CHRISTINE JENSEN

Inhabiting Multiple Roles

MATHIEU RIVARD

Christine Jensen is a complex character. "I guess I have a few personalities," she muses. "There's Christine the saxophonist, Christine the bandleader, and then there's the essence of where everything starts, which is Christine the composer. That, to me, is probably the deepest, hardest place I go in my life."

Jensen has a strong presence on alto saxophone, marked by a rich, brawny tone, while her soprano sax work is fluid and bright. Equally in her element writing for and performing in various ensemble settings, this compelling Canadian artist leads small groups as well as a big band, and also co-leads the dynamic Nordic Connect with her sister, New York-based trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, and Swedish pianist Maggi Olin.

Jensen's discography includes three small ensemble recordings (*Collage*, *A Shorter Distance* and *Look Left*), two Nordic Connect albums (2007's *Flurry* and 2010's *Spiral*) and two large-ensemble recordings, the first of which, *Treelines* (Justin Time), won the 2011 Juno Award for Contemporary Jazz Album of the Year.

Her writing has drawn comparisons to Maria Schneider, Kenny Wheeler and Wayne Shorter. Often lyrical and impressionistic, sometimes programmatic in nature, it is multi-textural and emotionally engaging. Her new album, *Habitat* (Justin Time), received a 5-star review in the February issue of DownBeat. The album contains six original compositions performed by her formidable jazz orchestra, comprising 19 of Montreal's finest musicians.

The album cover photo depicts Jensen standing near Habitat 67, an architecturally unique Montreal housing complex built for the 1967 World's Fair. The image and title are a metaphor: Jensen's compositions are inhabited by musicians who color them with their own creative sensibilities.

"For Christine, the big band is definitely a labor of love," says Montreal saxophonist, composer and bandleader Chet Doxas, a member of Jensen's jazz orchestra. "It's great to have someone who believes in continuing the tradition—that lineage of large ensemble writing and directing."

Brought up in a musical family in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Jensen's earliest introduction to music was offered by her mother, a piano teacher who raised her daughters on everything from Chopin to musical theater to big band music. At age 12, Jensen forewent the piano—her first love, sparked by Oscar Peterson and the impressionistic sound of Bill Evans—and started studying the saxophone, striving to develop her own voice.

Moving to Montreal in 1994 to attend McGill University's jazz program (where she earned a bachelor's and a master's degree in jazz performance, and currently teaches), Jensen went on to hone her skills studying with Kenny Werner, Jim McNeely, Dick Oatts and Steve Wilson. Awarded a six-month composition residency in Paris at the Québec Studio in the Cité Internationale des Arts in 2002, Jensen has since toured extensively around the world.

In addition to collaborating with her husband, saxophonist Joel Miller, and her sister, Jensen has worked with artists such as Geoffrey Keezer, Gary Versace and Donny McCaslin.

Juggling several projects, Jensen recently visited Sweden, where she performed original material for a new chamber music project with Olin and Swedish singer Sophie Norlin (to be recorded later this year) and conducted the Orchestre National de Jazz de Montreal. This year she will tour with a small ensemble including her sister and guitarist Ben Monder, as well as showcasing her namesake orchestra at Germany's Jazzahead! expo in April. She'll also conduct master classes on multiple continents.

"We're so lucky to be making music," Jensen says, conveying the type of gratitude that fans have for her luminous compositions. —*Sharonne Cohen*