Robert Hurst: Platonic Ideal (2011) **Work Sample No. 2**

Bassist Bob Hurst was only 15 when he started playing gigs around Detroit with his mentor, trumpeter Marcus Belgrave. The teen got schooled by his elders nightly, and not just those on the bandstand. It takes a village to raise a jazz musician, and one reason why Detroit has produced so many front-rank players is that the villagers are as hip as they come. The cognoscenti always reminded Hurst that he was already a part of a Detroit jazz bass tradition that included such heroes as Paul Chambers, Ron Carter, Doug Watkins and a gaggle of others.

"Everyone let me know this was a bass town," Hurst remembers. "They'd say to me over and over, 'Paul Chambers, Ron Carter and Doug Watkins.'" He repeats the names, slapping his right hand into his left on the beat. "'Paul Chambers. Ron Carter. Doug Watkins.' That's all I heard growing up. It was this Mt. Rushmore of people you needed to know."

More than 30 years later, Hurst has earned his own spot in the starry constellation of the most important bassists produced by Detroit. A leading figure of his generation at 46, Hurst approaches the Platonic ideal of a contemporary mainstream bassist. He marries a fearsomely swinging pulse, espresso-rich tone, enviable technique and a sweeping authority in matters of rhythm, harmony, melody and form. "The bass is hard to play with total clarity because of the nature of the instrument, but Bob is one of the very best," says star bassist Christian McBride, who counts Hurst among his key influences. "You can understand every note he plays, even at fast tempos. That clarity applies to his thinking too, which is on a really high level. If you can't think it, you can't play it."

Hurst had a jackrabbit start to his career, joining Wynton Marsalis at 21 in 1985 and later cementing his reputation with Tony Williams and Branford Marsalis. Hurst was a charter member of the much-ballyhooed Young Lion generation of jazz traditionalists that emerged in the 1980s, though his post-Marsalis career path and self-effacing temperament have conspired to keep him largely under the radar of the New York-centric jazz press and fans. He spent eight lucrative years on television with "The Tonight Show" band from 1992-1999, followed by a period of freelancing in Los Angeles. He returned to metro Detroit in 2008 as a tenured professor at the University of Michigan, and while he balances teaching with extensive touring, his recent work with vocalist Diana Krall and crossover trumpeter Chris Botti are Cadillac gigs that reward a sideman's bank account more than his critical standing.

But Hurst is pushing for more visibility. He released two wildly different CDs on his own label in 2011, his first as a leader in nearly a decade. “Unrehurst, Vol. 2” offers animated post-bop, loose and improvisatory with a trio featuring pianist Robert Glasper. Recorded live in a New York club, the music is compelling if a bit longwinded. The other disc, “Bob Ya Head,” marries African and Caribbean rhythms, funk, hip-hop, vocals, electronics and spoken word with a political edge; the populist aesthetic will surprise anyone who still thinks he is wedded solely to acoustic jazz. It too seems to come in and out of focus, and you get the sense that Hurst is still searching for a way of synthesizing all of the ideas and idioms that intrigue him.

“It does bother me a bit sometimes that I’m not mentioned in the magazines,” Hurst confesses. “I would like to be spiritual and say it doesn’t, but it does. I look forward to contributing a lot more. I stand by everything I’ve done. It’s all quality. But I look forward to realizing more of my artistic vision.”

Hurst lives with his wife, Jill, and their 14-year-old daughter in a palatial home with cathedral ceilings between Plymouth and Ann Arbor. Natural light floods the house. African masks line the living room, and Jill Hurst, who is a trained architect, contributed the drawings that grace the formal dining room. He is 6 feet 3, handsomely mustached, with a sturdy build and fleshy cheeks; he speaks in an easygoing baritone. Jill, who manages her husband’s business, talks at least twice as fast as he does, and at times he seems barely able to get a word in; but he respectfully waits his turn and then has his say. After 21 years of marriage — 28 years as a couple — they are a team in every respect.

One day in the spring of 2011 they hosted a party for the celebrated bassist Buster Williams, 69, in town for a U-M residency. In a 50-year career, Williams has worked with nearly every important musician in jazz, from Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock on down. After dinner, Hurst grabbed a bass from the living room and brought it into the dining area, where he talked shop with Williams and Ralphe Armstrong, 55, a Detroit bassist with a big-time, eclectic resume ranging from John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra and Frank Zappa to Eddie Harris. They passed the bass back and forth like a baton, and Hurst wore a beatific grin. “Wow!” he would say at the end of the evening. “Buster Williams was in my house. He played my bass!”

The threesome swapped war stories and coached each other, comparing alternative fingerings for various scales. “See, I would do it this way,” Hurst says, demonstrating. “There’s too much movement your way. I wouldn’t shift.” Armstrong, built like a bulldog, waxed lyrically about a bass he once played in Italy as if it were a lost love.

Williams, a distinguished man with a gentle manner, recounted how gut strings in the old days would often break and he'd have to play the set on three strings. "You still had to swing!" he says.

Hurst recalled a gig with Belgrave when he was 15 and the trumpeter called "Quasimodo," a Charlie Parker tune based on the harmony of Gershwin's "Embraceable You." Hurst didn't know it: "Marcus came back and grabbed the bass and started pounding out the roots to 'Embraceable You.' It was a small bandstand, and I couldn't leave. I just had to stand there and look stupid." Belgrave, who calls Hurst the most naturally gifted of all his protégés, laughed with the other guests seated nearby. "That's because I trusted you," he tells Hurst. "I knew if I played it once, you'd get it."

Robert Leslie Hurst III was born into a well-to-do family. His father, Robert Hurst II, rose from sales manager to become president of Michigan Bell and then president of Ameritech Network Services. He was a trailblazer, the first African-American head of a local company as big and prominent as Michigan Bell. He died of a heart attack at 51 in 1994. His father's work ethic and sense of personal responsibility left a big imprint on Hurst, who says the clarity of his music and his life choices relate to values nurtured by his parents. "My father took care of his business at home, and every male figure in my family owned their house — my grandfathers and uncles. They owned their homes, and their thing was getting a Cadillac. To see everybody do that meant something to me."

That's why Hurst had an IRA account at 20 years old and why, when he was making serious money on "The Tonight Show" — mid-six figures annually — he had no trouble sidestepping Hollywood temptations. "Bob is a well-studied person," McBride says. "A lot of musicians don't have that kind of sophistication, but he balances that with a lot of street cred. He can talk politics, business. But you sit at the bar and he starts to feel comfortable and the needle starts to shift."

Hurst grew up listening to his parents' jazz LPs — Miles Davis, Modern Jazz Quartet, etc. — and his father taught him that jazz was a glory of black culture. He started guitar lessons at 7, then switched to electric bass at 9. The family moved to Grand Rapids briefly, returning to metro Detroit when Hurst was 12 and settling in the upscale northern suburb of Rochester. He studied acoustic bass with Dan Pliskow, a seasoned Detroit jazz musician and noted teacher. A turning point came when Belgrave came to Rochester High for a master class and concert. Hurst, a precocious sophomore, asked if he could play a duet with Belgrave, choosing the bebop standard "Confirmation."

He stunned Belgrave by playing the demanding melody instead of a routine bass line. Belgrave asked Hurst's parents if he could work with their son. That led to countless gigs and all-day rehearsals.

"Marcus didn't treat me like a student," Hurst said. "He treated me like a fellow musician and a man. In classical music there's this hierarchy with the teacher up here and the student down there, but we're all students and we're all teachers. That's the most beautiful thing Marcus instilled in me — that you're a perpetual student."

Hurst was barely into his first year at Indiana University when Wynton Marsalis first offered him a spot in his band, but Hurst said his parents would have killed him had he left school so quickly. He stayed three years, studying jazz and classical music, before leaping into the fray. Marsalis' quartet with Hurst, pianist Marcus Roberts and drummer Jeff (Tain) Watts still is regarded by many as the trumpeter's best band, certainly his most aggressive and liberated. The rhythm section, which pianist Ethan Iverson once admiringly compared to a pack of wild dogs, was deep into the hide-and-seek games of rhythm and meter pioneered by Miles Davis' landmark 1960s quintet.

Ron Carter was Davis' bassist, and you can hear how strongly Hurst was influenced by Carter's architectural thinking on the Marsalis records "Standard Time, Vol. 1" and "Live at Blues Alley" (both on Columbia). Without betraying the foundation of a swinging groove, Hurst's bass lines add layers of melodic counterpoint and harmonic depth and contribute to a rousing juggle of rhythm and meter. The play of tension and release — of spontaneously disguising the beat, harmony or form of a song but resolving the abstraction convincingly — ignites this style of jazz. Hurst brought his own ideas to these expressive and exhilarating games from the get-go. "Bob was a key, because his mind would instantly recognize the grouping we were working with and create a new pattern on the spot," Watts says. "He knew in his mind, 'OK, we're now in 5, so I have to resolve to the next chord in the middle of my pattern. And now how can I elaborate on it?'"

The speed and enunciation of Hurst's first recorded solos turned heads. McBride points specifically to the rapid-fire improvisation that Hurst plays on "Autumn Leaves" on Marsalis' "Standard Time, Vol. 1" as a landmark that set a new standard for a subsequent generation of bassists. Hurst plays five ferocious and remarkably lucid choruses. (Also worth noting is Watts' clever metric-modulation arrangement of the "Autumn Leaves" melody in which every bar changes meter up to the bridge by adding a beat — thus giving the impression of train speeding out of control, only to reverse course and slow down during the last eight bars by the beats being taken away.)

Hurst and Watts deepened their rapport working with Branford Marsalis in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s. The saxophonist was still maturing in those days, and his strongest, most original work would come with his later bands, but the live “Bloomington” (Columbia), recorded on campus at IU in 1991 with a power trio of just saxophone, bass and drums shows a good measure of the ruckus this group could raise. Hurst’s first two CDs as a leader on DIW/Columbia have been long out of print but they still surface in used stores. Grab them if you see them, especially the second, “One for Namesake” (1993), a consistently inventive trio date in which Hurst is content to cede the spotlight to the gifted but doomed pianist Kenny Kirkland, lost to a drug-related death five years later at 43, and the heroic Pontiac-born drummer Elvin Jones. Despite Hurst’s fearsome technique, what’s best about his mature improvisations is that they develop thematically. On “Monk’s Dream” on “Unrehurst, Vol 2,” CD, Thelonious Monk’s loping melody remains in the DNA of the bass solo. “Bob is a great technical bass player, but his focus isn’t virtuosity,” says Branford Marsalis. “His solos are conceptual. He doesn’t play a boiler-plate style.”

Question: What did you like best about “The Tonight Show”?

Hurst: “Thursday — that was payday” (laughs).

When Jay Leno replaced Johnny Carson, Branford Marsalis took over the studio band and offered Hurst a spot. There had never been a band of predominantly black musicians in such a high-profile TV role. Hurst enjoyed the job at first, less so after Marsalis left in 1995 and it became more of a grind. Still, learning the ropes of TV and the cross-section of people Hurst met broadened his world view. Leno liked him, and he became the arbiter for whether jokes that touched on race were funny or offensive; Hurst got a workout during the O.J. Simpson trial. Hurst took his musical responsibilities seriously. “When Bob first got there, while I was unpacking boxes, he practiced eight hours a day,” his wife says. “He was committed to making sure that if someone like Dolly Parton came on and he had to play country or whatever, he played authentically. The checks came, but not without Bob doing his due diligence.”

To celebrate the release of new records in 2011, Hurst led a quartet at the downtown Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center. In a hat tip to Belgrave’s spirit, he used talented students on piano and saxophone, along with peer Karriem Riggins on drums. Many in the audience of about 60 people knew Hurst from way back when, and some were lifers who had heard all the legends in their prime — Miles Davis at the Bluebird, John Coltrane at the Minor Key and the rest. Hurst clearly enjoyed playing for homefolk, Detroiters for whom hipness, to borrow a phrase from Cannonball

Adderley, is not a state of mind but a fact of life. Hurst's between-song patter was chatty, relaxed, and when he announced his tune "Detroit Red" with a reference to "the great, great, great Malcolm X," he was greeted with hearty applause. Hurst beamed.

"That's a Detroit vibe," he tells the crowd. "You can say 'Malcolm X' all over the world and nobody says anything, but in Detroit, they clap."

Wearing a black shirt over jeans, Hurst stood as upright as his bass while his large hands moved efficiently over the instrument. His head bobbed to the groove. "My top priority is to make the music swing as much as humanly possible," he says. "Everything else is gravy. "I tell my students to ask themselves every eight or 16 bars, 'What can I do to make the music swing harder?'"

The band played a blues number, and Hurst found ways to shift into a higher gear chorus after chorus — digging into his basement register, leaping up to the balcony, ornamenting his walk with skip-a-de-do triplets, tucking his notes ever deeper inside Riggins' cymbal beat. "You want to be melodic and inventive," Hurst says. "Sometimes you can do it overtly, but it doesn't have to be flashy, in the high register or fast. You can do things that are anonymous. Sometimes I have to step up, but usually I like to stay out of the way and just keep it feeling good. That's the job. That's what pays the mortgage."