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LAUREN ELIZABETH BABA



Lauren Elizabeth Baba's new big band album features six of her original compositions.

# 'PUSH IT AS FAR AS IT WILL GO'

By Sean J. O'Connell / Photos by Mehdi Hassine

Amid the holiday revelers staring at the sidewalks of Hollywood Boulevard in late December, violinist and composer Lauren Elizabeth Baba sticks out. Her big shock of curly hair shrouds eyes unimpressed by the gritty tourism of the Entertainment Capital of the World. And rightly so. Baba was raised in Southern California and like most locals has little use for celebrity home tours. But as a gigging musician, she is no stranger to sitting in the middle of some of the most watched Hollywood events in history.

In 2016, in-between string-section gigs at the Oscars and the Grammys, the Hollywood Bowl and countless film and TV soundstages, Baba corralled enough money to record an album by her big band, theBABAorchestra. Containing six of her compositions, *Another*

*Ride On The Elephant Slide* is a snarling and puckish swell of brass and thunderclaps that is a world away from the showbiz spectacles that help to pay her rent. Citing influences as wide-ranging as Mahler, Ellington and Ornette Coleman, she has quickly found a voice that rumbles toward a quirky, avant-garde future.

"There wasn't any thought behind whether I should do it," Baba explains, regarding her first forays into big band composing while in college. "I'm going to do this because it is so fun. There's a lot of organizing. A lot of notebooks and highlighters. And I love it."

Baba grew up in Orange County, California, and studied at Saddleback College, a community college with a strong jazz program, with trombonist Joey Sellers. She immersed herself in big band music and learned the intricacies of



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Baba's new album is titled *Another Ride On The Elephant Slide*.

the big band's potential by serving as librarian and rehearsal organizer.

"Her creativity was always evident even if her chops were not there yet," Sellers remembers. "[She] possesses her own voice. She sees the big picture—trusts her instincts."

Sellers helped point Baba in the right direc-

tion but it was at CalArts that she flourished, helping to form a big band with trumpeter Andrew Rowan that she was eventually left in charge of.

Through CalArts, Baba began picking up local gigs, performing in string sections with pop musicians like Inara George and Sharon Jones. A combination of union work, occasional tours and a relatively robust local employment field for fiery young string players, she found herself playing a lot of other people's music. When she formed theBABAorchestra, she put the violin down to focus on bringing to life her own compositions.

In 2016, Baba gathered 17 friends to record. The big band recorded half a dozen tracks live in less than six hours. Those original songs swarm with cheek and seriousness, sometimes within a single measure. Baba stoically drives her compositions straight into the storm, engulfed by a band fully on board with her mission.

"In this context of my music, I see the role of the conductor as more of an eighteenth member of the band," Baba said. "My compositions have a lot of elements of creation and improvisation, and I enjoy the role of motion alongside and with the band. I don't see myself as the sole leader or taskmaster; everyone is running it together once it takes off."

The menacing, two-movement *Myth Of Sisyphus* is the album's centerpiece.

"When I got to CalArts, I fully experienced some of the struggles of living in L.A., and even more so the reality hit of being female. And a jazz musician. And a violin player in the jazz world. And a composer. All of these things were blossoming into reality. I wrote that piece to encapsulate this struggle. In my mind, it's not a struggle but a necessary thing you have to do. You push the boulder up to the top of the hill and it's going to roll back down again. You might as well do it with joy."

During the 20-minute tempest, baritone saxophonist Ryan Parrish fires off barrages of harsh lines as the band spins around him. Pianist Steve Blum subdues the orchestra, helping to connect the dots between movements. Baba is not channeling the swing-a-ling sounds of traditional big band jazz but a darker, churning momentum. And characters like Sellers are strong presences on the album.

"She is a treasure," he says proudly. "It's a delight to play her music." His braying trombone prods the ear with uncomfortably humanistic tones that dance on a line of muffled hysteria. Baba welcomes these risks from her musicians.

"You just go," she says. "That's how I was raised. I was raised creatively to express yourself and take it as far as you can take it. That's what I like. Really push it. Just push it as far as it will go." **DB**



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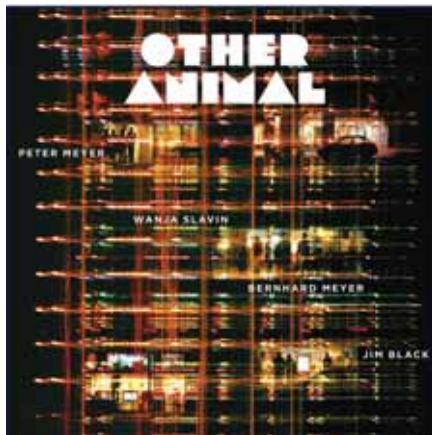


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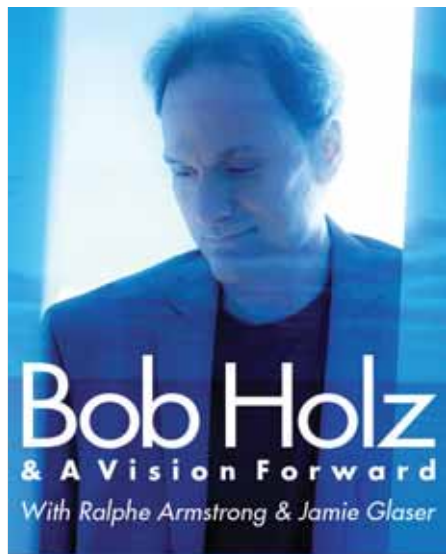
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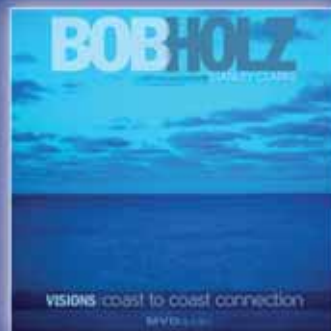
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## MIN XIAO-FEN

## MAKING A DIFFERENT MONK

By Matthew Kassel / Photo by Scott Friedlander

The first time Min Xiao-Fen heard Thelonious Monk's name, she was somewhat thrown off. "I said, 'You mean Buddha monk?'" Min recalled over tea in her Queens neighborhood of Forest Hills. "No kidding." It was a fitting reaction for the Chinese-born pipa player, who approaches jazz from an unusual angle on her lute-like instrument, fusing the traditional folk music of her birthplace with improvisational techniques she only discovered when she moved from Nanjing to the United States in the early '90s.

By the time she discovered Monk, Min had already played with guitarist Derek Bailey and trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith. But she was still exploring the jazz canon, and in 2003, she got the rare chance to familiarize herself with Monk's music in a short set at Jazz at Lincoln Center. Though her performance was well-received, Min believes she failed to capture Monk's spirit because she couldn't yet properly improvise.

For Min, that moment has arrived at last. Now in her mid-50s, she feels she has proven her affinity for Monk—and her facility as an improviser—nearly two decades after her introduction to his music. On her self-released centennial tribute album, *Mao, Monk And Me*, she filters Monk's tunes—"Ask Me Now," "Misterioso" and "North Of The Sunset," among others—through her four-stringed instrument, using filigree and vibrato to put her own stamp on his angular compositions, which remind her, she said, of Chinese calligraphy.

"I wanted to make a very different Monk," Min said.

While the album is a capstone to Min's recorded output, it's also her first in about six years. Accounting for the gap was a debilitating bout with cancer—she says it is now mostly in remission—and a surgery in 2014 that prevented her from playing the pipa for a year.

Min considered giving up music altogether during that time. She had found recognition as a pipa player touring with chamber operas and theater groups, and her 1997 release of *Spring, River, Flower, Moon, Night*—a traditional pipa record on the now-defunct label Asphodel—had sold thousands of copies and made her thousands in royalties.

But even before she fell ill, Min was feeling stifled by the folk music she had mastered as a child growing up in China during the Cultural Revolution, and her attempts at jazz weren't getting the attention she desired.

There were some bright spots, though. For example, Min established a nonprofit in the aughts to help fund her passion projects, and successfully solicited a grant from the Queens Council on the Arts to premiere "From Harlem to Shanghai and Back," her jazz revue with Blue Pipa—a trio of bass, guitar and pipa—in 2013.

So, after her surgery, Min decided that rather than abandoning the pipa she would slow down and devote herself to the music she loved: jazz. "I don't want to be like every pipa player, playing the same thing," said Min, who also sings.

Self-promotion doesn't come naturally for Min, whose DIY approach entails marketing her music, booking shows and even drawing the cover art for her records. In China, Min says, professional pipa players don't need to bother with the drudgery of self-promotion because that is usually taken care of by the company putting on the show. "But in America, you can't be shy," she said. "You have to tell people who you are."


Min knows who she is now. With the release of her new album, she feels she has finally found her place in jazz. "This is me."



Pipa player Min Xiao-Fen fuses traditional Chinese folk music with improvisational techniques.

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# IN TOUCH WITH THE ARTISTS

By Josef Woodard / Photo by Martin Morissette

It began in 1983, with founder-director Michel Levasseur's brave notion to launch a new "outside" music festival—with an ear for music of the more adventuresome, experimental, improvisational, noisy, electronic and art rock-ish kind—in his semi-rural Quebecois hometown of Victoriaville, a two-hour drive from Montreal. Enter Festival International de Musique Actuelle de Victoriaville, which became one of the most significant forums for avant-garde music and generally left- or experimental-leaning work in North America.

Four years after the birth of FIMAV, the adventure expanded to include Victo, a record label that continues on its trajectory, if in a much-limited way due to the music industry's current challenges. Now celebrating its 30th anniversary, Victo has built up a catalogue of 160 titles, including many recordings that serve to document the festival's past programming.

Victo also has valiantly championed the specialized domain of experimental music, from its inaugural release by guitarists Fred Frith and Quebecois hero René Lussier, *Nous Autres*, right up through its most recent release, a live recording of Anthony Braxton's striking solo alto saxophone performance at the festival in 2017.

At the outset, Levasseur was inspired by role models like avant-guitarist Derek Bailey and his Incus label, linked to the annual Company Week festival, and the German Free Music Productions label, a limb of the Berlin-based Total Music Meeting festival. The Moers festival/label duality in Germany was another inspiration.

"That's really what influenced us to start a label," Levasseur explained, "to continue to promote that music, really; to promote the artists and the music coming to the festival, and also to make the festival better known. It was a way to promote the festival all over the world, and most of the albums were recorded at Victoriaville. It grew up like this, into a label that has always been very connected to the festival, but also has its own life."

Guitarist Lussier asserted that "the idea of holding onto a record label is very courageous for Michel. It's great that he brings out another Braxton record."

A maverick in Canadian music, Lussier has played the festival many times, including a memorable quintet set in 2017. He has also released three titles on Victo that count a project with the Vancouver-based Now Orchestra and a wily duet with elastic-eclectic guitarist Eugene Chadbourne among them. Lussier, who worked to edit Victo albums during its early vinyl days, also knows about the struggles of running a label, having founded the Ambience Magnetiques imprint, which he started in 1984 and pulled away from in 2000.

He plans to record his current quintet—which melds the avant-rock, Quebec folk music and abstract elements making up Lussier's aesthetic—early in 2018, despite not having a record label lined up to release it. "I decided not to wait for a label to do something," he said. "I'm not waiting for a grant to make a project. It's a 'project du coeur.'"

"It's a matter of being alive; it's a passion thing. It's the same for Michel, doing record after record with a bunch of people all over the planet. He's passionate; he listens to so many records, just to do the festival. He is receiving so much demand to play and he's listening to everything. That's very courageous."

Levasseur noted, "Someone might ask me, 'Which CD do you think is your favorite, which is the most important?' Each one is important and



René Lussier

involves an individual relationship with the musician. You present the concert, but when you make a product that will last, it's a step further in the relationship with the artist. ... It's kind of like having a big family. It's a very personal, intimate thing to have a label and be in touch with the artists—and not the agents."

Victo started auspiciously with *Nous Autres*—still the label's best-seller—and other strong titles. As with most labels, though, the realities of dwindling sales in the digital era has taken its toll. "The recession and the changeover to downloads and all the problems of promoting this music—or music in general—is really affecting small labels," Levasseur said. "Streaming is really killing the labels and the stores at the moment."

In response, the Victo label has pared down to one or two releases per year, compared to five or six in the past. The label head said, "We go very carefully on the one or two releases that we put out each year. I'm glad there are labels like Intakt and Clean Feed that can do it. How they do it, I don't know. You should ask them," he added, with a laugh.

With a catalogue spanning three decades, Victo is home to many notable releases, including an early Bailey/Braxton duet record, solo albums by Barre Phillips and Marilyn Crispell and, more recently, Evan Parker's ElectroAcoustic Septet and the veteran Musica Elettronica Viva.

Victo, Levasseur stressed, "has always been a very important project. We've been putting out things for important reasons, sometimes for the music itself or for the artists. We were really making a point about putting out their music. There is a strong historical aspect to this label that makes it distinctive.

"There is a legacy there. Other generations can go back to those recordings, to those artists, and get influenced by them. That's the idea behind the whole business, to keep at it; also, to keep the back catalogue going. I've got so many CDs. My house is full of them," he laughed, citing his current inventory of 35,000 items.

Projects such as the FIMAV/Victo venture and other similar entities in the international avant-garde community, Levasseur said, require "energy from one or two people—craziness and energy—to keep going, presenting this music, helping out the musicians to present it to an audience." **DB**



MICHELLE COLTRANE AWAKENING

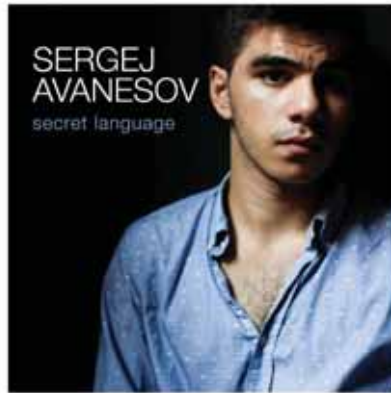
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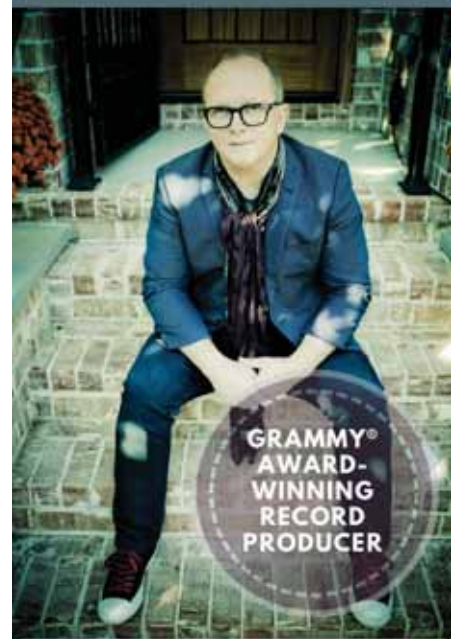
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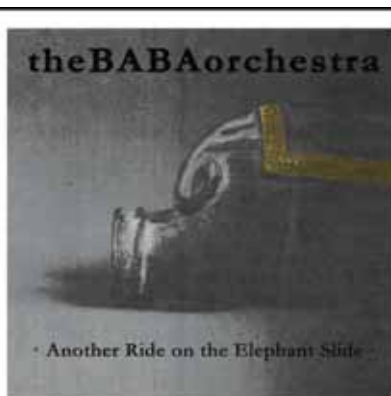
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