

Fly Sky & Country

Mark Turner: tenor and soprano saxophones; **Larry Grenadier:** double-bass;
Jeff Ballard: drums

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"Fly is a new thing. The trio has the intimacy of a close up conversation and the depth of three free minds exploring and expanding on each other's ideas. Uncluttered creativity."

- Chick Corea

"Sky & Country" is the ECM debut of the highly-regarded collective trio that drummer Jeff Ballard has memorably described as "an intimate band with teeth". It's a group that overturns expectations of its specific instrumentation. Modern jazz history is not short on highly charged sax/bass/drums trios, including those of Sonny Rollins, Albert Ayler and Sam Rivers, but Fly is differently cast. Equal rights for all instruments is one goal. The saxophone seeks parity with bass and drums, and its refusal to fill all the space with sound brings another set of tensions into play. As writer Nate Chinen observed in a JazzTimes article, "This is music that expands and contracts, effortlessly and dramatically and that balances the cerebral components of group improvisation with the more gut-level element of groove." Or as Brad Meldau, who works regularly with Larry Grenadier and Jeff Ballard in his own trio has said: "Fly brings together elements in their playing that are often at odds with each other: On the one hand their music can be intellectually challenging - their compositions in particular can be rhythmically and harmonically dense. In spite of that, their music makes a strong emotional impact, felt through the deep rhythmic groove, and the organic way that these three musicians tell a story together."

The group first surfaced as the Jeff Ballard Trio in 2000 on one track of the anthology "Originations", curated by Chick Corea (Ballard was Chick's drummer at the time) and became Fly with the release of their first album, on Savoy, in 2004. Association between the players however goes back much further. Grenadier and Ballard played music together as teenagers in California in the early 1980s and subsequently gigged together often. They both migrated to the US's East coast in 1990 where they met Turner, and the three musicians have played in diverse permutations and contexts since then.

In Fly, Turner, Grenadier and Ballard all write material. Mark Turner: "Sometimes it's the saxophone carrying the melody. Other times it's the bass or drums. We spread out the frontline duties among us." "Sky & Country" features three Ballard tunes, four by Turner, and two by Grenadier.

Mark Turner was born in Fairborn, Ohio in 1965, and moved with his family to California when he was four. He started playing clarinet at nine then later switched to alto, then tenor as a teenager. He studied art at Long Beach State and California College of Arts and Crafts, transferring to Berklee College of Music, and graduating in 1990. Since moving to New York he has worked and recorded with musicians including Kurt Rosenwinkel, Dave Holland, Paul

Motian, Brad Mehldau, John Patitucci, Dave Douglas, Billy Hart, Lee Konitz and James Moody. Turner is on dozens of recordings as a sideman as well as five of his own recordings (“Yam Yam” on Criss Cross, “Mark Turner”, “In This World”, “Ballad Session” and “Dharma Days” on Warner Brothers). Both Turner and Larry Grenadier appeared on Enrico Rava’s “New York Days” album on ECM.

Turner’s elegant, abstract and thoughtful playing has been much remarked on by his contemporaries. Brad Meldau has noted that Mark “doesn’t court the theatrics associated with his instrument ... (He is) playing with a direct candor usually reserved for older players.” And the older players, too, have been taking note. Lee Konitz (in the book “Conversations on the Improviser’s Art”): “I think Mark is a very serious contender. He’s really mastered the altissimo register of his instrument. That’s quite rare among tenor players ... He’s really playing lines up there as Warne Marsh could do – and Mark uses that register much more than Warne did.”

Larry Grenadier was born in San Francisco in 1966. He began playing bass when he was 11, and as a teenager worked in the Bay area with Joe Henderson, Stan Getz, Bobby Hutcherson among many others. He graduated from Stanford University in 1989 with a degree in English Literature. After playing with Gary Burton's band in 1990, he moved to New York City and played in the groups of Betty Carter, Joshua Redman, Danilo Perez, Tom Harrell, Joe Henderson, John Scofield, Pat Metheny, Paul Motian, Charles Lloyd and Brad Mehldau and recorded dozens of albums. Previous ECM credits include the above-mentioned Rava disc and three albums with Charles Lloyd: “The Water Is Wide”, “Hyperion With Higgins” and “Lift Every Voice”. Enrico Rava recently described Larry’s playing as “present and focused in every moment”, and this is true too of the quite different demands of Fly where bass and sax frequently move in complementary orbits, developing ideas independently and interdependently.

Drummer/percussionist Jeff Ballard was born in Southern California in 1963 and grew up in Santa Cruz, where he began playing drums at age 14. He toured with Ray Charles from 1988 through 1990. Jeff moved to New York in 1990, and since then has played and/or recorded with Lou Donaldson, Chick Corea, Buddy Montgomery, Mike Stern, Danilo Perez, Pat Metheny, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Joshua Redman, Enrico Rava and very many others. Recent recordings include the Brad Mehldau Trio’s “Live” , “Metheny/ Mehldau” and Joshua Redman’s “Momentum”. “Sky & Country” is Ballard’s first ECM recording.

In interviews Ballard frequently speaks of drawing influence from the widest range of stylistic sources, acknowledging jazz masters from Joe Morello to Tony Williams but also citing the inspiration of South American, Afro-Cuban, Middle-Eastern and African drumming, and rhythms from everywhere...

“Sky & Country” was recorded at New York’s Avatar Studio in February and June 2008. The group’s touring activities in April and May take in concerts in both the US and Europe.