

## Will Sellenraad Modern Groove Harmony

Guitarist Will Sellenraad said organ combos provided his gateway to jazz. While he acknowledges Wes Montgomery, Grant Green and Kenny Burrell in particular, Sellenraad said the chitlin' circuit as a whole serves as a bridge between the past and present.

"Definitely, as far as guitar playing goes, you can't not be aware of that and try and play this music," Sellenraad said at his apartment in New York's SoHo neighborhood. "It connects the dots a little bit between a real straight-ahead jazz thing and blues. For guitar players, we all spend time with the blues."

Still, Sellenraad distances himself from any retro crowd as he incorporates modern harmony into his blues base. His third album, *Balance* (Beez Wax), conveys the flavor of soul jazz without the presence of an organ.

"I was feeling a little typecast after *Star Hustler* came out," he said of an earlier organ trio date. So Sellenraad made an adjustment. Tracks like the title song and "Stubbs" feature bluesy grooves, but the influence of Miles Davis and Wayne Shorter provides the underpinning. Sellenraad also focused on writing songs rather than sophisticated compositions.

"People are playing some hard, hard music out here," he said. "So a lot of times, they're

missing the feel of what it's really supposed to be. Because it's so complex, it's like you're so worried about trying to play it right that you don't worry about dynamics, your touch on your instrument and the vibe of the thing. To me, those are the most important things.

"So the trick is to make it at least sound simple," he continued. "We're exposed to so much these days that the melody is lost. I've walked out of many a club saying I couldn't sing any of that."

Sellenraad, 38, grew up in SoHo, where he knew quite a few jazz musicians. But his decision to pursue a jazz career actually came after he left Manhattan to attend Goddard College in Vermont. Sellenraad transferred to the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music, where he earned a degree in jazz performance in 1995. Sellenraad's first album, *Streams*, came out in 2000.

In a sense *Balance*, recorded in February 2007, represents a tribute to the Big Apple scene. It features musicians with whom Sellenraad has worked for many years around the city: drummer Victor Lewis, bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa, tenor saxophonist Abraham Burton. Sellenraad composed his seven compositions for the date for this group.



"This is the most personal recording I've ever done," he said. "Almost everything on there is tailor-made for those guys. And then also to write something we could play on, that we're not looking head down at the chart, but something that is easy enough for us to get pretty quickly to that spot where we're improvising. I didn't want it to be like a real heady thing."  
—Eric Fine

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