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BORDERLANDS TRIO

# Stephan Crump Gravity & Magnetism

BY KEN MICALLEF | PHOTOGRAPH BY JR DELIA

**WHETHER PROVIDING LOW-END LIFTOFF** to the trio and sextet of pianist Vijay Iyer or lending ballast to his Borderlands Trio, Rosetta Trio, and Rhombal Quartet, acoustic bassist Stephan Crump is wary of labeling the music he performs. Better to let the listener decide. The thinning line between composition and improvisation is one such bailiwick for the Memphis native, as explored on the latest Borderlands Trio outing, *Asteroidea*.

"I think of this music as spontaneous composition," Crump says from his Brooklyn studio. "I'm always reluctant to tell people the music is improvised, because they categorize that as 'people doing whatever.' Improvised music is not as respected as written music. I love that [writing] process, and it's important, but all of the work I've done my whole life also goes into spontaneous composition."

*Asteroidea* is one of the most significant spontaneous-composition trio recordings of 2017. Joined by Kris Davis (piano) and Eric McPherson (drums), Crump assists

in punching and pulling notes, casting them away like shooting stars, and then rubbing them together like kindling, whose ensuing sparks create a maelstrom of melody, rhythm, and sparkling interaction. It's raucous, riveting, and highly charged. That it's entirely improvised is shocking—that it's so urgent, beautiful, and entrancing is its joy.

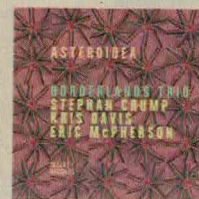
**Borderlands Trio has incredible chemistry. How does this level of interaction occur?**

Kris and Eric have an uncanny sense of orchestration that allows for more openness to control the overall structure and all the details. That taps into a broader spectrum of abilities. Eric's dynamic range is unparalleled, which allows him to control colors from the kit. We're all hearing and perceiving music on a broad spectrum harmonically. We're making overtones dance together.

**Borderlands Trio sounds avant garde, free, and very much in the moment. It's fascinating to hear and follow.**

Continued

**i INFO**



Borderlands Trio, *Asteroidea* [2017, Intakt]; Stephan Crump, *Rhombal* [Independent]

LISTEN

EQUIP

**Acoustic basses** 1963 German Saumer ¾-size; for travel, David Gage Czech Ease "highly customized"  
**Strings** E, Pirastro Eudoxa (gut wound in silver); A, Velvet Anima (gut/synthetic gut, silk, copper); D, Velvet Anima (gut/synthetic gut, silk, copper); G, Velvet Garbo (heavier gauge than Anima)  
**Bow** Early 1990s German Roderich Paesold  
**Rig** Studio: Ampeg B-12 and B-15 Portaflex; live: Aguilar DB 500 or Aguilar DB 359 heads atop Aguilar GS 112 or Aguilar GS 210 cabinet

Everyone has a broad conception of the possibilities on their instrument. It's not just about the fundamental notes that you play; it's the way you shape a note that coaxes different stackings of overtones. Everything that goes into the specific texture and color of the note is about how the overtones are stacking above it. We're not thinking about it in the moment; we're perceiving. We're not only dealing with the fundamental bass-line level, for instance, of what's happening. We're perceiving things stacked up [higher in] the chain, and making them interact on a vertical level. It's not just linear.

**Does the trio think about groove?**

We're all deeply committed to rhythm and groove and feel. We all hear rhythm first, even before pitch or melody. What also gives the music breadth is concentric orbiting. We're not declaring all the time what the core is. We're implying it, very powerfully and clearly through circling it on different orbits, but doing so simultaneously. That creates gravity and magnetism. We're connecting in that gravitational or magnetic way and getting that connective tissue charged, but at the same time always looking for ways to stretch so it keeps growing.

**Why is the album titled *Asteroidea*?**

*Asteroidea* is a starfish; they regenerate limbs. The title also evokes the stars and the constellations and gravitational pull and meaning. It comes down to the polarity, the charge among the notes, between and among the gestures. That's where the power is.

**How do you bring students into this idea of spontaneous composition?**

Don't create barriers. This music is about opening, not closing. Anytime

you're exploring, learn to lift the hood and see where the power is, where the force is in it. I'm not thinking about genre when playing this music. You have to be able to hear into the music and target shapes and phrases you want to offer. We're not just following each other around in *Borderlands Trio*, but really focusing on the clarity and completeness of an idea that we want to offer the music. It's trusting that if that idea is created in an atmosphere of maximum openness and sensitization, it will have a logic that works.

When it boils down, it's about similar fundamentals, about tension and release. That's another way of perceiving magnetism and polarity. Tension and release happen in the micro levels in how you're hooking up with the other musicians; it happens with phrases, and it happens structurally with the song form. I'm always thinking or perceiving that. I feel like those micro and macro approaches to [conveying] the music come into play, whether it's *Rhombal Quartet* and previously composed tunes, or totally wide-open music, or a song with a specific form you move through. **BP**

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