Ralph Alessi, Tim Berne, Don Byron, Uri Caine, Ravi Coltrane, Marc Copland, Mark Feldman, Fred Hersch, John Hollenbeck, Tony Malaby, and John Surman.

As one of the world's most accomplished tuba players **Marcus Rojas** has contributed to more than 350 albums, working widely in pop, new music, Broadway and symphonic settings with the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Ballet, and American Ballet Theater. A masterly improviser, he's played an essential role in ensembles led by Lester Bowie, Charlie Haden, Gil Evans, George Russell, Jim Hall, Dave Douglas, Wayne Shorter, and David Byrne. He was a member of Henry Threadgill's Very Very Circus and is currently a member of Dave Douglas' Brass Ecstasy, Michael Blake's Hellbent, and Musette Explosion. As a founding member of SingleTree, Brass Bang, and Spanish Fly with Steven Bernstein and David Tronzo, he has written and commissioned many new works.

Percussionist **Ches Smith** has earned a vaunted reputation as a creative provocateur through his work with Marc Ribot, Mr. Bungle, Secret Chiefs 3, Fred Frith, Xiu Xiu, and Trevor Dunn's Trio-Convulsant. Carving out a singular niche where jazz, rock and new music converge, Smith can be heard in several galvanizing improvisational settings including his all-star project These Arches featuring Tim Berne, Tony Malaby, Mary Halvorson, and Andrea Parkins.

Hailing from a distinguished musical family, drummer **George Schuller** came up on the Boston scene playing with masters such as Jaki Byard, Herb Pomeroy, Ran Blake, and George Garzone. He first gained notice as a bandleader and arranger with the adventurous Boston combo Orange Then Blue, a talent-laden ensemble with a global sensibility. He's thrived since moving to Brooklyn in the mid-90s, collaborating with musicians such as Joe Lovano, Lee Konitz, Myra Melford and Dave Douglas. He has also produced several dozen albums by an equally impressive roster of artists.

Guitarist **Liberty Ellman** came of age musically on the San Francisco Bay Area scene in the mid 1990s, performing and recording widely with Vijay Iyer, Ledisi, Miya Masoaka, the radical hip hop crew The Coup, and altoist Steve Coleman. Since moving to New York City in 1998, he's established himself as one of the most dependably creative and idiosyncratic guitarists in jazz, a player with a funk-informed rhythmic sensibility. He's served as a for some of the most advanced and adventurous musicians in jazz, including Henry Threadgill, Wadada Leo Smith, Myra Melford, Greg Osby, Butch Morris, Rudresh Mahanthappa, and Steve Lehman.

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