



CHRIS GREENE Network Builder

By Ed Enright | Photo by Ozzie Ramsay

Chris Greene is serious about his art. But when it comes to promoting his quartet and drumming up support for new recordings and live shows, nothing is off the table.

Greene has shown that he can run an indie marketing campaign that hits harder and ranges wider than most jazz musicians ever dreamed possible. The tenor/soprano saxophonist and bandleader has embraced many of the promotional methods that have long been utilized by musicians in the pop and hip-hop communities but are often overlooked by jazz artists. By

spreading the word through social media outlets and harnessing the power of aggressive fundraising techniques, promotional giveaways, creative marketing tactics and innovative online distribution channels, the Chris Greene Quartet has developed a devoted fan base and solidified its reputation among important music presenters on the Chicago scene.

“We’re just using the tools of the time,” said Greene, who has been able to give his band’s new CD, *A Group Effort* (Single Malt Recordings), a strong promotional push thanks in part to a successful fundraising campaign through Kickstarter. “It’s always a daunting task to promote your own stuff, but the cool thing is there are so many ways to get the word out there.”

Greene perpetually promotes his art. His tools? Enticing email blasts. Personal notifications via Facebook and Twitter. Homemade YouTube video trailers and testimonials that serve as commercials for the quartet’s gigs and recordings. Creating a band logo and band merchandise. Offering VIP seating packages for special performances. Sharing free DVDs and bonus audio tracks with select customers. Increasing his online sales through websites like ArtistData.com and Bandcamp.com. This is just a partial list of the myriad yet inexpensive methods Greene uses to generate excitement about his band, connect with listeners and turn potential new followers into true believers. And when audiences show up and express their appreciation, he goes the extra mile to make

sure they keep coming back for more.

"I have this theory that when it comes to jazz musicians, we're 10 to 15 years behind your typical indie rock or hip-hop band," said Greene, a native of Evanston, Ill., who turns 40 this August. "They're doing things like giving songs away as free downloads, and they're diligent about maintaining their email lists. Or even shaking hands with people in the audience and thanking them for coming—something like that goes a long way, and that's the kind of thing we tend to drop the ball on because we're so into playing our music and being original. That's fine, but there's a way to build an audience doing this, too."

To illustrate his point, Greene recalls an epiphany he experienced after attending a show by the rap/funk/soul band Spearhead in the 1990s. "At the time, no one knew who Spearhead was, but [bandleader Michael Franti] gave everyone a four-song cassette after the show," Greene recalled. "He asked everyone to listen to it and share it with their friends, and said they'd be back at the venue in a month. And I thought, 'This dude is crazy. He's gonna go broke giving away all this music.' But I'll be damned—I was just [barely] able to get a ticket to go see that second show because it was packed, based on the strength of the buzz he built up with that simple cassette. So nowadays, you have streaming audio, not to mention the whole Radiohead thing where people pay what they want for music on various websites. Tools like that go a long way toward cultivating a relationship between a band and the people on the scene who are willing to follow you around from club to club."

It doesn't hurt that the Chris Greene Quartet's music is rich in content, as well as just downright fun. Soulful, funky and rhythmically layered, *A Group Effort* presents a highly interactive ensemble that's well-schooled in straight-ahead jazz yet has deep connections to more modern, popular genres. Recorded live last October at Chicago's intimate Mayne Stage theater, the album consists of six groove-heavy tracks (including five originals and a backbeat-heavy interpretation of Kenny Dorham's "Blue Bossa"), each of which lasts 10 minutes or more. Catchy melodies abound, textures change at the drop of hat and excitement levels intensify as each improvisation unfolds.

"The one overarching thing that I like about everybody in the quartet is that we are all ostensibly jazz musicians, but we came up listening to a variety of different things as kids of the '80s," said Greene, seated at a sidewalk café in his hometown. "We're addressing traditional elements, but at different angles. I grew up listening to early hip-hop and Prince and Public Enemy, and my parents were big soul fanatics. Marc Piane, our bass player, is really into Frank Zappa and music that has those textural shifts, much like that song 'Stat' on the new CD. Marc loves Ray Brown, Paul Chambers and guys who can swing, but on a dime he can turn around

and give you some great ostinatos, and that's what I need—a guy who can do both.

"Same thing with our drummer, Steve Corley," Greene continued. "He comes out of playing on Chicago's South Side gospel scene. He knows how to respond and build music up and bring it down to a whisper—great dynamics. And just like Marc, when it comes to laying down some funk, I can call up that feel and he's right there.

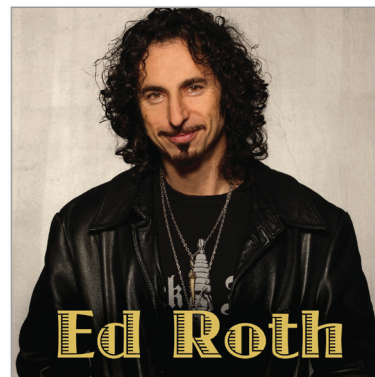
"Our pianist, Damian Espinosa, grew up listening to Rush and The Police, but he's also got a strong classical background and a ton of harmonic knowledge. He makes our songs sound hipper than they actually are and gets a lot of mileage out of his voicings."

Greene prides himself in leading a quartet whose members are locked-in regulars. Since its formation in 2007, the Chris Greene Quartet has undergone only one personnel change (when Corley was brought onboard last August). "I wanted to have a steady group of musicians, where if I handed a club owner a demo CD, at the very least, the guys you hear on the recording are going to be the same guys you see on the night of the gig," Greene said, noting that his bandmates often contribute compositions of their own to the set list. "That goes a long way toward building our sound and developing our repertoire, but also building a relationship with a club. They know there's going to be that consistency. It's not just me and three guys I can find; it's the four of us together onstage. I'm always loyal to them, and they're just as loyal to me."

The importance of consistency carries over into Greene's work ethic, too. "There are certain work habits that can make your life easier when it comes to building an audience or promoting a gig," he said. "It's our job, as much as any other thing, and the way I conduct myself as a business helps sustain a sense of professionalism. Sometimes that can be a drag, but if you combine it with Facebook and Twitter—which are, after all, social networks—you're able to inject some personality and humanity into the procedure. So you're not just a working machine; you actually look like somebody who's an interesting human being."

And it pays off. After putting so much work into the production and promotion of *A Group Effort*, Greene has learned just how much audience potential exists out there, waiting to be tapped. He says he was overwhelmed by how much money the Kickstarter campaign generated, far exceeding his goal of \$3,150. "I discovered that we've built up an incredible amount of good will over the years," he said. "There's a good market out there for us indie artists who are grinding away every day trying to push the music. As an independent jazz band, we can complain about how jazz is ignored, but the fact that people put up their hard-earned money in this economy to back what we're doing was really flattering. It's nice to know we've got a support system out there."

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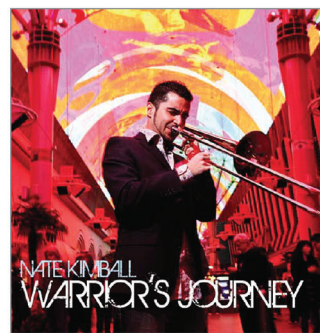


Ed Roth

Sought-after arranger and keyboardist Ed Roth is breaking out on his own with a debut self-titled album, joined by many of his jazz contemporaries. The powerful album is packed with fresh songs, all containing a strong melody and groove.

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