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The time-tested hand game known as Ro Sham Beau is hard to beat as a quick and efficient method for settling disputes. But the Boston band Ro Sham Beaux seems more likely to start arguments than to end them. Is this a jazzy indie rock combo, a slinky funk quartet with a jones for improvisation, or a rockin' jazz ensemble with a knack for sophisticated hooks? The answer is yes.

A fiercely grooving foursome hailing from New England Conservatory, RSB features Luke Marantz on piano and keyboard, bassist Oliver Watkinson, drummer Jacob Cole, and saxophonist Zac Shaiman. The collective quartet announces its arrival on March 13, 2012 with the release of a combustible self-titled album on Red Piano Records that blows apart binary musical categories.

While fluent in the post-bop canon, the band is equally influenced by indie rock pacesetters like Deerhoof, Björk, and The Dirty Projectors. Artfully employing electronic effects and looping in real time, RSB has honed a compelling book of original tunes that embrace pop's concision, indie rock's textural resourcefulness and jazz's improvisational imperative. Rather than serving as launching pads for extended solos, RSB tunes are vehicles for jaw-dropping group interplay and quicksilver shifts in tempo, texture and momentum. Above all, RSB infuses their music with a sense of unabashed joy, as if exalting in each other's company.

"We thrive in the spaces between order and chaos," Marantz says. "We're playing acoustic instruments, but electrified, including saxophone with effects and pedals which is a sound you don't hear very much. We improvise the forms, which means we've developed a whole language among ourselves out of necessity. Zac brings in new tunes every week and the old tunes keep expanding. We have a whole lexicon of places we can go."

The band's sound has evolved considerably since recording its debut album, but Ro Sham Beaux capture the quartet's singular sound. The album opens with "Bearblade," a funk-tinged anthem with a soaring saxophone line that gives way to a shimmering keyboard passage. The slow-burning "Tejas Drive" is built on Cole's pummeling trap work. While sounding nothing like The Bad Plus, the tune's surging and retreating tidal energy brings to mind a Dave King opus.

While still moody and mysterious, RSB's interpretation of Björk's "Jóga," ratchets up the intensity several notches, maintaining the melody's smeary quality while suggesting darker currents underneath. Even

spookier is the episodic "Dreamulator," which opens with the unsettling strains of a toy piano. An Afro-Brazilian groove transforms the vibe, and then quickly gives way to carefully latticed saxophone lines.



Part of what makes RSB such an exciting ensemble is the sense that they're still mapping the sonic territory into which they've wandered. Though the quartet is a collective, there's no mistaking Shaiman's saxophone as the lead voice, much like a singer in a rock band. A highly expressive player with a bright, clear tone (until he alters it with one of his trusty foot pedals), he often employs effects in subtle and crafty ways.

"I feel like the record was really important in figuring all that stuff out," Shaiman says. "We booked two 12-hour days in a rock studio, and they had tons of stuff to play with. We figured out a lot of stuff in the studio, and we ended up with more music than we could ever use."

While Ro Sham Beaux has developed a sound unlike any other band on the scene, the group traces its origins to a most familiar setting. The four musicians first played together at a jam session at NEC in the fall of 2009. With potent chemistry as friends and musicians, the foursome started jamming regularly, with original tunes gradually replacing standards.

"As we brought in our own tunes and started writing for the quartet, we got further and further from jazz quartet model," Marantz says. "We're all really into rock, and most of us have been in rock bands, so we were just following our other influences."

Shaiman earned his jazz stripes attending Don Braden's NJPAC Jazz for Teens program, then spent another two at Braden's summer program in Litchfield, Conn. At NEC, he studied with masters Jerry Bergonzi, Fred Hersch, and Cecil McBee, and has performed with luminaries such as Billy Hart, Geri Allen, and Joshua Redman.



Hailed by NPR as one of the "best young American jazz pianists," Marantz was raised in Texas amidst a highly musical family. A graduate of Dallas's vaunted Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, which has produced genre-bending musicians such as Norah Jones, Erykah Badu, and Roy Hargrove, Marantz earned numerous national jazz awards before graduating, including 17 from Down Beat magazine. He also co-leads The Primary Colors with his brother, the esteemed saxophonist Matt Marantz, and the Red Trio with drummer Zach Para and Israeli bassist Ehud Ettun. In recent years he's performed with masters such as Jeff "Tain" Watts, Tierney Sutton, Ingrid Jensen and Antonio Hart.

While growing up in Topsham, Maine, Watkinson put in time on violin, piano, cello, and drums before deciding to concentrate on the electric bass at 13. In high school he began studying jazz bass at the New England Conservatory Preparatory School, and since starting undergraduate studies at NEC in 2008 he's studied with jazz greats such as Cecil McBee, John McNeil, Dave Holland, Jerry Bergonzi, Jason Moran, Joe Morris and Danilo Perez, who invited him to teach and perform at the 9th annual Panama Jazz Festival in Panama City.

Growing up in Northern California, Cole got an early start on drums when his stepfather, a Memphis jazz and rhythm & blues trumpeter, made sure he studied with the best drummers in the region, including Rick Lotter and Eddie Marshall. He graduated from high school at 17 and matriculated to the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico, where he immersed himself in jazz and Afro-Caribbean styles and rhythms. During his yearlong stint in San Juan he performed with established leaders Charlie Sepulveda, David Sanchez, and Eddie Gomez. Relocating to Boston to study at NEC, Cole has worked closely with drum legend Billy Hart. He's found an ideal outlet for his far-flung influences in Ro Sham Beaux.

"Studying in NEC's jazz program has been amazing, but something inside of me has been longing to let loose, to play drums in a more expressionistic way," Cole says. "I had not been really a leader behind the drums, always a sideman. With Ro Sham Beaux there's not a leader, so I can conduct the ensemble more freely. I can stretch the time, or go nuts and they're right there with me."



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