

# The Hartford Courant

September 22, 2011

## Armen Donelian Performs Sept. 23 in New Haven



By OWEN MCNALLY, Special to The Courant

Although he has a blue-chip resume, a distinctive personal sound as a pianist and composer and has just released his ninth envelope-pushing album on Sunnyside Records, Armen Donelian is hardly a household name, except perhaps in the hippest of homes where adventurous, often lyrical cutting-edge music is revered.

Donelian, leads his bold, cohesive quintet Friday, Sept. 23 at 8:30 and 10 p.m. at New Haven's Firehouse 12.

Celebrating the release of his CD, "Leapfrog," the bandleader is joined at Firehouse 12 by his four colleagues on his new disc: Dutch saxophonist Marc Mommaas, guitarist Mike Moreno, bassist Dean Johnson and drummer Tyshawn Sorey, an inventive percussionist who combines muscularity with musicianly smarts.

Look for a repertoire rooted in the material on "Leapfrog," which features eight Donelian compositions. Released this month, the album was recorded, mixed and mastered last year at Firehouse 12 by the cutting-edge music center's owner and chief engineer Nick Lloyd.

Donelian, who studied with the harmonically advanced, probing pianist Richie Beirach, is an expressionist composer who ranges easily in mood from the dark and forebodingly tumultuous to the mysterious and dreamy. "Rage," the CD opener, is drenched in brooding, almost obsessively compulsive thematic repetition, generating a dizzying mood accentuated by the empathetic unison guitar/piano passages spun by Moreno and Donelian. But the very next track, "The Poet," in dramatic contrast, glides mysteriously above it all, a reassuringly serene sotto voce response to the tempestuous atmospherics of "Rage."

"The inspiration for this music came from my reflections on where the world is going these days,"

Donelian explains of the CD's shifting moods, including the joyful, leapfrogging, energy of the CD's grand finale, "Inner Sanctum."

Even before he stepped out into the jazz world, Donelian, as a musically gifted child of Armenian parents, was immersed in his home in Armonk, NY, with the sounds of Armenian, Turkish, Greek and Middle Eastern music both at festive, music-filled family gatherings and through his father's record collection. His father, who was born in the old Ottoman Empire and had lost dozens of family members during the Armenian genocide, was a physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project, the massive research and development program that created the first atomic bomb during World War II.

Quite serious about his ethnic heritage, he has traveled to Armenia numerous times to perform. As a Fulbright Senior Scholar in 2002, he taught at Yerevan State Conservatory, located in downtown Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. In addition, he has had Fulbright residencies in Finland, Sweden, Switzerland and Greece, taught extensively at the college level and written authoritative instructional texts.

Since breaking into the jazz world's major leagues in 1975 with Mongo Santamaria's Afro-Cuban Jazz Octet, the versatile pianist has served significant stints with such jazz greats as Sonny Rollins, Chet Baker, Billy Harper and Paquito D'Rivera. His collaborations with other luminaries over the years have included the late Thomas Chapin, the noted creative music saxophonist/composer who grew up in Manchester.

At age 12 in his first step into jazz, Donelian played in a Dixieland band directed by the well-known guitarist Arthur Ryerson, Sr. A big band veteran and a consummate studio musician, Ryerson recorded with Frank Sinatra and Charlie Parker. Ryerson's daughter, Ali, who is today a prominent flutist and recording artist from Connecticut, played in the band along with her brothers.

For all his academic training, extensive experience as an educator with four decades in the business as a globe-trotting performer, the 60-year-old still stresses the basics, including the wise use of space, the primacy of melody and the abhorrence of clutter purely for clutter's sake — "telling a story" is what it's really all about.

"I like stating an idea and leaving space for listeners to absorb it. When there's too much happening, there's not much listening going on. I'm after a deep melodicism," he says of his approach to whatever he plays or writes. Old verities, like closely listening to your bandmates and interacting to what they say, are also prime tenets of his working philosophy.

Tickets: \$18, first set; \$12, second set. Information: <http://www.firehouse12.com> and 203-785-0468. Firehouse 12 is at 45 Crown St., New Haven