



Being part of a collective can be valuable for musical development, but often it does very little for an individual player's name recognition.

That's what Brooklyn-based saxophonist-clarinetist Ken Thomson has come to realize after more than a decade as a member of the successful punk-jazz outfit Gutbucket. Its 15th anniversary activities included recording a live album at the Stone in New York City, to be released on Cuneiform in 2015. So although Gutbucket is still going strong, Thomson felt a few years ago that the time had come to venture on his own and give free rein to other musical ideas.

As a result, the reedist assembled his own quintet of top-notch musicians: trumpeter Russ Johnson, guitarist Nir Felder, Australian bass player Adam Armstrong and drummer Fred Kennedy. The band is called Ken Thomson and Slow/Fast, and its debut was 2010's *It Would Be Easier If* (Intuition).

"I was identified as someone who makes somewhat punky, fast, loud, distorted music," Thomson said a few hours before performing at Sugar Maple in Milwaukee as part of a tour in support of the group's sophomore recording, *Settle* (NCM East). "It is a departure from Gutbucket, which is more fast than slow. I wanted a wider pal-

ette that we could use."

Because the members of Slow/Fast all have busy schedules, it can be difficult for them to all get together to play. To make matters worse, Johnson left New York for Milwaukee in 2011. The leader finds comfort in knowing that these musicians are ready to invest their time in his compositions.

So, what motivates them to play Thomson's music? "The challenge," said Johnson. "The music is physically and mentally very demanding to play, but you feel the payoff at the end. When you practice it, you only see the challenge, but once you are on the bandstand, the beauty actually comes out and you realize all these extremely intricate events have their meaning."

The most striking aspect of a Slow/Fast performance is how intently the band members look at the scores. However, as Johnson suggests, Thomson's compositions do not have the dry or cerebral quality that mars too many similar exercises.

Thomson's knack for high-level intricacies and attention to detail are likely due to his keeping one foot in the New Music world. Until 2006, he ran the composer collective Bang On A Can's imprint Cantaloupe Music. Since he left that position, his ties with the organization actually have been tightening. He leads the highly physical,

12-piece Asphalt Orchestra, whose album *Plays The Pixies: Surfer Rosa* (Cantaloupe) features interpretations of the alt-rock band's compositions. Additionally, Thomson is a member of the Bang On A Can All-Stars, and in 2013 Cantaloupe released *Thaw*, a collection of his string quartet works performed by the Jack Quartet.

The bustling, hectic pace of life in New York City is another challenge for Thomson. He seizes any opportunity he has away from the city to write or flesh out his compositions. "I wake up in the morning and, unfortunately, the first thing in my mind is not writing music," he said. "The sad part is that our lives are 80 percent logistics and figuring things out [but only] 20 percent music. For me it's helpful to separate myself from the digital world."

*Settle* finally gives Thomson the opportunity to devote more time to the bass clarinet, an instrument he picked up well after he became proficient on the alto saxophone. (He also plays bass clarinet on the *Thaw* track "Perpetual.")

"I feel that the instrument is underutilized," he said. "It has a four-octave range that offers incredible possibilities. What I've realized with this band is that I can play unison or above the trumpet, and at the same time play down with the bass."

—Alain Drouot