

SCOTT HEALY

Coastal Composer

By Shaun Brady // Photo by Lisa Tanner

Conan O'Brien's very public firing from "The Tonight Show" in 2010 not only sent the talk show host to a new network; it relocated him to the opposite coast. One fact that was overlooked while the media feasted on the host's rancorous feud with NBC and Jay Leno was that when O'Brien's new show debuted on TBS, a band full of New Yorkers had been transformed into Angelenos.

Five nights a week, Scott Healy can be seen manning the keyboards for Jimmy Vivino and the Basic Cable Band, just as he had done for its predecessor, The Max Weinberg 7, since the 1993 debut of "Late Night With Conan O'Brien." The adjustment to life in Los Angeles was difficult, Healy says, but the decision to make the move was not.

"It was a fantastic, wonderful opportunity for everybody," Healy said. "We're playing great music all day long. We've developed a book with hundreds of tunes, from Beatles songs to a lot of jazz and big band stuff. We've backed hundreds of artists—from B.B. King to Bonnie Raitt to Tony Bennett to Bruce Springsteen. I love this gig."

That's not to say, however, that he doesn't miss the East Coast. Born in Cleveland, Healy graduated from Eastman School of Music (in Rochester, N.Y.) in 1982 with a degree in composition. He moved to the New York City area soon afterward. Healy takes a nostalgic look back at those years on his new CD, *Hudson City Suite*, which paints an imaginary portrait of a town that existed briefly in the mid-19th century before being absorbed into Jersey City, N.J.

"I lived in the area where Hudson City had been 130 years ago," Healy explains. "So I wondered: What would it be like today? What was it like then? I could see the vestiges of Hudson City architecture and the personality of the neighborhood, with a lot of craziness and wonderful, colorful people. A lot of soul, very walled off from the rest of the world. I spent a lot of time in this area, and it really resonated for me."

The music Healy wrote for *Hudson City Suite* is a nine-part depiction of a mythological place, a city that might be if it hadn't gone extinct more than a century ago. It unites past and present musically as well as conceptually, bridging tradi-



tional big-band swing with lithe jazz modernism.

Healy was inspired in part by his move to L.A. and in part by the suites of Duke Ellington. "The thing that I love about Ellington is his immediacy and his message," Healy says. "He wrote from the heart, but he also wrote about ideas. Everything seemed to be very personal, and I wasn't feeling *that* in my music at the time. I was doing a lot of conceptual music, and sometimes I would get lost in my own process. So I figured, 'Duke wrote about things. Let me look around and write about something.' That's when the idea of the *Hudson City Suite* evolved."

The album was recorded with a 10-piece group of L.A.-based musicians, with guest appearances by trumpeter Tim Hagans, imported from New York for the occasion. Hagans, who had recorded once before with Healy for a previously unreleased session in 1989, praised his intriguing, painterly arrangements.

"Scott has the ability to make a 10-piece ensemble sound much larger," Hagans says, "almost like a symphony orchestra. There's no

strings, but the richness is there. You can hear that he's well aware of modern classical music as well as being a jazz musician."

That earlier recording has finally seen the light of day via Healy's newly minted label, Hudson City Records. The imprint provided the opportunity to release not only Healy's latest effort, but to clear out his closet. The label's website offers digital-only releases of two older efforts, the aforementioned, never-before-issued Scott Healy Ensemble album *Song Without Words* and a rerelease of *Naked Movies*, a 2004 CD by Healy's groove- and electronica-influenced quartet The Coalition. That band also features guitarist Glenn Alexander, who co-led a 1991 quartet date with Healy that resulted in *Northern Light*, which Hudson City Records has released digitally and as a physical CD.

"It's always eaten at me that these projects never came out," Healy says. "At the time, the independent artist process wasn't really happening yet. CDs were really expensive to print, we didn't have the Internet, and I had come close to

a couple of big record deals that didn't happen. I used this music a lot to get other work, but I never put it out; that always bothered me because I felt it was really strong. Finally, it seemed like a good time to get my feet wet with a label."

The "Conan" gig was also a major reason why these releases were allowed to gather dust. Healy was acquainted with guitarist Jimmy Vivino and his saxophonist brother Jerry from working freelance studio sessions in New York. Jimmy Vivino was helping Max Weinberg assemble a band for the new TV show, and Healy got the call. "I always tell people I was really glad they didn't have auditions because I never would've gotten it," he says. "There would have been a line around the block. Jimmy and Max Weinberg called people who they knew, and who they knew could be there quickly. We became a band in a day, and that's what got us in."

During the 17 years that O'Brien was based in New York, Healy continued to supplement his income by playing as a hired gun for session and commercial work: writing film and TV scores; composing and orchestrating classical scores on commission; gigging with jazz, rock and blues bands; and teaching at the New School and Sarah Lawrence College.

That type of work continues, but to a diminished extent since the move to California. "You have to get in line out here," Healy says. "All the world-class pianists out here are pretty stiff competition, especially for a newcomer. I had deep contacts in New York."

For now, he's begun taking more session gigs on accordion, which he learned in order to accompany The Band's Levon Helm. And with the inauguration of his new label, Healy is making a renewed push to establish himself as a jazz artist. He networks with like-minded composers through the Ellington Study Group, a monthly gathering to study the scores of masters like Ellington, Thad Jones and Bob Brookmeyer. He also writes about music theory and compositional techniques at his blog, Professorscosco, hoping to one day parlay that work into a book.

The most difficult aspect is balancing all of these varied pursuits. Asked how he does it, Healy laughs and answers succinctly, "I don't." The sprawling geography of Hollywood and being forced to essentially start over have both proved to be obstacles, but he says that the wealth of experiences he's enjoyed have been worth it. What he expected to be a two-year TV run has now lasted two decades and transformed the way in which he views his own work.

"I always considered myself a composer first and a player second," he says. "But in New York I was working as a player almost exclusively, so I evolved as a player and that got me into the Conan thing and onto other people's records. I had to accept the fact that maybe I'm really a player. I like to be in the trenches, I like to be creative, I like to solo with my band, and I like to get into the live aspect of playing my own music. I think that's ended up making me a better writer."

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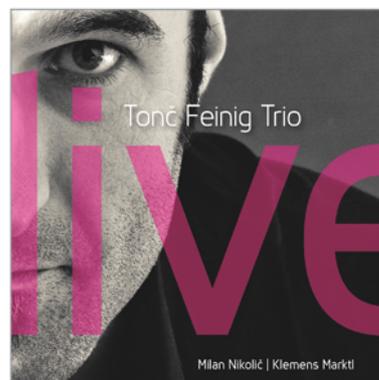


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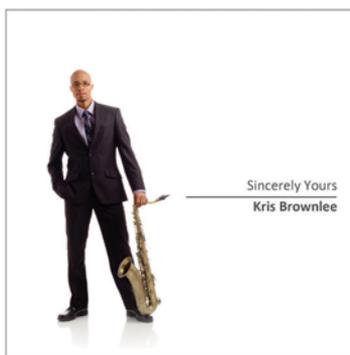


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