

# AMERICAN PIMP TECHNICOLOR SWANK PORN MUSIC

URI CAINE DELVES INTO THE  
DISCO SIDE OF JAZZ

**H**eads nod more than toes tap. The music grooves instead of swings. It's Friday night at 55 Bar in New York City's West Village and the place is packed with young bohos who look more inclined to go to a punk club than a jazz spot.

Uri Caine takes center stage behind an electric piano and Apple laptop. Bassist Tim Lefebvre is flanked behind him and Zach Danziger positions his drum kit upfront. Billed as Bedrock, the group's engaged in a heady motor-booty affair, in which Caine's snaky improvisations writhe and wring through dark, aquatic soundscapes, propelled by Lefebvre's elastic bass lines and Danziger's deep pockets of funk. The grooves are protean in nature, with some sections moving at glacial paces, others shimmying in a boogie-down fashion. The trio is celebrating the release of Bedrock's newest album, *Shelf-Life* (Winter & Winter), the follow-up to its first endeavor, 2003's *Bedrock3*.

If 55 Bar had enforced a dress code for the Caine show, it would probably include polyester leisure suits, crotch-hugging bellbottom jeans, Terry Cloth halter tops and flowing gowns. A wicked seductiveness emanates from the bandstand, but it's not the American Songbook's sepia-toned elegance. Tonight, the allure is more akin to American Pimp Technicolor swank. The funk quotient is that strong.

Although Bedrock owes a debt to modern DJ culture with its use of sampling and Danziger's bustling drum-'n'-bass rhythms, much of the music on *Shelf-Life* plays out like a love letter to the '70s. Its retro-futuristic sound is





anchored in jazz-funk, but often mutates from galactic abstractions to frisky stabs at Blaxploitation-inspired soul and disco. Yes, disco. That four-on-the-floor beat, decorated with sensual, undulating bass grooves, scratchy guitar, creamy synth-fills and glamorous arrangements.

*Shelf-Life* is designed to make the listener sweat. In fact, the disc closes with the devilish mid-tempo r&b ballad "Sweat," which features veteran Philadelphia soul crooner Bunny Sigler. Also on board are singer Barbara Walker, trumpeter Ralph Alessi, clarinetist Ruben Gutierrez, DJ Olive and percussionist Arto Tunçboyacıyan. Caine even recruits his mentor, hard-bop tenor saxophonist Bootsie Barnes.

Like its predecessor, *Shelf-Life* brims with salacious hilarity, contagious melodies and first-rate musicianship. It's as smart as it's seditious, chiefly because Caine imbues it with all the intellectual, creative and emotional vigor that he did with releases like *Urlicht/Primal Light* (1996) and *The Goldberg Variations* (2000), both on Winter & Winter.

Those albums, on which Caine deftly interpreted the music of Gustav Mahler and Johann Sebastian Bach, respectively, with modern makeovers that sometimes involved turntables, gospel singing, Dixieland, rollicking blues and Third Stream jazz, catapulted him to the upper echelon of jazz musicians. "It's not just eclecticism for the sake of that," Caine, 49, said. "It's more about the contrasts of different musics. They complement each other."

Caine had proved himself as a virtuosic pianist and a gifted composer through his first two solo albums, *Sphere Music* (JMT, 1993) and *Toys* (JMT, 1996). When *Urlicht/Primal Light* dropped, though, Caine made his mark as a conceptualist, capable of juxtaposing a multitude of genres and stylistic idioms while crafting a singular artistic statement. A year after its release, *Urlicht/Primal Light* won the International Composer's Hut award for Best Mahler CD. The accolades Caine received for that album spearheaded commissioned projects from the Vienna Volksoper, the Seattle Chamber Players, Relâche, the Beaux Arts Trio and the Basel Chamber Orchestra.

Other lofty jazz interpretations of European classical works include *Wagner In Venezia* (1997), *Love Fugue* (2002) — on which he reinvented Robert Schumann's "Dichterliebe" song cycle — and *The Diabelli Variations* (2003), a magnificent piano and orchestral arrangement of Beethoven's "Opus 120."

When talking about music, Caine doesn't come across as condescending, but like an encouraging, amiable college professor, with whom students love to hang around and discuss philosophy, art and politics.

At his Central Park West apartment, Caine explains why *Shelf-Life* seems so much like a '70s throwback with squealing Minimoog



melodies, glassy Fender Rhodes chords and ARP-string ensemble synth-washes when compared to the more 21st century-sounding *Bedrock3*. "It's more of an association with having played them," he said. "It's also about being able to get different types of things going musically, especially if you start out as an acoustic pianist."

Woodshedding in Philadelphia's diverse jazz scene in the '70s, when he was barely out of high school, Caine fondly remembers when synthesizers infiltrated jazz, igniting hatred from many luddite pianists who argued that they were toys rather than bona fide musical instruments. "I used to always read that the synthesizer wasn't a real instrument," he said. "But used creatively, it still has potential. There's a different technique required to play them than the piano. On the synthesizers, the whole idea of using your finger weight that you apply on the piano doesn't work the same way. It's better to have a flat finger technique."

Those heated debates about synthesizers seem antiquated, yet even jazz artists on the cutting-edge of technology are hesitant of professing their affection for disco. "The way music changes over time, certain references and controversies are put into a different light," Caine argued.

Caine said that he was "neutral" about disco in its heyday, preferring what he called the "more extreme" music of James Brown, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Joe Henderson and Igor Stravinsky. Still, Caine played behind singers such as Jean Carne, in which the swirling mirrored ball wasn't too far away. "Once you get into a situation in which you play different types of music and see what's required, you develop a different education," he said. "You learn humility, because you realize that music is deep and

has a lot of art forms. For instance, if a person writes a Broadway show, you could say, 'The music isn't that difficult; it's of that world.' But to write a Broadway show? Try it. I became more aware of wanting to be more of a student."

*Shelf-Life*'s homage to the '70s isn't just a reflection on Caine's Philly stomping grounds. His trio-mates' experience working on soundtracks for David Holmes' movies *Ocean's Eleven* and *Ocean's Twelve* informed the music as well. "A lot of the stuff we were introduced to in terms of coming up with those soundtracks were similar to the ones we used for inspiration on *Shelf-Life*," Danziger said. "A lot of it is what some people would consider elevator music. With *Shelf-Life*, we were inspired by quirky, nostalgic TV music, semi-funk, semi-disco, Italian porn soundtrack stuff."

"Tim was in a lot of '70s porn as an actor, so I rented a lot of those movies he was in," Danziger jokingly continued. "Honestly, I don't think porn soundtracks sounded as good as our music. They sounded better and worse, at the same time. Definitely, we think we've done stuff that one might interpret as porn music. Then you actually hear some of the porn music and you say, 'Nah, *Shelf-Life* isn't really like that.' But it's reminiscent."

If it wasn't for Caine's varied output in the past, it would be easy to dismiss *Shelf-Life* as a quirky, self-indulgent project meant for cheap laughs and nothing else. Oftentimes, Caine's fondness for the absurd recalls that of George Clinton and Frank Zappa. "Does humor belong in music?" Caine asked. "Yes. It adds another contrast. Humor is another aspect of all these different groups."

He uses *Urlicht/Primal Light* as an example. "If you grew up listening to Mahler played in a certain way, the Mahler fanatic wouldn't accept

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my versions," he said. "That's OK. We're looking at it as improvised musicians, using it as another alternative structure to base some improvisations on. It's same thing with the stuff I play with Bedrock."

Caine's knack for balancing brainy concepts with sometimes bawdy comedy traces back to his childhood years in Bala Cynwyd, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia. The oldest of three children, born to lawyer father, who was once the head of the city's ACLU, and an English professor mom. He remembers growing up in a consciously Jewish household. "We grew up speaking Hebrew, even though we were still Americans," he said. "We would sit around the table, Friday night, and listen to Jewish folk music to learn Hebrew. It was this revival to speak Hebrew and go back to Israel."

His parents were also open-minded. "They went to Woodstock and left the kids at home," he said.

Caine's house was filled with music, and his mom had a particular love for Aretha Franklin and The Beatles. "I don't think they understood jazz or r&b," Caine said. "But they heard it. My uncle gave me Miles Davis and John Coltrane records. That's when I started to listen to jazz."

Like his younger brother and sister, Caine studied music as a kid. He began taking piano lessons from a neighbor when he was 8. Four years later, he studied with one of his first significant instructors, pianist Bernard Peiffer, who Caine describes as a "tough teacher with a strong personality."

"He was the first to give me the idea of what it really takes to become a professional musician, in terms of practicing," he continued. "If I brought in a piece, he could spend an hour or two just playing four chords. He had this idea of being so detailed about everything. It made a strong impression on me."

After high school, Caine attended the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied music composition with George Rochberg and George Crumb. It was during this time that Caine began delving inside Philadelphia's jazz scene, finding another prominent mentor in Barnes, who eventually introduced him to other Philly-based jazz luminaries such as Mickey Roker, Hank Mobley and Philly Joe Jones. "I had [Uri] on the chitlin'-circuit of all the black clubs," Barnes said. "They loved him, everywhere we went. During his solos, he always played a little different from all the other cats. He was always on the edge, trying something. I knew he was going to be great."

"There would always be these clubs [in Philadelphia] where they would bring down musicians like Joe Henderson, Phil Woods or Freddie Hubbard, and they would hire a local rhythm section," Caine said. "That's when I starting thinking about New York."

But Caine's move from Philadelphia to New York wasn't so direct. He first worked in the

Caribbean and briefly lived in Israel. "It made me all realize that if I was going to try to move anywhere, that it should be New York," he said. "I was having great experiences discovering that you could be a musician all over the world."

So in October 1985, Caine moved to New York and began playing with musicians such as Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Calvin Weston, Gerald Veasley and Cornell Rochester. "[New York] wasn't exactly what I had expected," Caine said. "The jazz scene was much more fragmented, but in a lot of ways much more open. It made me realize that you had to get your own thing together. But at the same time, it was important to play with a lot of different musicians."

Caine remembers his initial life in New York as happily scuffling. He eventually found an indelible kindred spirit in clarinetist Don Byron, who first hired him to play on his 1993 disc, *Don Byron Plays The Music Of Mickey Katz* (Nonesuch), his much debated and emulated klezmer project. After that album, Caine became a regular in Byron's groups, working with his jazz quintets and classical ensembles. "Working with Don has been a great experience," Caine said. "His way of looking at music and including a lot of different things was good after playing with a lot people who weren't as open-minded."

While Byron was becoming the critic's darling for his diverse body of work, Caine was simultaneously ascending from a gifted sideman to a leader of note. His first two albums, *Sphere Music* and *Toys*, on which he concentrated on the stylings and compositions of Thelonious Monk and Herbie Hancock, were modern jazz excursions that leaned slightly to the left. While well-received, they sound meek in comparison to Caine's third effort, *Urlicht/Primal Light*, the breakthrough disc that made him a name to watch.

In one grandiloquent sweep, *Urlicht/Primal Light* displayed one of modern jazz's most exciting facets of the late 20th century — its increased awareness and interaction with DJ culture. "There's nothing good or bad about having a DJ on stage," Caine said. "When I started doing that, it was to have this idea of having musicians playing Mahler against Mahler being manipulated by a DJ. That clash is beautiful when you start playing that way. Then it took on added implications. Everyone now has a wealth of music at their fingertips with the laptop. It doesn't mean it's going to be good music. It just means that if you combine technology with real imagination and skill, you can start grasping unbelievable things."

That DJ culture mindset, both explicit and implied, fuels all of Caine's succeeding albums.

"One of the traditions of jazz is innovation," he said. "It's not just about all the great masterpieces of the past. Although, jazz is certainly about that too. But jazz is so about the openness, embracing music from a lot of different sources. DJ culture is just as important to jazz as rediscovering Duke Ellington."

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