

**I**t must be in the genes. How else can you explain *Sweet Home: The Music of Robert Johnson* (Random Chance), the adventurous debut from singer-songwriter Pyeng Threadgill? The daughter of jazz explorer Henry Threadgill and Christina Jones, the celebrated dance choreographer and founding member of the Urban Bush Women, Threadgill unearths the sultriness, melancholy and ebullience of Johnson's Delta blues and remodels his music for the 21st century.

Like her father, Threadgill has an ear of experimental instrumentation. Rick Congress, owner of Random Chance, heard Threadgill and cellist Dana Leong perform at a mutual friend's birthday party, and soon after he approached the singer about doing the project. "He originally just wanted me to do just cello and voice," Threadgill says. "But I wanted to use all kinds of different instrumentations." On *Sweet Home*, she uses acoustic guitars, naturally, but she peppers the soundscapes

with cello, trumpet, trombones and subtle electronic embellishments.

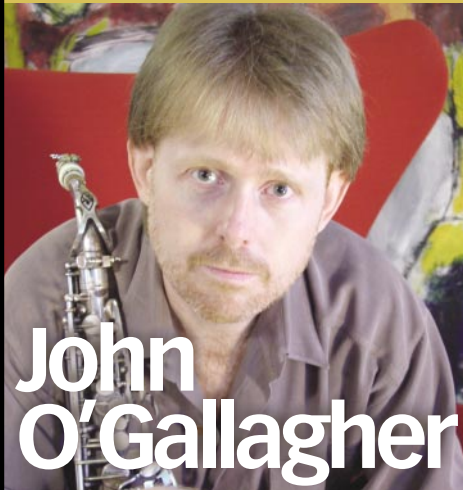
Threadgill also shares her father's gift for recontextualization as demonstrated by her reggae-flavored take on "Love in Vain Blues" or the boom-bap bounce that propels "Phonograph Blues." Elsewhere, Threadgill infuses elements of jazz, funk, R&B and Afro-Cuban music into Johnson's blues. "I wanted each song to be different," she says. "Otherwise what would be the point?"

Still, Threadgill insists that her mother's work with the Urban Bush Women had a more explicit influence than her father's music. The intoxicating "Last Fair Deal Gone Down," which employs a staccato, syncopated rhythm derived from an 18th-century African-American ring-shout, came directly from observing the Urban Bush Women. "I wouldn't even know what a ring-shout was had it not been for them," Threadgill says. Traditionally, broomsticks produced the ring-shout's defining rhythm, but



RAYNE ROBERTS

Threadgill's arrangement uses percussion, guitar and handclaps—plus a little something extra. Although she initially wanted to use the same broomstick-derived beats for this recording, Threadgill couldn't produce the correct sound. "Eventually, we used a ladder," she laughs. "That's me, banging the ladder on the floor to generate the rhythm." Now, how Threadgill-ish is that? **JOHN MURPH**



## John O'Gallagher

**J**ohn O'Gallagher has a thing for mathematics. If the title of the alto saxophonist's new disc, *Abacus* (Arabesque), doesn't clue you in, talk to him about some of his inspirations. He'll get all Brainiac-like on you, citing such heady material as the "golden numbers" of 13th-century mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci and Douglas R. Hofstadter's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* as significant

touchstones. "I'm interested in a lot of things that have to do with structure," O'Gallagher says. "I'll go on the Web and search for things on fractals, because you can find a lot of interesting things on how nature is based upon fractal geometry."

"String Theory" derives its harmonic structure from Fibonacci's work, but it comes to life through O'Gallagher's alto sax coiling tightly with Ben Monder's golden guitar tones and the rhythm section of pianist Russ Lossing, drummer Jeff Hirshfield and bassist Johannes Weidenmueller. O'Gallagher applied Fibonacci's numbers on the vigorous "Homunculus" from his 2002 debut, *Axiom* (CIMP), which had him sharing the frontline with tenor saxophonist Tony Malaby with the rhythm section of drummer Jeff Williams and bassist John Hebert. "Mathematics is something I've dabbled in a bit as far as composing. But believe me, I know very superficially about the real workings of this stuff," O'Gallagher says with a wry laugh.

The saxophonist's diamond-hard tone

and corkscrew improvisations sometimes recall Greg Osby, but O'Gallagher also reveals himself to be quite a sensualist on *Abacus*' spectral "For You," where he etches out beautiful, elongated melody lines alongside Monder's elastic chords. And there's a certain jovial mischievousness that shines through the riveting makeover of Lee Konitz's "Hi Beck." "I think Lee's one of the most underrated brilliant guys out there," O'Gallagher says. "I've always thought of his music as being ultramodern."

In addition to Konitz, O'Gallagher lists Thelonious Monk, Steve Coleman, Lennie Tristano and György Ligeti among his favorite composers. "What draws me in are compositions that have a real inner logic in which every note has a meaning," he says. As far as his own compositions, O'Gallagher usually thinks visually, and lately in terms of series as Picasso once did with his paintings. "Sometimes when I compose, I think, 'Man, I can write a million versions of this one idea.'" **JOHN MURPH**