



**CHALLENGE MATCH**  
 Ben Allison, left, and Frank Kimbrough explore new themes in jazz.

## Collective souls

The cofounders of a famed jazz collective take different paths on two new albums.

By K. Leander Williams

Asking jazz musicians to explain what they do can be like playing a shell game: The ball is clearly there somewhere, but it remains elusive. By contrast, words seem to come as easy as playing to pianist Frank Kimbrough, and even more so to bassist Ben Allison, the acknowledged brain behind the Jazz Composers Collective, a musician-run nonprofit that helped launch both their careers in the mid-'90s. "What we started wasn't unprecedented in jazz," Allison says, thinking back to the Collective's origins in 1992. "But my idea actually came from elsewhere, from what I was reading about how Alban Berg and the Viennese School of composers handled their work in the early 20th century. Like them, we had to create context for our work where none existed." Kimbrough, sitting across from his longtime pal in a Japanese restaurant near Union Square, nods in agreement. "At the time, it looked like jazz was going to become strictly a neotrad repertory thing following what was happening at Lincoln Center," he recalls. "So

what Ben came up with really allowed us to concentrate on original music from the scene's different camps. It's hard to believe that it grew from four guys throwing \$75 each in a shoebox to presenting a regular Greenwich House music series."

The cofounders insist that the organization is currently "dormant" rather than defunct, even as their latest albums—Allison's *Little Things Run the World* and Kimbrough's *Air*—confirm that they're sharing fewer stages these days. They're not the only JCC success stories, either. Perhaps ironically, saxist Ted Nash now plays with the Wynton Marsalis-headed Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, while he records more adventurous fare for Palmetto Records, the jazz indie that is also home to Allison and Kimbrough. The members' combined résumé now runs the gamut, stretching from the late Dewey Redman (Kimbrough) and Curtis Stigers (Allison) to Andrew Hill (trumpeter Ron Horton) and John Lurie's Lounge Lizards (multireedist Michael Blake). "Yeah, there was a time when we all had quite a bit more time on our hands," laughs Kimbrough. "It's not possible now to just call up these cats and jam."

That's not to say that JCCers never play together anymore. Horton's lyrical trumpet is often the focal point on Allison's *Little Things Run the World*, an aurally cinematic disc

that picks up the folksy trail dusted off by last year's *Cowboy Justice*. The bassist has named his quartet Man Size Safe this time out; even if you miss Allison's allusion to Vice President Cheney's out-of-control desire for secrecy—the veep reportedly has just such a locker in his office—there's no sidestepping the dynamic tension between Horton's boppish grandeur and the twangy Americana signified by Steve Cardenas's just-this-side-of-rollicking guitar. "As makers of instrumental music with no lyrics, jazz musicians have only two ways of putting words out there: through tune titles and liner notes," Allison

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explains. "It's not my style to pontificate from the bandstand, but I like the idea that titles can add another layer of meaning to what the band is playing."

As the sound of Allison's group becomes more extroverted, however, Kimbrough's *Air* moves toward introspection. It's a solo-piano recital, and whereas many pianists have to

work up the improvisational and emotive fortitude to go it alone, Kimbrough reveals that the format takes him back to his days scuffling around New York before the JCC was formed. "I'd been in the city just over ten years when I met Ben," the North Carolina native remembers. "Much of that time was spent playing solo piano around the Village—five years of Saturdays at the old Village Corner from 9pm to 3am—because no one was interested in the freer music I wanted to play. The loft-jazz scene was long gone by that time." Judging from the way Kimbrough jaunts through free-associative originals and pieces by Thelonious Monk ("Jackie-ing") and Paul Motian ("It Should Have Happened Long Ago"), he clearly has little interest in stylistic boundaries. "In people like Shirley Horn, Andrew Hill and Paul Bley, I had some of the best mentor/friendships anyone could ask for," Kimbrough says. "But now, looking back, it seems like I had to wait for the next wave of cats, the generation after me, to hit the scene in order to finally get where I needed to go."

*Air is out now.* Little Things Run the World comes out Jan 22. Ben Allison's Man Size Safe plays the Winter Jazzfest at the Knitting Factory Sat 12, and at the National Arts Club Feb 5. The Frank Kimbrough Trio plays the Kitano Lounge Jan 25 and 26.