

The silents of Laurel and Hardy set to music

By Andrew Gilbert

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In jazz as in comedy, timing is everything.

For trumpeter Steven Bernstein, a commission to compose and perform scores for several silent films by Laurel and Hardy offered the rare opportunity to provide musical commentary on the evolution of an iconic comedic duo.

When we think of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, it takes almost no effort to summon a complete vision, with their bowler hats and contrasting physiques. Just about every film follows the same arc, as the couple's elaborate politeness gives way to Laurel's tears and Hardy's slow-burning exasperation in the face of another futile scheme.

"What's striking is how much patience they had. They really let the humor unfold," says Bernstein, who's probably best known for his inventive slide trumpet work in his quartet Sex Mob, though he's carved out a bustling career in New York as an arranger and special project soloist with artists like Lou Reed, Linda Thompson, Catherine Russell and Rufus Wainwright.

"We're so used to having comedy slammed at us. The way they set these jokes up, they really sit there and let it happen. It's luxurious comedy."

The project grew out of Bernstein's relationship with the arts organization Celebrate Brooklyn, which approached him several times about writing scores for silent films. When the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art got on board as a co-commissioner, he knew immediately that he wanted to tackle the early work of Laurel and Hardy.

"By my nature I tend toward comedy," says Bernstein, who will present the West Coast premiere of the Laurel and Hardy project Friday at Montalvo with his stomping jazz combo, Millennial Territory Orchestra. "Bill Frisell had done Buster Keaton, and Dave Douglas did Fatty Arbuckle, and, to be honest, Laurel and Hardy are my favorites. They crossed over into talkies and became part of popular American culture.

"I didn't even know their silent work that well. I just imagined they'd be great to sink my teeth into."

Of course, when Laurel and Hardy first started appearing together regularly in the mid-1920s, they had yet to perfect what turned into the most enduring and beloved marriage in comedy. After reviewing a wide swath of their early collaboration, Bernstein selected three films that capture the partnership taking shape, and he ended up writing scores that evoke their increasingly intuitive interplay.

"Each of the scores was written in a different style," Bernstein says. "For the first film, 1927's 'Sugar Daddies,' they're more madcap. They look like Laurel and Hardy, but they're not the characters we know yet. So I wrote out every bar, and timed it out beginning to end. There's room for improvisation, but it's a complete score."

In the second film — the classic "Double Whoopee" from 1929 — "they're Laurel and Hardy, and I left more room for pauses. The film is stronger and really carries itself, so I left more room for unknown things to happen," Bernstein says.

And "the final one, 1929's 'Wrong Again,' is an even looser framework, a real jazz score. I wrote a series of melodies linked to various scenes, which we interpret differently each time."

Bernstein conceived the Laurel and Hardy scores specifically for his Millennial Territory Orchestra, which just released its second album "We Are MTO" (MOWO Records). He initially created the MTO to explore early jazz played by "territory" dance bands that roamed the country playing the hits of the day. In many ways it's a perfect match, as the golden age of the territory band, from the mid-1920s through the mid-'30s, ran concurrently with the transition from silent films to talkies.

For Friday's performance, Bernstein has assembled a Bay Area version of the MTO with some of the region's most inventive improvisers, including Berkeley High alumni Jeff Cressman on trombone and Dayna Stephens on tenor and soprano saxophone. The band also features violinist Carla Kihlstedt and clarinetist Ben Goldberg, who play together in Tin Hat; guitarist John Schott; bassist Devin Hoff; drummer Scott Amendola; and Sheldon Brown on baritone and soprano sax.

(Bernstein performs tonight at Oakland's Uptown Club with a West Coast version of Sex Mob, featuring Schott, Hoff, Amendola and special guests.)

In much the way Laurel and Hardy created a comedic vocabulary that could turn just about any setting, incident or event into hilarious fiasco, Bernstein employs the forms and instrumentation of rough-and-tumble early jazz for his own musical ends.

"Once we got our language together, we were able to appropriate all kinds of music," Bernstein says. "Just having a clarinet, trombone and violin in a jazz band setting, your ears tell you what era it is. But then you can start taking it all kinds of directions, working in stuff that sounds like dub reggae and Sly Stone."

Steven Bernstein's Millennial
Territory Orchestra West

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Montalvo Arts Center, Carriage House Theatre, 15400 Montalvo Road, Saratoga

Tickets: \$25-\$45. (408) 961-5858. www.montalvoarts.org/events