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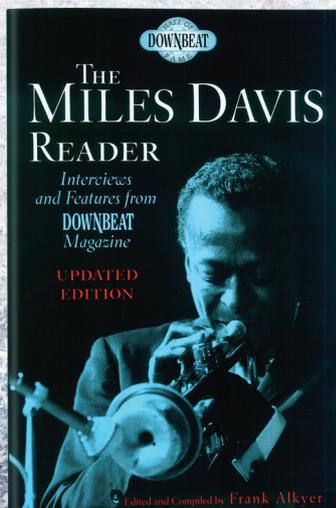
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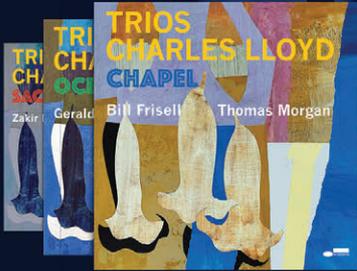
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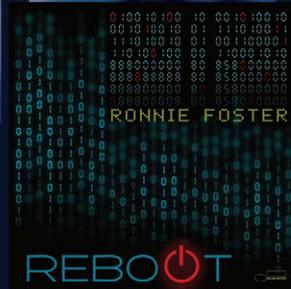


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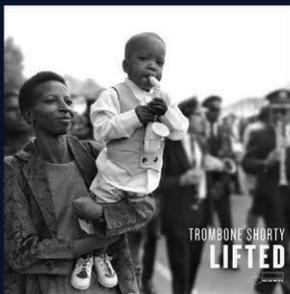
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The Philosophy of Hard Work

BY FRANK ALKYER

Sean Jones is riding a career high right now. And he's doing it in a very modern way. In today's jazz world, those who can play, teach. It's a large part of what makes the jazz economy and ecosystem work in 2022 and beyond. Jones has much to say about that, and his art, in this month's cover feature.



JATI LINDSAY

Sean Jones, the jazz artist as jazz educator.

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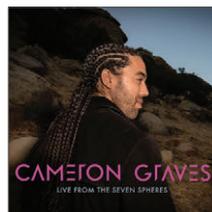
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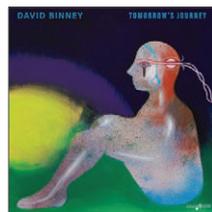
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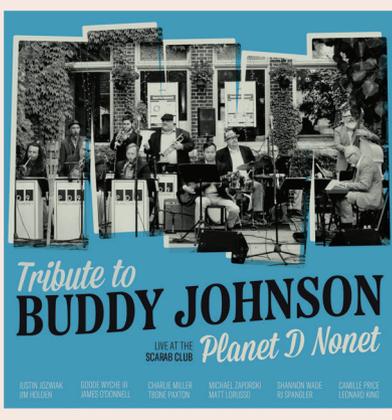
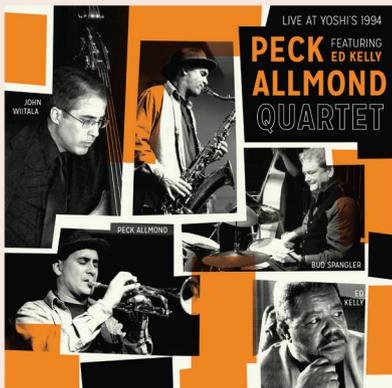
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First Take > BY FRANK ALKYER



Derrick Shezbie, left, and Glenn Hall III —two generations of Rebirth Brass Band.

A Warm Soul with a Jazz Heart

THE OLD PROFESSOR LONGHAIR SONG says, “If you go to New Orleans/You ought to go see the Mardi Gras.”

Well, I’ve never been to Mardi Gras. I’m sure it’s awesome. But I have been to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, and that’s an extravaganza that’s hard to beat.

There’s music aplenty for anyone with a pulse — some 14 stages and nearly 500 acts over seven days.

But like any good meal, you’ve got to save room for the dessert. After the fest ends, the music moves to the clubs, venues and streets.

Take, for instance, Kermit Ruffins’ Treme Mother-In-Law Lounge.

After the fest, Ruffins — now edging toward elder statesman status in the New Orleans trumpet community — brought in the TBC Brass Band just to warm up crowds for the evening.

As the TBC percolated and the crowd began to sway, a guy named Derrick showed y’all how to properly dance to a brass band. As a hype man, his spirit and steps were infectious.

After the gig, Derrick somehow convinced our crew to give him a lift. By the way, he didn’t know us, we didn’t know him. But he had to get to Shorty Fest, a benefit concert put on by Trombone Shorty over at Tipitina’s.

It’s all connected — musicians and clubs, clubs and audiences. So, we happily obliged. But when we got there, and were ready to say goodbye, Derrick says, “C’mon, let’s go.”

He meant inside. The general consensus was, “This ain’t gonna happen,” but a couple of us jumped anyway.

Next thing, we’re backstage and Shorty is blazing. But I followed Derrick to find out who he was, this guy who just walks into clubs with an entourage. That’s where the truth settled in.

A young man gave a handshake and hug to Derrick, then started in, “Hey, how does this part go?”

He threw his right hand in the air, “Bah dap bah dap bah doodley dap.”

And Derrick threw his up with a “Nah, it’s Bah dap doodley dap bah bah dap bah.”

Trumpeters. For the next 10 minutes, class was in session as the two traded air-trumpet parts. Finally, I said, “Who are you guys?”

Turns out Derrick is Derrick “Kabuky” Shezbie, now 47, the long-time trumpeter in the Rebirth Brass Band, who left the group in 2015. His student at that moment was Glenn Hall III, 27, who took his spot.

“He’s the real deal,” Hall said, showing his admiration for Shezbie’s talent.

And he’s right. Shezbie came up in the early ’90s as part of the Young Lions movement. He was signed by Quincy Jones as an 18-year-old and put out his first record, *Spodie’s Back*, on Jones’ Qwest Records in 1994. He’s played with everyone from Dizzy Gillespie to Allen Toussaint to Rebirth and many more.

The last few years have been tough for Shezbie with the pandemic, and, worse, dental issues — a trumpeter’s occupational hazard. Last year, friends pulled together a GoFundMe to help him get much needed dental implants.

Derrick said he’s working hard to get back to playing soon. All I could say was, “Godspeed.”

It reminded me of what another New Orleans trumpeter once said: “My chops was shot — But I’m dying to swing again.”

That was Louis Armstrong in DownBeat in 1935. Luckily, he had decades more in the tank.

I wish the same for Derrick. He’s a warm soul with a jazz heart, the kind you don’t encounter often — unless you’re in New Orleans. **DB**

Paul
Taylor



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Photograph by Melanie Futorian

Chords & Discords >

In the Key of Antonio

I think that, when it is a transcription of a complex saxophone solo such as Antonio Hart's in the May edition, it would be advantageous to the student if it was in the transpositional key of his/her instrument. They've got enough problems getting around the clusters of multi-tailed, accident peppered, notes without having to transpose them in the bargain!

LANCE LIDDLE
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REEDGEEK Woodshed #100
 Antonio Hart's Alto Saxophone Solo on 'Mo Duk'

Sounds from the Ukraine

My name is Bogdan Gumenyuk. I am a jazz saxophonist and producer, originally from Kyiv, Ukraine, and now living in Montreal. I recently released my new album *Love Letters To The Other Side*. All the money raised from the sales of the album on Bandcamp is going to support the people of Ukraine.

My main goal in reaching out to you is to spread the word of my initiative in any way possible.

BOGDAN GUMENYUK
 MONTREAL, CANADA

Editor's Note: Thanks, Bogdan. We pray for peace in your homeland. The album can be found at bogdangumenyuk.bandcamp.com.

students in today's academic jazz programs. I saw the writing on the wall many years ago in New Orleans when I witnessed young Black men turn their backs on a passing jazz funeral march for a deceased member of the traditional jazz community.

You do a great disservice to a program that was and continues to be progressive and tolerant and welcoming.

ED SOPH
 EMERITUS FACULTY
 COLLEGE OF MUSIC, JAZZ STUDIES
 UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

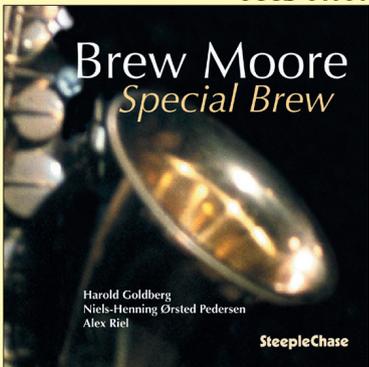
Editor's Note: Mr. Soph is responding to a letter in the May issue from Professor Tracy McMullen, which, in turn, criticized DownBeat's coverage of the 75th anniversary of the jazz program at the University of North Texas that ran in February issue.

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In Defense of UNT History

I attended North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas) from 1963 to 1968. There was no degree in Jazz Studies back then, as there is now. "Jazzers," those who played in one of the three Lab Bands, were not allowed to use the grand pianos in the "classical" performance areas or studios, and Leon Breeden, who ran the Lab Bands with the help of a graduate assistant or two, was not even introduced as a faculty member by the dean at the new music major convocations held at the beginning of the academic year.

There was no curriculum other than Lab Band. Combos were formed by the students themselves and not overseen by faculty. We pretty much taught ourselves by listening to the masters. The music was still in popular culture back then.

I can't imagine how you came up with the idea of "a jazz curriculum and method tailored to white men's perspective and comfort." The Lab Bands were integrated in the early '60s thanks to Mr. Breeden. Tenor saxophonist Billy Harper, trumpeters Tex Allen and Marvin "Hannibal" Peterson, and bassist James Leary were in school with me. And, today, drummer Quincy Davis and saxophonist Brad Leali are full-time faculty.

I really think it a stretch to blame a "segregated lineage" for the "dearth" of Black

Desperately Seeking Flora

With the soon-to-be-released new album from Flora Purim (her first in something like 15 years), might we be seeing an article on the queen of Brazilian singers in DB? I've been following her music since I was a college DJ in Long Beach and first heard her perform at UCLA in the mid-'70s with a front-row seat. Even got to do a radio interview with her and Airto in Sacramento in the '80s.

KEN HUNT
 SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA

Corrections & Clarifications

We try to get things right, and when we don't we offer our regrets. In the June issue:

- Bright Dog Red delivered its fifth album on *Ropeadope (Under The Porch)*, not its debut.
- Ted Panken wrote the Michael Weiss article.
- In the Student Music Awards, Raphael Silverman attends Columbia University.
- Jasper Somsen co-produced Lynne Arriale's new recording *The Lights Are Always On*.
- Vocalist Bill Brickey's name was misspelled in the review of Mike Allemana's *Vonology*.

Have a Chord or Discord? Email us at editor@downbeat.com or find us on Facebook & Twitter.

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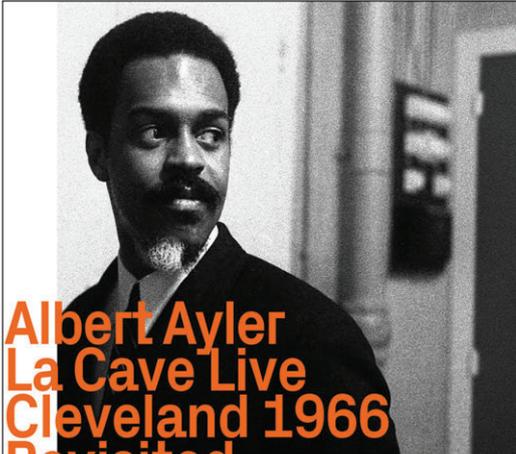
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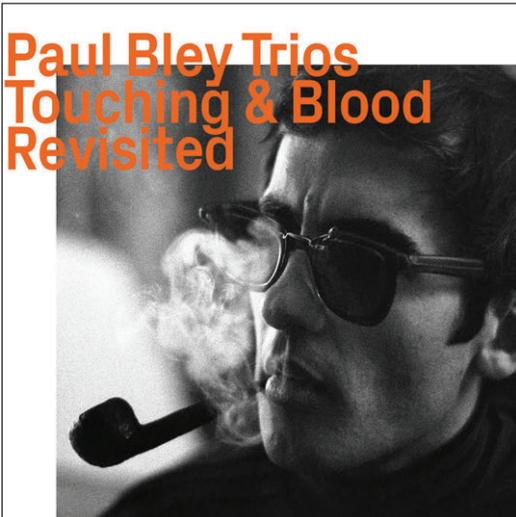
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Michel Samson, Mutawef A. Shaheed as Clyde Shy & Roland Shannon Jackson



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Ayler, Bley and Sun Ra: just a few of many titles in the Ezz-thetics catalog.

Ezz-thetics Focuses on Reissuing '60s Free-Jazz Classics

On Nov. 7, 1966, a 31-year-old Swiss fan of cutting-edge jazz made the short trip from his home in Basel across the border into Germany to hear the Albert Ayler Quintet perform in Lörrach. The performance by the saxophonist's singular five-piece — with his brother Donald on trumpet, Michel Samson on violin, William Folwell on bass and Beaver Harris on drums — made a deep impression, further cementing the young man's love of exploratory music.

As the years passed, Werner X. Uehlinger collected new recordings, keeping abreast of the developments of free jazz in the U.S. But as the major labels began to reduce their investment in jazz, and artists began to release their own work, recordings became harder to track down.

In the early 1970s, he came across a magazine with an advertisement placed by the great Poughkeepsie, New York, multi-instrumentalist Joe McPhee. He placed a direct mail order for one of the musician's first recordings on CJR, and when Uehlinger made his first trip to the U.S. in 1974, he made a point of visiting McPhee. That meeting led to the formation of Hat Hut Records, a label Uehlinger started primarily to release McPhee's work.

In 1975, Hat Hut debuted with *Black Magic Man*, and over the course of six years the imprint released a dozen of his albums. By then Hat Hut had established itself as a major force in the production of avant-garde jazz and improvised music, creating a powerful catalog with classic titles from the likes of Steve Lacy, Cecil Taylor and Irène Schweizer. The label would go on to issue crucial work from artists like David Murray, Sun Ra, Billy Bang, Anthony Braxton

and Vienna Art Orchestra, as well as many others.

Uehlinger remembered that the Ayler concert he witnessed back in 1966 had been recorded by German radio, and he reached out to the noted producer and writer Joachim-Ernst Berndt, who connected him with the station. The rights to the recording belonged to Ayler's teenage daughter Desiree, but in 1982 she wasn't old enough to negotiate a deal.

"Her mother, Arlene Ayler, took care of the arrangement," said Uehlinger. A year after rebranding his label as Hat Art in 1984, Uehlinger finally released the music from the Lörrach concert that had so deeply seared its way into his consciousness, collecting it with recordings made in Paris on the same tour as a double LP titled *Live Lörrach, Germany/Paris, France*. The recordings represented a major discovery, capturing one of the saxophonist's best bands at the peak of its power.

As Hat Art, Uehlinger's label thrived, bulking up its catalog and slowly expanding its scope to include experimental music by artists such as Arnold Dreyblatt, Pauline Oliveros and the French group Catalogue, in addition to a growing roster of jazz and improv figures like John Zorn, Franz Koglmann and Dave Burrell. He also began recording and releasing contemporary classical music.

"I got a lot of information about [John] Cage and [Morton] Feldman from jazz musicians who listened to this music, especially Steve Lacy," Uehlinger said. "He pushed me to do these recordings, and then I met people like Marianne Schroeder, who record-

ed [Giacinto] Scelsi, and he pushed me into Galina Ustvolskaya and Eberhard Blum, who played in Feldman's trio. These were musicians totally dedicated to new music — they didn't play Chopin or Mozart; they were only playing contemporary music."

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, he licensed dazzling archival music of Jimmy Giuffre from European radio stations and reissued select items from the catalog of L.A.'s Revelation Recordings, including titles from Warne Marsh, Anthony Ortega, and John Carter and Bobby Bradford's New

Art Ensemble.

In 1997, Uehlinger rebranded the label again, forming Hatology for jazz-related titles and Hat(new)Art for contemporary classical work. The new imprint remastered Ayler's Lörrach/Paris recordings, releasing it on CD in 2002, and maintaining its place as a capstone in the label's history. Beginning in 2016, the label licensed additional European radio recordings made on the 1966 tour in Berlin and Stockholm, and it also released a concert by Ayler's quartet with Don Cherry, Gary Peacock and Sunny

Murray recorded in Copenhagen in 1964.

In 2016, Uehlinger sold the label to the Belgian distributor OutHere with a three-year agreement that allowed him to continue to produce recordings, but at the end of 2019 the deal ended. In order to continue his work as a producer, he formed yet another imprint called Ezz-thetics — named for the classic 1961 George Russell album.

As with all of his labels, Uehlinger continued to release new work on the imprint, building on his long relationship with pianist Matthew Shipp and carrying on with his work in the contemporary music field, but the major focus on the latest imprint has been reissuing free-jazz classics from the 1960s, many of which remain in print.

Due to Switzerland's public domain laws, material recorded prior to 1970 doesn't require any licensing agreement, so Uehlinger, with the massive help of recording engineer Michael Brändli, has been releasing new packages of previously issued work from artists like Marion Brown, Archie Shepp, John Coltrane and Paul Bley, to say nothing of vintage Charlie Parker work. In many cases the improved fidelity is jaw-dropping.

Earlier this year the label reissued *Nothing Is...* a classic Sun Ra album originally released by ESP-Disk.

"It's incredible," Uehlinger said. "I had to call the engineer to tell him how fascinated I am. I've been hearing things on the album that I've never heard before. A lot of the details are on the master tapes, but you have to go in and bring them out."

He has also extended his devotion to Albert Ayler with a recent double CD featuring live recordings made in the saxophonist's birthplace of Cleveland. The material on *La Cave Live: Cleveland 1966 Revisited* was previously issued on the massive Ayler box set released by Revenant Records in 2004, *Holy Ghost: Rare & Unissued Recordings* (1962-1970). But this new reissue sounds so much richer and nuanced thanks to Brändli's engineering magic it may as well be an entirely new discovery.

Uehlinger said he has more Ayler material on the way, with fresh reissues of the saxophonist's *Live At Slug's Saloon* — 1966 performances recorded at the New York bar and issued in 1982 by Base, DIW and ESP-Disk — due this year.

Asked why he would focus on music that in some cases remains readily available, Uehlinger responded, "It's the importance of the recordings. I got a lot of feedback from people about bringing this music back into the conversation. My list of future projects is very big."

—Peter Margasak



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Ukrainian group DrakhaBrakha performs an emotional set during the first weekend of Jazz Fest.



AP/AM MCCULLOUGH

New Orleans Jazz Fest Returns Bursting with Live Showcases

“WHEN I WAS STAYING DOWN HERE, PEOPLE asked me, ‘Do you want to come here and do a festival like Newport?’” George Wein recalled in a documentary clip screened just before the Newport All-Stars hit the Jazz Tent stage and played a heartfelt tribute to the late founder of both the Newport Jazz Festival and the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival.

“I said, ‘No, no, no man! New Orleans is something very, very special,’” Wein responded, during an interview shot at the last pre-pandemic festival in 2019. “There’s no city in the world like New Orleans. From the jazz to the blues to the funk, we just put it all together with the food and the culture, and we created the greatest festival in the world.”

Wein was right. More than a half-century after he intuited the magic formula — using an outdoor festival as the roux that brings together all the music, food and culture bubbling up from the streets of New Orleans and nearby Acadiana — there’s nothing in the world quite like Jazz Fest. Though he didn’t live to attend his own “George Fest” commemorations, Wein’s spirit was everywhere from the moment crowds began streaming through the gates of the New Orleans Fair Grounds for the thrice-delayed 51st annual Jazz Fest — an event as eagerly anticipated by the thousands of mostly local performers as the tens of thousands of attendees, all parched for the communal healing power of live music.

“I feel like I’ve won the lottery,” beamed Cubano big-band leader Arturo Sandoval, whose exuberant trumpet blasts closed out

opening day in the Jazz Tent. So did almost everyone at the festival, on stage or off, during a seven-day musical marathon, which was only briefly delayed by two early-morning showers that barely dampened the ground with Jazz Fest’s traditional mud. And though the heat could be daunting, especially for a recovering cancer patient seeking refuge from the sun, this veteran fester and longtime New Orleanian was able to hit so many sweet spots hobbling around with a cane that this report reflects only the highest of personal highlights during the first six days of the festival.

The Blues Tent delivered a one-two punch on day one, when the ageless and always spiffy Little Freddy King received a standing ovation with his down-and-dirty New Orleans blues drone, which segued into a roof-raising set by Bombino, Niger’s whirling dervish of the guitar. Later, in the Jazz Tent, vigorous septuagenarian Arturo Sandoval recounted the 14-hour motorcycle trip from Miami that first brought him to New Orleans before revving into overdrive with his hot “Viva Cubano” band.

One of the most inspiring sets of the entire festival came on day two, when hundreds of festers crowded into the Cultural Exchange Pavilion to watch the rousing Ukrainian band DrakhaBrakha celebrate the spirit and determination of Ukraine against a backdrop emblazoned with the credo of New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians: Won’t Bow Down. Later that afternoon, The Cookers — a formidable octet of ascended post-bop masters, including the

unflinching tenor saxophonist Billy Harper — dug deep into the music they helped create, before Jose Feliciano offered a benediction looking and sounding as beautiful today as he did when his star was first rising a half-century ago.

Native New Orleanian and Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra drummer Herlin Riley ruled Locals Thursday in the Jazz Tent, where he called down the spirits of Congo Square on his drums during an impassioned, invigorating set punctuated by several ovations when he stepped to the front of the stage and got the whole crowd dancing. And “George Fest” moved into high gear on second Friday to honor one of the world’s great mensches of this music: Jazz Fest founder George Wein. “George was family” was the prevailing sentiment expressed during a Lagniappe stage interview with many of the Newport Jazz Festival players he mentored.

The heart of second Saturday was Rickie Lee Jones, who has become as deeply rooted in New Orleans as the live oaks on Ursuline Avenue in the near-decade she’s lived here. Shaking a tambourine to summon the spirits on the other side of the veil, Jones hit the Gentilly Stage for her first Jazz Fest gig as a local in a feathered top hat and red hot pants that got a real workout. She tossed a single rose to the crowd before delivering a bounteous bouquet of soulful, funky and jazzy songs from her catalog in an exuberantly joyful show with her musical soulmate, percussionist Mike Dillon, and a hot horn section that made her 1979 hit “Chuck E.’s In Love” sound as fresh as the day it was minted. —Cree McCree

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The Original Big Seven take a second-line stroll down the festival promenade.

Movie Review: *Jazz Fest: A New Orleans Story*

WHETHER YOU'RE A LONGTIME JAZZ FEST DEVOTEE OR A FIRST-time attendee at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, every day is a juggling act.

Little Freddie King or Lost Bayou Ramblers? Irma Thomas or Beausoleil? Galactic or The Soul Rebels? With 7,000 musicians performing on 14 stages spread over 145 acres at the New Orleans Fair Grounds, hitting your personal sweet spot on any given day involves intricate calculations, which often go astray when you're lured off course by the siren song from a random stage. So imagine the daunting task of distilling five decades of musical gold, along with the deep-fried overstuffed cuisine of Louisiana, into a single 95-minute film.

Against those odds, co-directors Frank Marshall and Ryan Sufferin managed to pull it off. Shot to commemorate the festival's 50th anniversary in 2019, *Jazz Fest: A New Orleans Story* offers a crash course in the immersive Jazz Fest experience, where "the air is thick not just with humidity but with culture," as jazz singer Gregory Porter puts it. And despite the festival's ever-slicker corporate trappings, and the rah-rah civic boosterism of the film itself, the sheer power of the music breaks through, the way the sun pierces the clouds after a torrential downpour — which, as Jazz Fest producer/director Quint Davis notes, "is an element of our planning."

Though most of the live concert footage — Earth, Wind and Fire, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, the soulful return of Al Green, New Orleans soul queen Irma Thomas, deep bayou bluesman Sonny Landreth, bounce queen Big Freedia, funky hip-hoppers Tank and the Bangas, to name but a few — was shot in 2019, the filmmakers had no idea it would be the festival's last hurrah before a two-year pandemic hiatus.

But the timing proved fortuitous. It allowed them to interview two key figures we lost in the interim: festival founder George Wien and Marasalis jazz family patriarch Ellis Marsalis, who Wien tapped to pick local artists for the inaugural festival in Congo Square, where Bongo Joe and other drummers called down the spirits of once-enslaved ancestors who used to gather there every Sunday.

The film kicks off with a kaleidoscopic montage of the sights and sounds that greet fest-goers streaming through gates, peppered with pithy interview quotes from artists and organizers, then loops back to Jazz Fest's origin story. As the founder of the Newport Jazz Festival, Wien was first approached by the hotel industry to recreate his Newport success in New Orleans in 1962. But it was only after Louisiana jettisoned its repressive Jim Crow laws, and musicians of all colors could appear on the same stages, that Wien (who was married to a Black woman) fulfilled his dream: founding a festival in "the only really unique culture in America ... the briar patch where jazz was born."

True to the spirit of a festival traditionally closed by the Neville Brothers when they were all alive, the filmmakers bring it all back home to close when Aaron and Cyril Neville, along with second-gen Nevilles Ivan and Ian, join Trombone Shorty and Orleans Avenue to close out Jazz Fest 2019.

—Cree McCree



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Author Philip Watson on Writing *Bill Frisell, Beautiful Dreamer*

REMARKABLY COMPREHENSIVE and exhaustively researched, Philip Watson's *Bill Frisell, Beautiful Dreamer* (Faber Books) is the definitive biography on "The Guitarist Who Changed The Sound of American Music," as the subhead states. Completed over seven years, Watson consolidated so much information, gathered so many testimonies and connected so many dots in this admirable undertaking that it's hard to believe it's the Irish scribe's first published book.

"The biography has been gestating for quite some time," explained the Dublin-based author, a former deputy editor at GQ and editor-at-large at Esquire in the U.K. "The germ of this book has been forming somewhere in my head for the past 35 years or more — ever since I first met Bill Frisell and heard him play live in the '80s. Things started to get more concrete, however, in 2014, when Bill and I first sat down to meaningfully discuss the idea at that year's Kilkenny Arts Festival in Ireland. Bill said no at first. And then, after we'd worked out a few details about editorial independence and the amount of access he could realistically give me, he said yes. And I first began interviewing people at the beginning of 2015."

Watson praises Frisell's singular vision and highly individual sound, calling him a "quietly revolutionary" guitar hero who has been a "vastly transformative and unifying force." The "Beautiful Dreamer" in the book's title, it turns out, is an apt description. Not only was it the name of the Stephen Foster song he remembers his mother singing around the house when he was a kid (his Rosebud?), the word dream also pops up in a number of Frisell compositions, from "Like Dreams Do" to "Dream On," "Shutter Dream" and "Blues Dream," the latter the title track to his 2001 Nonesuch album.

The book opens with a description of a particularly telling dream the guitarist had 30 years ago that has stayed with him about hearing a wonderful sound that is impossible to describe. "It's every piece of music he has imagined or heard, coexisting and playing simultaneously," Watson writes of Frisell, who would spend his entire career searching for that elu-

sive sound. It's a process that Frisell calls, "a glimpse of something to strive for ... something I know is there just a little bit beyond my grasp. But that's what keeps me going, every day, every time I play."

When Frisell began his ongoing collaboration with Charles Lloyd in 2013, he commented at the time, "I just can't even believe I'm getting to do some of these things. It's like I woke up in some unbelievable dream."

There's that word again.

Watson lays out the timeline, tracing Frisell's early days with clarinet lessons in elementary school, buying his first electric guitar (a Fender Mustang) at age 13, later winning a high school battle of the bands and playing Wes Montgomery's "Bumpin' On Sunset" in his school auditorium. He catalogs the guitarist's initial studies with Dale Brunning in Denver, then Johnny Smith in Greeley, Colorado, then Jim Hall in the heart of New York's Greenwich Village. He covers in great

ff

Bill Frisell,
Beautiful
Dreamer

THE GUITARIST
WHO CHANGED
THE SOUND OF
AMERICAN MUSIC

Philip
Watson

detail Frisell's time at the Berklee College of Music and his eventual emergence as a kind of ECM house guitarist, appearing on albums by Eberhard Weber, Jan Garbarek, Arild Andersen and Paul Motian before debuting as a leader with 1982's *In Line*. He systematically documents the subsequent recordings in Frisell's expansive discography, up to his most recent Blue Note release, 2020's *Valentine*.

More importantly, Watson examines what makes Frisell tick, most effectively done in a chapter titled "Raised By Deer." By drawing comparisons between Bill's slow, halting almost stammering way of speaking and his idiosyncratic approach to guitar that puts a premium on space between the notes, and by identifying a steely determination that lurks beneath the fragile voice and childlike sense of wonder he has about the music, the author keenly connects the dots. And he admits that he had to adapt his own methodology to suit Frisell's inherently eccentric approach to the interview process.

"As soon as we sat down for the first of our many long interview sessions," he recalled, "I realized that I had to adapt, revise my expectations, slow down to his pace, settle myself, tune in, respect the silences, resist filling in or finishing off. That was when the dots started to appear and connect."

Throughout the richly detailed book, Watson recreates telling scenes from the road while conducting revealing interviews with Frisell's wife, artist Carole d'Inverno, their daughter Monica, Bill's brother Bob, road manager Claudia Engelhart and key bandmates (including the late cornetist Ron Miles) that further reveal his character. He even traces Frisell's nature back to his biochemist father's Swedish disposition.

Watson mentioned that he did come away with a number of lessons learned from this undertaking.

"One clear lesson and reminder: to listen with your ears, not your mouth," he explained. "I've also taken inspiration from the way Bill attempts to move through the world with genuine modesty, generosity and integrity."

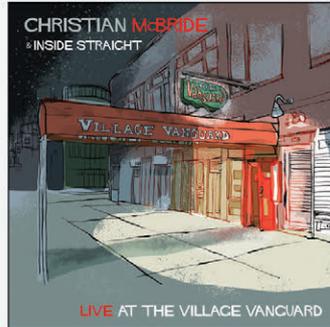
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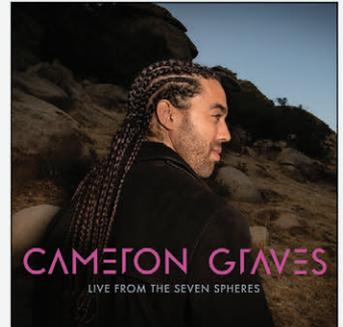
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The screenshot shows the Mack Avenue Vinyl Boutique website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the Mack Avenue logo and a shopping cart icon. The main banner features a large image of a woman's face with a map overlay, titled "She's Back" with the subtitle "Grab yours before it's gone (again)". Below this is a featured album by Veronica Swift, "This Bitter Earth", with a "SHOP NOW" button. Below the banner is a "NEW RELEASES" section with five album covers: "Origin" by Joey Alexander, "A Time for Love" by Oscar Peterson, "Symphony Hall Concert" by Erroll Garner, "Sounds from the Ancestors" by Kenny Garrett, and "More Music" by Joey DeFrancesco.

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Marco Benevento recorded his latest album at home in Woodstock, New York.

Marco Benevento Solo 'Home Brew'

DURING HIS LONG BREAK FROM THE ROAD due to the pandemic, Marco Benevento didn't just sit at home and twiddle his thumbs. Instead, the keyboardist stepped outside into his cramped studio on his nine-acre Woodstock, New York, home and, on his own, developed a jazz/rock solo affair of rambunctious and off-kilter experimentation. It's richly riveting and ebullient.

The simply titled *Benevento* (Royal Potato Family) serves as his liberating sonic playground with a collection of in-need-of-dusting studio toys, including tape machines, old microphones, old mic preamps, a drum set, vintage analog equipment and multiple keyboards such as a Mellotron, Moog synthesizer, a classic piano and Voyager, Rhodes, Wurlitzer and Clavinet keyboards.

He calls the outcome of his deep walk through polyrhythmic grooves, electrifying self-jams, West Africa-derived dance music, songs based on poetry and short lyrical ditties his "small batch psychedelia," calling the creation totally "home brew."

Since moving upstate from New York City in 2011, Benevento used his 20-by-40-foot space (nicknamed the Inspiration Station by friends) as his home base for composing and then passing off demos to whomever he was working with in various bands to add the finesse. This time it was different. "I was making all the magic happen by myself," he said. "I stuck with it, and then one day realized this may be the real record. I'm glad it's out there because it's a snapshot of my world at that time. I played everything on my four-track tape recorder. It's loose, with some songs

that sound like they're unfinished, short interludes and then instrumental music that is structural. In some ways this album is like going back to my roots."

Benevento comes from a full jazz background, having attended Berklee College of Music and studied with Joanne Brackeen, Brad Mehldau and Kenny Werner. "I was deep into classic jazz, and all I was shooting for was to form a jazz trio," he said. "But that evolved over time. I discovered the sound of playing the acoustic piano through an amplifier one day and then added a distortion pedal and a delay." A forward thinker, Benevento started to explore jam rock and indie pop in the mix.

His trio of bassist Reed Mathis and drummer Matt Chamberlain scored some impressive gigs, including the Newport Jazz Festival and opening for Jamie Cullum at Carnegie Hall. After that show, the band was approached by an A&R talent scout from Verve who was interested in recording them for the label.

"We were invited into the Verve office, where we could take home any of the label's music," Benevento said with a laugh. "Wow, Verve was going to record our third album. That gave us a lot of confidence that we were doing something right. But then, everything went silent." His manager, Kevin Calabro, freaked out because he had already booked a tour and he wanted albums to sell. So, in 2009, the pair decided to form their own label, Royal Potato Family, and release *Me Not Me* — the beginning of a long string of adventurous Benevento albums, as well as a roster expansion of a range of music from fringe jazz

to calming folk.

On *Benevento*, the lone cat enlisted his San Diego poet friend Al Howard to send him poems that found their way into the vocal songs. It was a family affair, with Benevento's wife and their two young girls singing backup. On selected tunes, he linked up with master percussionist Mamadouba "Mimo" Camara, who works at the progressive Woodstock Day School that his kids attend. The pair catches fire on "Marco And Mimo," where daughter Ruby joins in.

Spontaneity ruled. *Benevento*'s improvised tunes include "The Warm Up," which features a dazzling piano run.

"I just went into the studio, started the drum machine, sat down and warmed up, got my fingers moving," he said. "Then I discovered I had come up with pretty cool, free music just noodling around."

Another shorty is the playful "Polysix," which Benevento says is the name of his go-to keyboard: "It's just a 30-second interlude of a little ditty that was stuck in my head." Then there's the opener, the loud and catchy "Like Me" that he says is pretty much "an unfinished song."

The structured compositions include the pop-ish "At The End Or The Beginning," which has an African dance vibe. That's influenced by Benevento's fascination with the sounds of West African pop titans Francis Bebey, the electronic Cameroon composer whose synth guitar explores the makossa dance rhythm; Kiki Ghani, a keyboardist from Ghani who's famous for his disco funk; and William Onyeabor, the late legendary Nigerian funk star that David Byrne champions.

"I'm a vinyl collector, and I have a huge collection," Benevento said. "My world was blown open when I found this music with its repetitious grooves and synthesizer solos. They remind me of all the music that I love. It's my go-to music when I wake up in the morning. In my own twisted way, after I broke down what they were doing, I thought, 'I can make songs like this.' So 'Marco And Mimo' is my version of a Francis Bebey song. And some of the other experimental stuff reminds me of the vibes from those guys."

One of Benevento's friends says his project reminded him of the first Paul McCartney DIY album, simply titled *McCartney*, where he played all the instruments and recorded in a rural setting. That resonated with Benevento. "I have 20 or 30 more pieces that I plan to put out," he says. "So, I might do what Paul did on his two other solo albums. My next release will be *Benevento II*."

As for No. 1, it's the last album he recorded in his cramped studio. "I was in that studio for 10 years and had some good experiences," he said. "I've moved into a bigger studio: my three-car garage that had been used for storage. It has a 10-foot high ceiling, heat, reclaimed barnwood on the walls, concrete floors. It's a gold mine of space." —Dan Ouellette



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"My music is 100% about people — how they present themselves, how they present their culture, how they present their ancestors," says Etienne Charles.

Etienne Charles Composes for New York Philharmonic

LINCOLN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING Arts, the gleaming cultural complex on Manhattan's West Side, was built on land once occupied by Lenape Indians, who were pushed out by Dutch settlers, who in turn were vanquished by the English. And so the story went, up to the period after World War II, when much of the culturally rich, if economically poor, neighborhood of San Juan Hill was swallowed by the fashionable forces of urban renewal.

That is where Etienne Charles comes in. The trumpeter, composer and native of Trinidad has made a specialty of creating works built around marginalized communities, and his latest extended work, *San Juan Hill*, certainly fills that

bill. For the piece, Charles' sextet, augmented by flute and turntable, will join forces with the New York Philharmonic in an hour-long exploration of the history of the six-by-three-block slice of the West 60s — and it will do so in the voices of those who lived there.

"My music is 100% about people — how they present themselves, how they present their culture, how they present their ancestors," Charles said in a recent Zoom call.

The piece, commissioned by Lincoln Center and scheduled to have its premiere there on Oct. 8, is still very much a work in progress. But in broad outline, Charles likened it to a city in that it will "continuously build." It will draw on key

points in the history, nodding to the Lenape and progressing onward before digging into the fertile period when migration from points South yielded a vibrant mix of cultural influences from the African diaspora.

Delving into oral histories and other academic research, Charles discovered how heavily jazz musicians figured in the mix. Some, he said, were San Juan Hill natives who will provide inspiration for his piece. Among them: pianists Herbie Nichols and Thelonious Monk; clarinetist Russell Procope, a mainstay of Duke Ellington's band; and saxophonist Benny Carter, who wrote *Echoes Of San Juan Hill*, a precursor to Charles' work that had its premiere in 1996 with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

One neighborhood resident whose work Charles expressed particular interest in bringing to life is James P. Johnson, the Jazz Age composer of "The Charleston" who developed stride piano in nightspots like the jumping Jungles Casino ("a cellar without fixings," as Johnson called it) on West 62nd Street. In evoking that world, Charles will turn to the eminently adaptable pianist Sullivan Fortner, who is already in his band Creole Soul, as are Godwin Louis (saxophone), Alex Wintz (guitar), Ben Williams (bass) and John Davis (drums).

The work, co-presented by Lincoln Center and the New York Philharmonic with financing from Cecily M. Carson and the Carson Family Charitable Trust, will be among the first major compositions to be performed at David Geffen Hall after a \$550 million makeover, the first major redesign of the space since 1976, when its name was changed from Philharmonic Hall to Avery Fisher Hall. The renovations are an apt metaphor for the neighborhood's developmental churn writ large, and that, too, will provide raw material for Charles.

The first part of the piece will feature Creole Soul, which will combine with the full orchestra for the last part. The small group has in the past painted vivid aural pictures of marginalized people, most recently in March at the San Francisco premiere of Charles' *Greenwood*, a suite commemorating the destruction of a thriving Black neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

While combining with the philharmonic will expand his palette considerably, merging jazz ensembles with symphony orchestras can be tricky. But Charles expects no complications. Nor does Jaap van Zweden, the philharmonic's conductor and music director, who, in an interview, said he felt comfortable with such an integration since his personal tastes and those of his musicians often ran toward the popular realm.

"It fits in my whole body and in my spiritual life," he said, adding: "The open minds of the orchestra members are amazing. The soul of the city comes out of these people. It feels very natural."

—Phillip Lutz

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TODD ROSENBERG



Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* was only the second work by a Black composer to be featured at the Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Blanchard's Fiery Opera Confronts Issues of Abuse

IF THE GOAL OF THE LYRIC OPERA OF Chicago was to attract a more diverse crowd by programming jazz composer/trumpeter Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*, the revered institution clearly succeeded.

The last and sold-out performance in April brought in a younger constituency and a sizable African-American audience.

Premiered at the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2019 and presented at New York's

Metropolitan Opera in 2021, *Fire* is only the second work by a Black composer to be featured at the Lyric in its 136-year history. (The first was Anthony Davis' *Amistad* in 1997.) Blanchard's opus is based on New York Times columnist Charles M. Blow's memoirs, the tale of a lonesome upbringing in a rural Louisiana community and of sexual molestation at the hands of an older cousin named Chester. The libretto by director/screenwriter Kasi Lemmons alternates

poetry and down-to-earth language — if not profanities. When was the last time you heard the word “motherfucka” uttered from the Lyric stage? Several sentences are used effectively as leitmotifs throughout the performance. “I was once a boy of peculiar grace” underlines the hero's constant struggle, while “Sometimes you just gotta leave it in the road” takes all its meaning at the opera's conclusion, when Charles finally resolves to give up on his revenge fantasy.

Producing an opera in the time of a pandemic can bring a slew of challenges, as the Lyric discovered. For this final performance, the three lead roles had to be recast. Thus, Justin Austin from New York's Met was flown in at the last minute to replace Will Liverman as Charles. Brittany Renee filled the shoes of Jacqueline Echols for the ubiquitous *Destiny/Loneliness/Greta*. Whitney Morrison stood in for Latonia Moore for another key character, Billie. And Leroy Davis stepped in to act as the nefarious Chester.

They all acquitted themselves splendidly considering the circumstances, and soprano Morrison actually stole the show. But we should not forget the young Benjamin Precely, who, as the character Charles-Baby, displayed some impressive poise and delivery. Despite *Fire's* shortcomings, it is encouraging to see an opera addressing an issue that has finally been getting some traction: sexual abuse and the shame it can inspire in victims. —Alain Drouot

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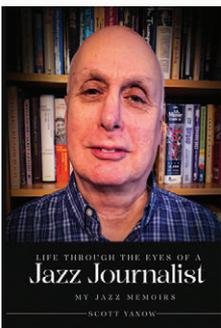
Norah Jones

Fallon Hosts Jones: In May, Norah Jones reprised her first ever appearance on national television by returning to perform on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in honor of the 20th anniversary of her hit album *Come Away With Me*.

French Honor: In April, at Alliance Française of Chicago, the French General Consul Yannick Tagand awarded drummer/impresario Mike Reed the title of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. The award came in recognition of Reed's work as the founder of the Pitchfork Music Festival and as a member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, as well as his assistance with The Bridge, the transatlantic network for jazz and creative music, among many other achievements.

Kline Steps Down: Randall Kline, founder and executive artistic director of SFJAZZ, will step down in November 2023. "While leaving SFJAZZ is a difficult decision — this place, in many ways, has been my baby — I cannot think of a better time to make this change, as 2023 will mark the 40th anniversary of SFJAZZ and the 10th birthday of the SFJAZZ Center," Kline said.

A Jazz Journalist's Life: Longtime jazz journalist and DownBeat contributor Scott Yanow has released a memoir titled *Life Through the Eyes of a Jazz Journalist*. The



book traces Yanow's life in this music from his discovery of jazz and his period as jazz editor of Record Review to the story behind his involvement with the AllMusic Guide and his adventures as an amateur musician. The book includes comical interludes

and vintage interviews with luminaries like Freddie Hubbard, Chick Corea and Maynard Ferguson, encounters with Clint Eastwood, summaries of the Monterey and Playboy Jazz Festivals and more.

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BETTER HURLEY

Bob Stroger: A Country Boy Playing the Blues

JUST BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC, BASS-ist Bob Stroger's touring itinerary took him around the world. He also recorded the recently released *That's My Name* (Delmark) with his Brazilian blues band, The Headcutters, near their country's southeast coast. Now that venues are re-opening, Stroger has picked back up where he left off. At 91, he sees no reason to slow down.

"As long as I satisfy my fans, I'll keep going," Stroger said from his home on Chicago's South Side. "I never think about retiring from music. When you retire, if you have the money, you travel. So I'm retired now because I travel around the world doing this."

That's My Name encapsulates Stroger's wide and lengthy experiences. His compositions, especially the title track, showcase his amiably spacious bass lines and expertise in this music's history. He embraces material by artists ranging from early blues singer Ma Rainey to jazz bandleader Jay McShann. He also revisits pieces that some of his former colleagues wrote, including Eddie Taylor. Such versatility has always been crucial for his work.

"My style changed when I played with Otis Rush, then when I played with Eddie Taylor," Stroger said. "Then when I played with Snooky Pryor I changed styles again. I had to listen and find styles that fit their playing. With this CD, I didn't want all the songs to sound the same. So I played all of my heroes."

The album also highlights Stroger's quietly compelling voice. Still, he remains humble about his subtle delivery's emotional impact.

"I'm my biggest critic, I just sing my personality," Stroger said. "A lot of good singers can sing like different people, but I can't. I sing the way I talk. I'm a country boy, and it shows in the way

I'm singing."

That country boyhood was spent in Hayti, Missouri. As a young adult, Stroger moved to Chicago, where his father worked for a railroad and, fortuitously, they lived near a hotbed of the city's thriving West Side blues scene.

"When I was living on Oakley Avenue, Silvio's was on Lake Street," Stroger said. "I could walk out my back door and look in the window of Silvio's and I saw Muddy Waters, Hubert Sumlin, Howlin' Wolf. I saw all the big guys. I never had a suit and they were wearing suits and ties and I said, 'I really want to do that.' When I was in the country cotton fields, we didn't have the college education and music was the only thing I could do to get recognized. So I went that route."

Stroger also developed his technique across different idioms. He played in R&B groups and with jazz saxophonist Rufus Forman before becoming blues guitarist Eddie King's bassist throughout the 1960s. These encounters continue to shape Stroger's sound.

"A lot of people said I was a smooth bass player because I play a lot of chromatic notes," Stroger said. "And that's kind of smoothing it out, that's where my style comes from. I think it comes from picking up the jazz notes and some of the stuff you do on upright bass."

Bandleaders Otis Rush and Sunnyland Slim admired that approach and included Stroger in their ensembles as more global festivals featured blues artists during the 1970s and 1980s. Gradually, he started releasing records under his own name, starting with *In This House: Live At Lucerne, Vol. 1* (Crosscut) in 2002. Nowadays, his main inspiration for recording is to spotlight his international collaborators, primarily The Headcutters.

—Aaron Cohen



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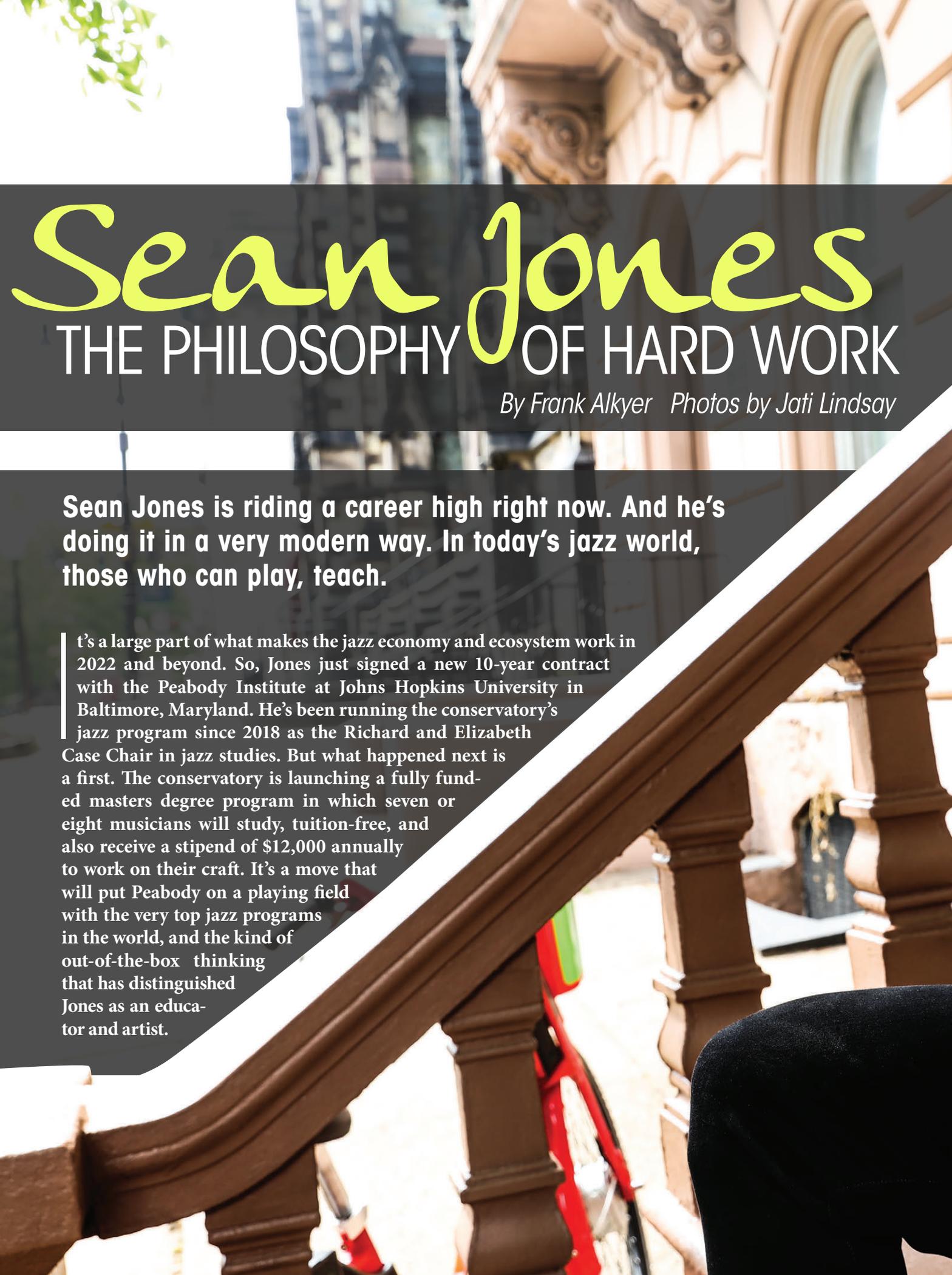
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Sean Jones

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HARD WORK

By Frank Alkyer Photos by Jati Lindsay

Sean Jones is riding a career high right now. And he's doing it in a very modern way. In today's jazz world, those who can play, teach.

It's a large part of what makes the jazz economy and ecosystem work in 2022 and beyond. So, Jones just signed a new 10-year contract with the Peabody Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. He's been running the conservatory's jazz program since 2018 as the Richard and Elizabeth Case Chair in jazz studies. But what happened next is a first. The conservatory is launching a fully funded masters degree program in which seven or eight musicians will study, tuition-free, and also receive a stipend of \$12,000 annually to work on their craft. It's a move that will put Peabody on a playing field with the very top jazz programs in the world, and the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that has distinguished Jones as an educator and artist.





"Newsflash: I never wanted to be on the road ... I wanted to be an educator," says Jones.

All of this means Jones plans to be in Baltimore for the long haul. For him, the city, and its gritty blue-collar work ethic, reminds him of home in Warren, Ohio, a working-class town in the state's northeastern corner. It's far enough away from the big-city politics of Washington, D.C., to offer perspective, close enough to land quality gigs.

When Jones isn't teaching, he's working on his own craft with any of a number of projects. One of them is the Baltimore Jazz Collective, an ad hoc group of the best musicians around Baltimore featuring Jones, who serves as curator, tap dancer and vocalist Brinae Ali (who is also Jones' wife), bass clarinetist Todd Marcus, pianist Mark G. Meadow, bassist Kris Funn, drummer Quincy Phillips and a rotating cast.

He and Ali also have Dizzy Spellz, their loving, hard-swinging, Afro-futuristic look at the world through the music of Dizzy Gillespie. And he's in demand as a soloist, guest artist and pure jazz inspiration.

Jones gives back to the causes he loves, too. He serves as the artistic director of NYO Jazz, the newest of three youth orchestras sponsored by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute, featuring some of the best young talent in the land. They'll be putting out a recording this year with saxophonist Melissa Aldana as guest artist. And Jones just finished his term as the president of Jazz Education Network, an inter-

national organization dedicated to expanding the jazz universe.

One other thing that Jones wants to tell the world: He hasn't had a drink since January. He felt that side of a musician's life was getting in the way of what he wanted to accomplish.

"I think a lot of us are able to live this sort of life where if we can maintain our professionalism and, sort of, have that in the back pocket as a way of escape," he said. "But eventually, it catches up to you. You're forced to make a decision. Well, I felt that for me, I wanted to be able to make the decision before I was forced to."

Jones sat down for a live interview last December in Chicago at the Midwest Clinic, one of the world's largest music education conferences. A rapt audience listened as he waxed in practical, and very philosophical, tones about life, art and jazz.

These are his words, edited for style, length and clarity. The questions have been eliminated to leave more room for his thoughts.

I learned how to improvise in the church. My first musical experience was in the choir at church. I actually sang soprano at like 5 or 6 years old.

It was a gospel church, specifically, the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal church. When you grow up in that environment, you have to sing or play some type of instrument.

There were like three people in church who couldn't sing or play an instrument. We thought something was wrong with them. [laughs]

The harder this trumpet got, the more I wanted to play it. And I told myself that I was going to master this thing. Long story short, Rich Rollo, who was my band director at the time, started to give me lessons after school for free. Then, Jessica Turner, who was also a band director, called my mother and said, "Listen, I'm going to take your son to lunch." And so my Mom said, "Yeah, keep him as long as you want." [laughs] As I'm shoving pizza into my face, Jessica pushed two CDs across the table. One was Miles Davis, *Kind Of Blue*. And the other one was Miles Davis, *Tutu*. And that pretty much sealed my fate.

The folks in middle school and high school started to hear about me. And they introduced me to a guy named Essoto Pellegrini. Pellegrini was a local-hero trumpet player. He decided early in his life that he wasn't going to be an orchestral trumpet player because it was going to take him away from his family too much. He actually got invited by the Cleveland Orchestra several times to be in that section. And he said no. So, he taught at Youngstown State University, and he started to come and pick me up and take me for lessons at his house.

The first lesson, I'll never forget. He pulls out his horn, and it looked weird. I didn't know it was a C trumpet at the time. And he started doing all this double-tonguing and triple-tonguing. I'm like, "Man, I'll never be able to do that." So I went home, put the horn in the case and said, "All right. That's it."

So, he called my mother and says, "Get Sean together." And he picked me up in his Maserati. He had a helmet on. He was like *seriously*

'I was playing behind an Elvis impersonator and a Dolly Parton impersonator. It was horrible.'

Italian. He's driving us around in his Maserati, and he's going 70, 80, 90 miles an hour, and I'm like freaking out. Then, he pulls over. And says, "How did that feel?" I said, "It was scary, but it was exciting." And he said, "Stick with me, and that's how your entire career will be."

Tony Leonardo, may he rest in peace, he was the director of jazz studies at Youngstown State. He was in Woody Herman's band for years. He was the cat. And my little high school band played, and the Youngstown State University big band was the guest. And so I heard his big band. I never heard anything like that. I didn't know anything. I'm telling you — *green*. I was like, extra green, like forest green.

So I'm looking at this band like, "Wow," the power of the big band. These cats can play. And then Tony came up to me after the concert. He said, "Hey, young man, you sound pretty good. I think we can get you into school at Youngstown State University." And I said, "OK, sure." And they made a way for me, a full ride. So, without knowing what any of that meant, I found myself at Youngstown State University.

I took a year off to work on a cruise ship. Somebody told me it was a good idea to go play on a cruise ship and save some money. So, I went out there, and I had this nine-month contract.

The boat I was on, it was called the *Big Red Boat*. And the joke was it wasn't big at all. We would dock in the Bahamas, and every other boat was bigger than us. [*laughs*] I was playing behind an Elvis impersonator and a Dolly Parton impersonator. It was horrible.

After the third week, I prayed to God, I said, "Look, if you're up there, if there's a God, get me off of this thing."

That's when I realized God had a sense of humor. Literally, a week later, the cruise line went bankrupt. We were stuck in the Bahamas for three weeks. And they turned the air conditioning off on the boat. They took all the passengers off, but the crew had to stay.

So we're on the boat, no air conditioning. It's September. And I'm sitting there like,

"What am I doing with my career." And then I remembered a letter that I wrote to my mother when I was 16 years old. I wrote a letter to my Mom, basically telling her what I'd be doing 10 years from that moment.

I told her I'd be a college professor. I told her I'd be a recording artist. And I told her I'd be Wynton Marsalis' friend.

William Fielder, we knew him as "Prof." The history of jazz trumpet from the 1980s up until now would not be if it wasn't for William Fielder. He taught Wynton Marsalis, Terence Blanchard, Terrell Stafford and so many other cats. Kenny Garrett used to go and study with him — just wind. Yeah, Kenny Garrett, saxophone player. So all these cats went through him. I was one of his last students at Rutgers University. He said, "Send me a tape." Two weeks later, he offered me something called a Ralph Bunche Fellowship, which is like a full ride, and I had a little bit of money to eat.

I said, "OK, this is my ticket to the East Coast, right?" So I told my mom, "Mom, I'm going to New York." "You're going to starve," she said. [*laughs*] I said, "Well, Mom, you know, I'll come back home. I'll drive back home and eat some of your food." You know, I'll never forget that morning I left her house. I got in my little Beretta. I had my clothes. I had \$600. And my Mom, God bless her, she went outside. And she took this anointing oil, like from the church, and she put it on the tires, on each tire, and she said a little prayer. And that was it.

I met Wynton on the cell phone. And this is a

great lesson for any young person who is getting into the music. It's all about choices. So, I got a phone call that Wes Anderson [saxophonist and a member of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra] was going to be in Columbus, Ohio. I didn't have any money. I had maybe \$10 on me. I had no gas in the car. So I was like, "Well, I could fill up my tank, or at least put \$10 worth of gas in the tank. I can get down there, but I'm not going to be able to get back." And then in my mind, I'm like, "Yeah, but you can borrow money from somebody when you get down there." And so for every excuse that came to my mind, I immediately started to think about a solution.

I got there, and I'm thinking I gotta borrow this money to get back home. Wes counts off "Caravan." [Trumpeter] Pharez Whitted was there on stage. [Trumpeter] Derrick Gardener, too. They saw that I came in and said, "Hey, come on up here." And so I got up there, and it turned into a trumpet battle — *of course*. You get three trumpet players together and it's like, louder, faster, higher. [*laughs*]

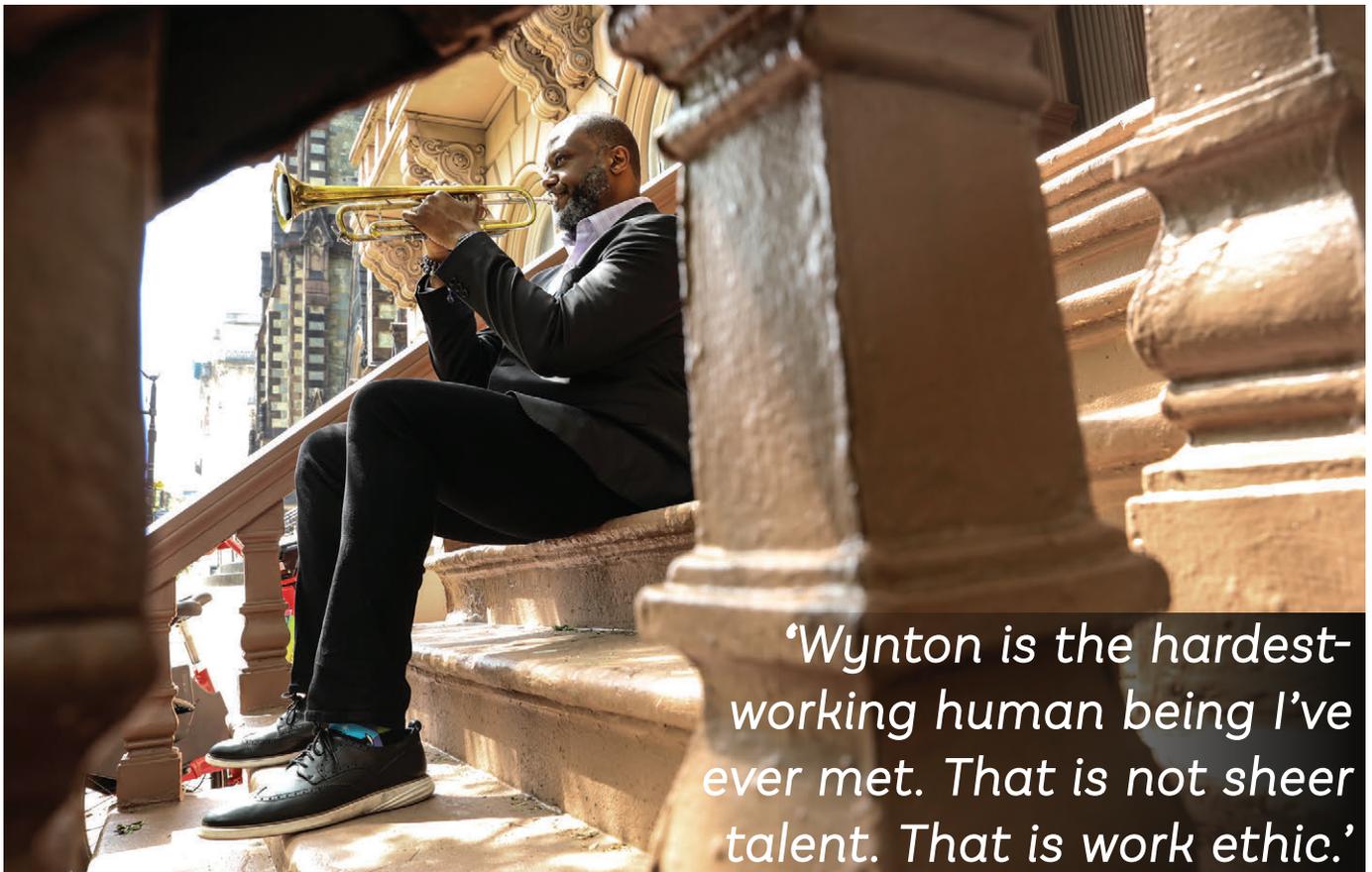
And I looked out in the audience, and Wes Anderson is holding the cell phone up and laughing. I'm like, "Man, he must think this is a joke, or it sucks." So, I walk off the stage. And Wes says, "Hey, man, take this phone. Somebody wants to talk to you on the other side." So, I grab the phone, "Hello." And somebody said, "Hey man, you sound good." I said, "OK. Who is this?" "Wynton Marsalis." "Yeah, right." Click. I hung up the phone.

So I gave it back to Wes. He says, "Yeah, man. How was that?" I said, "Man, I don't want you messing with me." He says, "Did you talk to him?" I said, "No, you're joking around." And he said, "Man, that was *Wynton*." And I'm like, "Can you call him back ... please?" [*laughs*]

So, check this out. Wynton gave me his number. He said, "You get to New York, call me." — So, I got to New Jersey and a year had gone by. And my good friend, her name was Michelle. She passed away a little while ago. I'm sorry, Michelle. One morning, I don't know what got into her, but she said, "Did you ever call Wynton?" And as soon as I said, "Nah," she grabbed my phone and ran. She was a track star. This was before you could lock your phone. She opened my phone, found Wynton's number and called it.

He picked up, and she said, "I'm Michelle. I'm Sean Jones' friend. He's afraid of you. Talk to him." She gave me the phone and Wynton says, "Man, you have to have your friend call me?" and I'm like, "I'm so sorry Mr. Marsalis." He said, "What are you doing right now?" I said, "Well, later on, I have a final or something." And so he says, "OK, you got a few hours, get on the train and come to my house."

He gave me his address. I went up there.



'Wynton is the hardest-working human being I've ever met. That is not sheer talent. That is work ethic.'

And I'll never forget this. I walked in the door. He's playing chess with Aaron Goldberg. Ali Jackson is sitting at a drum set. Carlos Henriquez is sitting with a bass, and there's a grand piano there.

You know, for a kid from Warren, Ohio, I'm looking at this, like, *"People live like this?"*

He didn't even look up. He's like, "Yeah, Sean sit down, man." So I sat, and they they started to rehearse for the *Live At House Of Tribes* record. And, so I'm sitting there watching this go down, and time is ticking. And I'm starting to think about this final. And I said, "Mr. Marsalis, I'm sorry, man. I gotta get back to New Jersey for this final." He says, "All right, man, pull your horn out." And, I started playing. And, then he says, "Hey, man, you know, you play too good to sound like other people you meet. Sound like yourself."

Check this out. This is crazy. The phone rang. It was [trumpeter] Ryan Kisor [a member of the band]. Ryan Kisor couldn't make the summer tour, and Wynton said to him, "Who would you who would you suggest me getting?" I was the third person that Ryan mentioned, Wynton looked over at me and said, "What are you doing this summer?"

I never met Ryan Kisor. I was just showing up. I was literally showing up everywhere. And for students that are in a room, you know, fate is

where preparation and opportunity meet, and you create those opportunities.

Wynton offered me the lead trumpet chair during the tour. And I said no. Actually, I said no, twice. I wanted to be a soloist. And he said, "OK, I respect that." A month and a half later, he said, "Hey, man, I need you to play on this gig playing lead." So I went up, I played lead. I can't remember what the concert was. But at the end of that run, he said, "Hey, man, I think you can do this. Are you sure you don't want to check it out?" I said, "Nah, man. It's not what I do." A month and a half later, he called me back again. And he said, "Man, just do this one tour." So I did the January tour. And at the end of the tour, I said, "OK, man, I'll do it." And that started my six-year run with Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Wynton is the hardest-working human being I've ever met. That is not sheer talent. That is work ethic. I saw this man write us practically a symphony in three weeks. He literally stayed up all night long. Just focus. That put a fire in me.

Newsflash, I never wanted to be on the road. Never. That was not part of my dream. I wanted to have recordings, but I didn't want to be on the road. I wanted to be an educator.

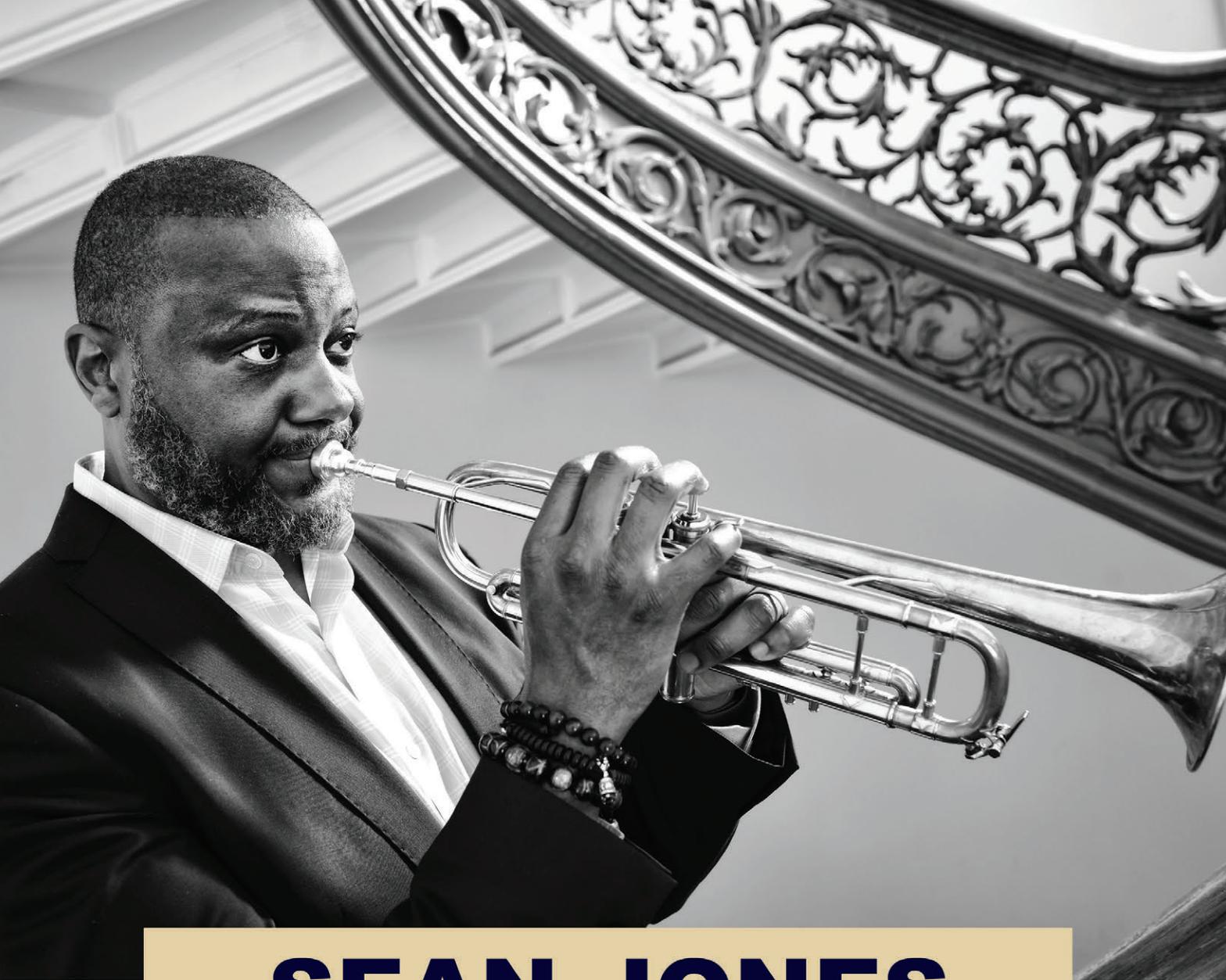
The scene is in academia right now. I was at Berklee, livin' life. All those killing musicians

up there. Every day, it was like, "Yeah, I'm playing, it's great." Loved my job there. I heard that Peabody's jazz program was pretty much falling apart, there was nothing there. And this position came open. And I looked at it. I was like, "That's interesting." And went back to my job. Then, I got a phone call from the dean at Peabody. And he said, "Sean, would you be interested in taking this on?" And I said to myself, "Why would I leave this to go there?" And then I heard [trumpeter] Donald Byrd's voice. Donald Byrd said something when I was younger that I've never forgotten. He said, "Don't go where the work is being done, go where the work needs to be done." And so I'm like, "Oh, here we go again, universe."

When I started at that program, there were six students. There's now 47. We have two big bands now, five combos, gospel choir, hip-hop ensemble. All of that's happening now. And it's not because, you know, I think I'm so great. It's just that I'm just willing to do the work.

My favorite song is "Danny Boy," or "Londonderry Air." Some of y'all might know it as "He Looked Beyond My Faults." I love that song. And sometimes I play it right, sometimes I crack it. But I'm gonna keep playing it because it heals me. So that's where you need to get — then everything else doesn't matter.

DB



SEAN JONES

**Welcome to the
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Ron Carter

'EXPERIMENTING FROM NIGHT TO NIGHT'

By Bill Milkowski Photo by Mario Zgoll

On May 10, the iconic bassist-composer Ron Carter was fêted in an all-star, 85th birthday celebration at Carnegie Hall.

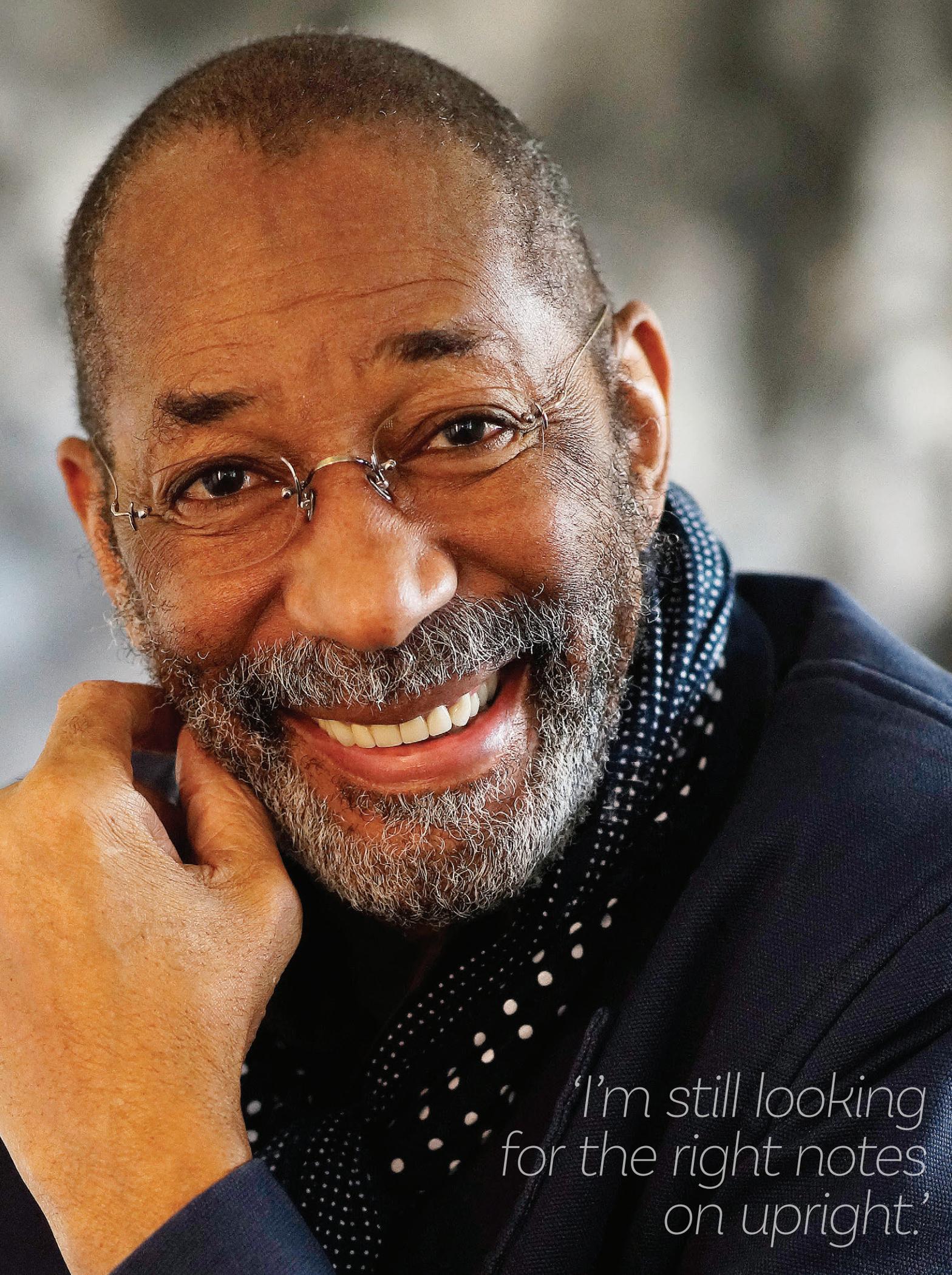
With *NBC Nightly News* anchor Lester Holt (himself a bass player) acting as emcee and bass greats Buster Williams and Stanley Clarke providing personal testimonies, the evening included performances by Carter-led groups in three combinations: his longstanding Golden Striker Trio with pianist Donald Vega and guitarist Russell Malone, his Foresight Quartet with tenor saxophonist Jimmy Greene, pianist Renee Rosnes and drummer Payton Crossley, and the Ron Carter Octet featuring the leader on piccolo bass alongside cellists Maxine Neuman, Zöe Hassman, Sibylle Johner and Dorothy Lawson and a rhythm section of pianist Vega, bassist Leon Baelson and drummer Crossley.

"The gig is on May 10th," the revered octogenarian said about his Carnegie Hall gala, "and my birthday is May 4th. So I'll have to make a note when I do my little talk to the audience and say, 'You guys are six days late, but thank you, anyway.'"

The most recorded bassist in jazz history, with more than 2,250 recordings to his credit, Carter has collaborated with an array of art-

ists ranging from Paul Simon, Billy Joel, Aretha Franklin, Roberta Flack, Diana Ross, Bette Midler, Phoebe Snow, The Rascals, Gil Scott-Heron ("The Revolution Will Not Be Televised") and Santana on the pop side to Bill Evans, Chet Baker, Stan Getz, Kenny Dorham, Lee Morgan, Coleman Hawkins, Cannonball Adderley, Kenny Burrell, Milt Jackson, Eddie Harris, Charles Lloyd, Sonny Rollins and countless others on the jazz side.

Few other musicians have amassed such a disparate discography. A prime example: He played cello on Eric Dolphy's 1961 album *Out There* and bass on the 1991 hip-hop landmark *The Low End Theory* by A Tribe Called Quest. His impressive list of credits from early in his career includes Randy Weston's *Uhuru Africa* in 1960, Gil Evans' *Out Of The Cool*, Wes Montgomery's *So Much Guitar* and Bobby Timmons' *In Person (Live At The Village Vanguard)*, all released in 1961. A string of '60s Blue Note recordings — Tony Williams' *Life Time*, Herbie Hancock's *Empyrean Isles*, *Maiden Voyage* and *Speak Like A Child*, Wayne Shorter's *The Soothsayer* and *Speak No Evil*, Joe



*'I'm still looking
for the right notes
on upright.'*



The Foresight Quartet, from left: Payton Crossley, Renee Rosnes, Carter and Jimmy Greene

Henderson's *Mode For Joe* and *The Kicker* and McCoy Tyner's *The Real McCoy* — brought him further esteem. Add to that '70s classics like Freddie Hubbard's *Red Clay*, Tyner's *Extensions*, Jim Hall's *Concierto*, Antônio Carlos Jobim's *Stone Flower*, Woody Shaw's *Blackstone Legacy*, Stanley Turrentine's *Sugar* and George Benson's *Beyond The Blue Horizon*.

Perhaps most famous are his recordings with Miles Davis' celebrated quintet of the mid-'60s. On the bandstand with Davis, alongside Hancock, Shorter and Williams, Carter exuded a resolute presence and a sartorial splendor that came to define his calm, elegant demeanor for more than six decades. And while the six studio recordings they made in four years — 1965's *E.S.P.* (which featured three Carter compositions), 1967's *Miles Smiles* and *Sorcerer* and 1968's *Nefertiti*, *Miles In The Sky* and *Filles de Kilimanjaro* — are part of jazz legend, the group took things to another other level in concert.

"That was a laboratory band," Carter said in a phone interview in advance of his Carnegie celebration. "We were always experimenting from night to night."

That process of collectively stretching the boundaries by dispensing with standard 32-measure AABA forms common in Tin Pan Alley songs (a foundation of Davis' first great quintet from the mid-'50s), in favor of more ambiguous melodic and harmonic elements, propelled jazz out of the bebop era and into the future. And the music seemed to transport the audience, in turn, to a new place. With its

more subjective treatment of standards, where meters shifted, chord changes became ambiguous and formal structure was deconstructed, Davis' second great quintet was by far the most forward-thinking and risk-taking group of its time, with one foot firmly planted in the tradition and the other foot in The New Thing.

In concert, Davis' band lived for those combustible moments of spontaneous creation. If you listen to recorded documents at the time like *Live At The Plugged Nickel* from 1965 or *Live In Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series Vol. 1*, it's almost as if they eye-rolled their way through the changes, paying only half-hearted attention to the form in a rush to get to those moments of pure improv. Williams' dynamic drumming was the polyrhythmic catalyst for this freer direction.

And while Carter's bass was often cited as the anchor, his presence was anything but sedentary. Indeed, his lines were alive from bar to bar, highly interactive with the other members of the quintet, often changing the course of things for the whole band depending on whether he might break into a solid walk in any tempo, double a melodic line or provide spontaneous counterpoint, the latter a testament to his intensely focused listening and classical training. As he put it, "I'm going to make sure the bass part sounds interesting every night."

During pandemic times, Carter played on four recordings released in 2021: Gerry Gibbs' *Songs From My Father*, *Skyline* with Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Jack DeJohnette, Jon Batiste's *Live At Electric Lady* and Nicholas

Payton's *Smoke Sessions*. The revered Grammy-winner, 1998 NEA Jazz Master and 2012 inductee into DownBeat's Hall of Fame also kept himself busy by completing two instructional books: *Playing Behind The Changes* and *Chartography*, both published in 2021 (roncarterbooks.com).

Your first instrument was cello, which you studied from age 10 to 17. Why did you switch to upright bass?

Because I thought I wasn't getting the chances that a talented African-American cello player should be getting. So I switched to bass because there was no bass player in the orchestra at Cass Technical High in Detroit.

And yet, you came back to the cello, documenting your concept for four cellos on 1978's *Songs For You*.

Yes, that was a great time. I just wanted a new sound, not necessarily just to be different from everybody else's, but something that I really wanted to hear. And that sound was four cellos playing with a nice jazz quartet background. And I've decided that I'm going to write more in that vein because I have a group now that's understanding my intent. They want to see how far they can take this music with me. And they make themselves available when we all have time. So it's a great composer setting for me, and I'm looking forward to playing together again at the Carnegie Hall celebration.

After getting your bachelor's degree from Eastman, you moved from Rochester to New York City in August of 1959. That was a very potent time for jazz. *Kind Of Blue* had just come out and later that year Dave Brubeck's *Time Out*, Ornette Coleman's *The Shape Of Jazz To Come* and Charles Mingus' *Mingus Ah Um* were released.

And "Trane's record [*Giant Steps*] also came out about that time. Yeah, it was an exciting time to be in New York. I had a scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music, but I really went to New York to work. I had been in the house band at a club in Rochester that backed major jazz artists, and I was told by several people who came through there — Sonny Stitt, among others — that New York always wants a good bass player. And they thought I could fit the bill, so they encouraged me to come to New York when I graduated. I came to New York looking for work, primarily, and my first gig there was with Chico Hamilton. I took over the bass spot for Bull Ruther [former Brubeck bassist, from 1951 to 1952, Wyatt "Bull" Ruther]. We went out on the 1959 Jazz for Moderns tour. It was a bus tour with other bands [Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, Dave Brubeck Quartet, Maynard Ferguson Orchestra and Chris Connor]. The band was Eric Dolphy on alto sax, bass clarinet and flute, Dennis Budimir on guitar, Nate Gershman on cello, Chico on drums and myself on bass. We stayed together for about six months before the group eventually disbanded when Eric moved back to California. Eric was a special guy. I watched him develop what his point of view was with his constant practice routines he had every day, on the bus, in his hotel room, in his apartment. He'd practice four, five hours every day. I'd practice maybe a couple hours a day, but mostly I was practicing on the gigs.

Did you record with that band?

There's some recording somewhere. They're finding more and more stuff in the can. I've seen some bootleg stuff advertised, but I haven't heard it. So I'm not sure what that is. Speaking of which, I just got an email yesterday that they found four recordings of Miles in Tokyo with the Sam Rivers band. So there are four new LPs that they just released only in Japan. I'm trying to track those down to see what's on them. The only one legitimate record is *Miles In Tokyo*, which Columbia released in 2005. But evidently there are four others that they recorded along the way that have Sam Rivers. I'm trying to get a hold of those. I knew Sam from Boston and I heard him play in New York at his loft, Studio Rivbea. And I made some records with him, ultimately [1965's *Fuchsia Swing Song* and 1967's *Contours*, both on Blue Note]. I thought he was a wonderful player.

Tell me about Charlie Persip and the Jazz Statesmen.

That was my first band, other than the group with that Chico Hamilton band that went out on the road in 1959. The Jazz Statesmen was definitely the first band that I recorded with. It was Charlie Persip on drums, Roland Alexander on saxophone, Freddie Hubbard on trumpet and Ronnie Matthews on piano. Teddy Charles, the vibes player, was the producer for that record we made on the Bethlehem label.

You introduced a new sound with the piccolo bass on 1973's *Blues Farm* and then showcased that instrument on your 1977 *Fantasy* album *Piccolo*.

Yeah, that's a wonderful record. In terms of arrangements and concept, that band [Kenny Barron on piano, Buster Williams on bass, Ben Riley on drums] was really ahead of its time, not just because there were two bass players but because the arrangements were much more specific. It's not a jam session kind of thing; it was a very organized band. There weren't many bands at the time who were really groups like we were. Everyone was jamming with bop and free jazz, but that group stood out because the personalities in the band made it sound like one guy playing.

Talk about your involvement with the Fender electric bass.

At the time I came to New York, the electric bass was just getting its

voice and the producers of commercials didn't know which one they preferred — this new sound, the electric bass, or the old standby, the upright bass. So all the upright players went out and bought an electric bass. Richard Davis, George Duvivier, Milt Hinton ... all those guys went out and bought one, including me. For a while, we were running around New York in cabs going from session to session with an electric on one arm and dragging an upright bass along.

And you incorporated the electric bass on your 1969 album *Uptown Conversation*.

Yeah, that was a really wonderful band: Sam Brown on guitar, Herbie Hancock on piano and electric piano, Hubert Laws on flute, Grady Tate and Billy Cobham alternating on drums. They just loved to play good music, and my job was to provide them something that they could really play, and we had a great time doing it.

Is the electric bass anything that you've been involved with in recent years?

No. I gave it to my son, Ron Jr., long ago. I realized that to be competitive, I couldn't do both, so I just invested all my time on upright. And I'm still looking for the right notes on upright.

Your very first album as a leader, *Where?*, was released in 1961. What do you remember about that session?

I was pleased that George Duvivier said that he'd make the record with me. He had a bar he opened in 1961 on St. Nicholas Avenue and 146th Street called The Bass Fiddle, and I would go by there after my gigs at night and talk with George. He had a great jukebox in there at the time. And he would ask me how I did this or that on the bass and what's my aim in playing music. And when I called him to be the second bass player on this record date, he was just as thrilled as if it was his first

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The Golden Stryker Trio with Donald Vega, left, and Russell Malone, right.

record date. Charlie Persip played on that along with Mal Waldron. I began to understand what a wonderful composer he was. He wrote some nice songs and I had fun playing with him on my date. Eric Dolphy was also there.

How did you come to join Miles Davis' band two years later?

He came by when I was working with Art Farmer, Jim Hall and Walter Perkins at the Half Note, which was down on Spring and Hudson. After the set was over he called me over and said that he was putting together a new band because Paul [Chambers] and Jimmy [Cobb] and Wynton [Kelly] were going to join Wes Montgomery's band. He had a tour coming up in a week and wondered if I would join the band. And I told him no, that I had a gig with Art Farmer, but if he would ask Art to let me be free of my responsibilities, I would do the gig. So Miles talked to Art, and Art agreed to let me go. I left the next week with Miles on a six-week tour to the West Coast.

There's only one solo bass album in your entire discography, 1989's *All Alone*.

Yeah, I wasn't really interested in that part of the bass library. I thought it was necessary to make a statement that it's possible to do it, but I had other eggs to cook. I just wanted to be a better composer, a better arranger. At the time, I didn't have Finale or any other music software

program for notation. I did it all by hand with a hell of a copyist. So I was learning what I wanted to do, literally from the ground up. But the bass on that record *All Alone* sounded really great that day. I just never got back to doing solo bass again, except on my live performances.

Speaking of becoming a better composer, there's one tune of the 100 or so that you've written that I find just completely haunting. It's "Mood," the very sparse, chamber-like piece that has an evocative, almost Erik Satie feel. You recorded that piece on your 1969 album *Uptown Conversation* and more recently did a beautiful rendition with the WDR Orchestra on 2015's *My Personal Songbook*.

And don't forget Miles recorded it on *E.S.P.* I had a nice melody and what made it work, I think, was Tony Williams playing just some real sparse stuff for the whole track. That set the tone for the harmony and the pretty sparse melody that I came up with one day as I was fooling around. It's a nice piece.

What other pieces do you regard highly?

"A Little Waltz" is one. That was on *Uptown Conversation* and some others I've done. It's been recorded by a lot of people. We used to play it in the V.S.O.P. band. My current quartet [Rosnes, Greene, Crossley] likes that piece because it has some nice harmonies. I also wrote a piece called "Friends" for a record

I did with the four cellos and Hubert Laws [1993's *Friends* on Blue Note]. It's a nice little melody. My current favorite piece is my bass lines to the Brandenburg Concerto No. 3.

Right, you did a Bach album.

Yeah, I did three. One was me playing the cello suites, only the dance movements (1987's Japan-only release *Ron Carter Plays Bach* on the Philips label). Another was arrangements that I wrote for eight basses where I play all the parts (1992's *Ron Carter Meets Bach* on Blue Note). It's a pretty complicated project that [Hitoshi] Namekata, who headed up Something Else, Blue Note's Japan division, put together. He encouraged me to write what I wanted to write, and he didn't question my choices. I've never done that music live, not with eight basses.

A record you did that came out just before the pandemic was your collaboration with poet Danny Simmons on *The Brown Beatnik Tomes: Live In Brick House*. How did that come about?

When I first arrived in town, folk singing was really big in New York. And [bassist] Bill Lee [Spike Lee's father] was the guy all the folk singers had to have in their accompanying band. [Lee played on records by Odetta, the Chad Mitchell Trio, Tom Rush, Tom Paxton, Judy Collins, Ian & Sylvia, Peter, Paul & Mary and others]. Well, Bill could only do so many gigs at one time, and somehow he latched on to me as being his sub. So I did do some sub things for him. I played with Leon Bibb, Josh White, Theodore Bikel, Martha Schlamme. And I did some playing behind poets. So that was not a new one for me.

And when Danny asked me would I do this for him, I was a little concerned. I asked him to send me to the poems so I could find out where it was going. Was it just a bunch of words, or did he have a point of view? And once he sent me a couple of poems I said, "I think I can help you make this work." And we had a great time.

You mentioned that you are still looking for the right notes on the upright. How would you assess your own playing today? Are you pushing yourself to improve on the instrument?

Every night. And I think the more I get a chance to play in different environments, I find out what the possibilities are for what the bass can do, and I try them out to find somewhere else to go.

What specifically are you going for?

Note choices, presence, line development, consistency — that I'm going to bring it every night, a presence in the band. I'm trying to make all those things happen as part of getting a nice pair of shoes. Because when they feel good, man, everybody wants to step on them, you know?

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NEW SOUNDS FROM EUROPE!

by Tina Edwards, Ammar Kalia, Martin Longley, Peter Margasak and Brian Morton

The DownBeat staff has been stuck in Chicago, wondering what's happening elsewhere — especially across the pond in Europe. So we asked five of our European writers to do a simple assignment: Select three European acts that deserve our attention. On the following pages, they highlight 15 groups and artists that exemplify the breadth and beauty of Europe's improvised music scene. The most surprising aspect of this assignment? No writers duplicated a single selection, and each expressed grief about choosing between favorite artists. Perhaps we'll need another round. Enjoy.



Sarathy Korwar

FINDING THE OPENNESS OF IMPROVISATION

Much has been made of the London jazz scene over the past five years. A product of the city's racially diverse makeup, a new generation of artists has honed its skills through accessible, free grassroots workshops, resulting in sounds that interpolate the sonic traditions of their diasporic heritages with the methods of improvised music. Bandleaders such as Shabaka Hutchings, Nubya Garcia and drummer Moses Boyd have led the charge, with their work that combines Afrobeat with Caribbean and West African melody, frenetic electronics and jazz improvisation.

In and among this youthful mix is drummer and composer Sarathy Korwar. Born in the U.S. and raised in India, Korwar landed in

London in 2009. While not being brought up in the English capital, his output has exemplified a genre-splicing, multi-ethnic identity.

"When I first arrived, I was spending all of my time 'shedding in the practice room,'" Korwar said by phone from his London home. "There wasn't a particular jazz scene forming, instead the biggest influence on me was the fact that I had access to so many of my drumming idols for the first time in my life. I could go to Ronnie Scott's on the weekend and see someone like Steve Gadd play — it was incredible."

Korwar internalized these musical influences and applied their virtuosity to his own interests. The result was 2016's debut album *Day To Day*. Largely consisting of field record-

ings he made of the folk music of the Sidi people in rural Gujarat, the album is a beguiling mix of devotional singing and propulsive rhythm that traverses everything from punchy Afrobeat fanfares to modal jazz.

Korwar's freewheeling approach put him in the same vein of fellow London artists Garcia and Boyd, who were also releasing debut projects in 2016, while his emphasis on pursuing the specificity of his own culture equally set him apart from the London group. "I've always felt part of the open, collaborative London scene, but at the same time, I'm often the only South Asian in the room, so I bring my own lived experience of having grown up elsewhere," he said. "That adds a different flavor to the music."

This meeting of cultures has been further explored in Korwar's ensuing releases. 2018's *My East Is Your West* is a live recording blending spiritual jazz with Indian classical traditions, while 2019's *More Arriving* coalesces around the statement that "there is no singular brown voice," subsequently blending Hindi hip-hop with jazz, Indian classical and spoken word. "I sometimes see myself as existing outside of any scene, since I don't want to be boxed into a particular genre," Korwar said. "I always work with people, rather than just their music. It's the openness of improvisation that is the driving force."

Indeed, this open approach is what lends Korwar's music to the genre-eating, improvised output of the loosely apportioned London scene, while his unique lived experience also sets him apart. Korwar's music is ineffable; he is within the scene and without — an artist ultimately of his own making. —Ammar Kalia



Linda Fredriksson

FINDING A DEEPLY PERSONAL APPROACH TO IMPROV

Finland's jazz scene has become a small but persistently intriguing outpost of European improvised music over the past decade. Coalescing around the label We Jazz, acts such as tenor saxophonist Timo Lassy, quintet Komo Saxo and drummer Teppo Mäkynen have carved out a niche for deep-swinging, collective improvisation that

trades off of sparse minimalism as much as it does the bombast of group melody.

Helsinki-based composer and saxophonist Linda Fredriksson is a stalwart of the Finnish contemporary scene, playing variously as a member of the trio Mopo and experimental group Superposition. In 2019, Fredriksson released a debut album as a bandleader, *Juniper*, on We Jazz, setting course as one of the most exciting and propulsive acts from the city. Referencing the indie introspection of Sufjan Stevens as much as the keening, complex melodies of Eric Dolphy and Pharoah Sanders, Fredriksson's emotive tone produces a sound that lives within the grey spaces of liminality.

Throughout Fredriksson's work, field recordings of rural surroundings intersect with the lo-fi hiss of demo tapes, while Fredriksson's sax sings like speech desperate to be spoken. On "Neon Light (and the Sky Was Trans)," for instance, saxophone lines build from a tentative melodic suggestion to forceful waves unable to be contained, reflecting the fraught nature of self-expression, while the tribute to a late grandmother, "Nana-Tepalle," crescendos from a plaintive refrain to a multi-layered cacophony — mirroring the tumult of bereavement.

Fredriksson's body of work ultimately exists to pull the listener into a complex confessional. It is a deeply personal, self-searching approach to improvisation. —Ammar Kalia



Marius Neset

THE PRESENT OF EUROPEAN JAZZ

They say that in British politics you're either European or Atlanticist, and that kind of divide can also be applied to music. There was a time when European players insisted that imitating American stars was an infantile phase of development, long since left behind.

Some of the younger generation take a more inflected view. Among the most ambitious players under 40 is saxophonist Marius Neset, who started out at the Copenhagen Rhythmic Music Conservatory (albeit he's Norwegian). He was mentored and apprenticed by Django Bates, and in 2016 found himself in DB's "25 for the Future." Since then, he's made four albums with the ACT label, including the 2020 *Tributes* with the Danish Radio Big Band. Though now well-established, he's still happy to talk about influences.

"I grew up listening to the great masters in jazz ... and that's still important, but I feel the musical world

is more universal, probably because of the internet," he said. "It's harder to separate the genres now."

Neset won't be pressed on whether this eclecticism is more evident in Europe than Stateside. "Myself, I am much influenced by European classical composers, and I try to bring some of this influence in my own music."

Neset is a master of form. His music is poised and logical without being passionless, still with jazz's core values. "It's about which story you want to tell, and I think I've learned a lot from classical music when it comes to this," he said.

The pandemic for Neset was a strain. "It feels wonderful that things are getting back to normal again," he said. "I'm working on a new album with a new band that I'm very proud of. I'm also composing a new project with [the adventurous classical ensemble] London Sinfonietta."

Also important to his development is an association with bass legend Arild Andersen, "a freer and more open approach to music than I'm used to, but I love to experiment with that side as well."

He's not the future of European jazz. He is the present. —Brian Morton



Alina Bzhezhska

'I SPEAK FOUR OR FIVE LANGUAGES, BUT MY MAIN LANGUAGE IS MUSIC'

“I try to present my instrument with a strong voice. My goal is to show people that the harp can be a leading instrument,” said London-based harpist Alina Bzhezhska. “All my life, I’ve been fighting the stereotypes that come with playing the harp. As a teenager, I wore a leather jacket, cut my hair off and was in a rock band,” she laughed.

Set for release in the autumn is *Reflections*, a combination of original tracks and covers that will be released by BBE Records. It opens with a soaring and funky take on Dorothy Ashby’s “Soul Vibrations.”

“Dorothy Ashby has been my hero for a very long time,” Bzhezhska said. “She was an activist. She had radio programs supporting Black musicians. And she was an educator. She was the woman that I always wanted to be. When I made my album, I knew I wanted to do this special tribute.”

Does Bzhezhska feel like a member of the European jazz scene? Not quite. “You know, when I played music as a child, I never wanted to be a musician from the Soviet Union. I wanted to go away from boxes. With my stud-

ies, I’ve traveled around the world — America, Germany, Poland and now I’m here in Britain. After I traveled, I realized that I’m a person of the world. I speak four or five languages, but my main language is music.”

Bzhezhska’s excitement for the release of *Reflections* is being juggled with devastation. She spoke to DownBeat days before taking relief items to her war-torn home, the Ukraine. Bzhezhska hoped to see her family who live in Lviv — if only for a moment.

“For two years of the pandemic I was holding onto this album, and finally I signed with BBE. It was one of the best things that has happened to me musically. Now, I feel almost guilty to openly celebrate my musical success because there are people who suffer and who simply need food or shelter,” she said.

Bzhezhska reflected on a recent phone call where she told her mom that she wants to go home to Lviv. “Music is your weapon,” she said, recounting her mother’s advice. “You need to be on stage and tell people about Ukraine. We need people to understand who Ukrainians are.”

—Tina Edwards



Die Hochstapler

CREATING A TOOLBOX FOR IMPROVISATION

The members of this French-Italian-German quartet came together in 2011, but they’ve also performed in plenty of other contexts. The intuitive rapport between the member’s Die Hochstapler (German for the Impostors) — trumpeter Louis Laurain, bassist Antonio Borghini, drummer Hannes Lingens and alto saxophonist Pierre Borrel —

seemed in place from the very start. The quartet’s strength resides in its quicksilver improvisational instincts, collectively responding to on-the-fly cues to accept or reject new material from its repertoire in real time.

On the group’s first album, *The Braxtonette Project* (released, as all of their recordings are, on the Umlaut imprint), they toggled end-

lessly between material composed by Ornette Coleman and Anthony Braxton, drawing unexpected connections as they swapped themes and revisited licks, shuffling the internalized material like a deck of cards.

For the group’s second album, *Die Hochstapler Plays The Music Of Alvin P. Buckley* (2016), the members turned the writings of Chicago linguist Alvin P. Buckley into loose-limbed compositional gambits, bringing his sketches for game pieces and collective composing to razor’s edge fruition, building further on sublime internal trust.

This fall, the quartet will simultaneously release two new albums, pulling back the curtain on its modus operandi. They refer to *Beauty Lies* as a toolbox, a collection of 25 short tunes, licks and fragments that they’ve written and memorized. The second album, *Within*, documents what the band does with those materials over the course of two live sets recorded in February of this year, forging an unceasing stream of bracing free-bop negotiations, unfettered swing, pungent solos and collective surprises.

Few working bands have been able to find so much vitality and invention in the building blocks of improvisation. —Peter Margasak



Punkt.Vrt.Plastik

The members of the collective trio Punkt.Vrt.Plastik are all accomplished bandleaders in their own right, deservedly attracting international attention for their astonishing technical mastery, distinctive artistic visions and nonchalant range.

Copenhagen-based Slovenian pianist Kaja Draksler leads a fantastic octet that sets poetry to art songs spiked by edgy improvisation, and she has developed a heavily composed solo-practice rife with micro-tonal effects. Berlin-based, Swedish bassist Peter Eldh is a triple threat: a top-notch groove machine, composer and producer — that rare breed who's equally adept in post-bop and hip-hop, a quality he's brought to his shape-shifting quintet Koma Saxo and in his studio-driven, funk-ed-up Projekt Drums endeavor. German drummer Christian Lillinger has applied his multifarious beat dissections in many contexts, including his sometimes cerebral, sometimes extroverted trio with vibraphonist Christopher Dell and bassist Jonas Westergaard, and his confab of doubled and tripled instrumentalists called Open Form for Society. They're among the busiest figures in improvised music today.

That makes their commitment to Punkt.Vrt.Plastik almost as remarkable as the music they generate. The trio's first-ever gig came when ex-Bimhuis artistic director Huub van Riel assembled the group for October Meeting, his three-day improv extravaganza in 2016. Both the audience and musicians seemed to realize they had experienced something special.

Earlier this year, the group released *Zurich Concert* (Intakt), a jaw-dropping live set. All three musicians write for the group, placing an emphasis on rhythmic acrobatics. The trio has internalized its repertoire, so even when they employ a set list, the musicians are free to divert from the path, spontaneously introducing a melody or pattern from another tune in the middle of essaying an entirely different composition. Sometimes they defer to the interloper, and sometimes they'll reject the suggestion, bulldozing on and forcing the outlier to get back in line.

One of the most exciting developments has been Draksler's ingenious use of microtonal effects. Adapting a computer set-up that U.S. pianist Cory Smythe developed in duo projects with fellow pianist Craig Taborn — and employed on his own 2020 vocal-driven album *Accelerate Every Voice* (Pryoclastic) — Draksler unleashes improvisational lines and riffs that explode in hall-of-mirrors harmonies.

The keyboard platform, programmed by Gianluca Elia, was effectively deployed by Draksler on her recent solo recording *In Otherness Oneself* (Unsounds).

Ultimately, Punkt.Vrt.Plastik is a three-headed beast of equal engagement, with each musician pushing within high-level conversation. When all three players balance a desire to rip apart those frameworks, they become utterly magnetic in spite of mystery. —Peter Margasak

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Graham Costello's STRATA AT THE CENTER OF GLASGOW'S ECLECTIC SCENE

Glasgow's jazz scene is becoming increasingly enviable with its penchant — much like London — for dissolving the notion of genre. At its epicenter is drummer and composer Graham Costello with his band, STRATA — not to be confused with Gilles Peterson and Jean-Paul “Bluey” Maunick’s STR4TA.

Costello's music traverses extremes, never staying in one mood for long. Ambient minimalism, free jazz and noise-rock tools are on the map with cinematic results.

Formed in 2016, STRATA features Liam Shortall (trombone), Harry Weir (tenor sax), Fergus McCreadie (piano), Kevin Cahill (guitar) and Gus Stirrat (electric bass) with Costello on drums — a who's who of Glaswegian jazz talent.

The most recent album, *Second Lives*, is alive and kicking with dynamism. “Legion” roars with a percussive opening, building a sense of foreboding tension thanks to Weir's staccato saxophone. Meanwhile, “Iris” hums mournfully, with McCreadie on keys and no drums from Costello in sight; the sign of a rounded bandleader who can lead silently.

Unlike Scotland's capital of Edinburgh, where the jazz scene celebrates tradition, Glaswegian jazz musicians like Costello are drawing on the city's deep-rooted culture in electronic music. For further research into the scene, dive into DJ and producer Rebecca Vasmant 2021's album *With Love, From Glasgow* (Rebecca's Records).

STRATA maintains DIY ethos, but that hasn't held the group back; Costello has been nominated for Scottish Album of the Year, as well as eight Scottish Jazz Awards. He's part of the reason Glasgow's jazz scene has never been healthier.

—Tina Edwards



Empirical HAVING A DIALOGUE WITH HISTORY

Empiricism was the first great British contribution to philosophy, and now the group Empirical, around for an astonishing 15 years already, is one of the great British contributions to European jazz.

Those two words together in a sentence now inevitably involve a third, uglier coinage. Empirical vibraphonist Lewis Wright said, “Unfortunately, I think we are going to be seeing a significant amount of long-term fallout from Brexit in our industry, especially for artists who aren't stadium-filling pop stars.”

Wright happened to be the spokesman on this occasion, but Empirical is that other proud British invention (maybe), a democracy, with saxophonist Nathaniel Facey, drummer Shaney Forbes and bassist Tom Farmer all sharing responsibility for the group's evolution. Brexit made it harder to tour, and then COVID-19 made it impossible. The fan base, while not stadium-scaled, is nonetheless large and loyal, and the group's intelligent, polystylistic approach

keeps audiences alert. Wright and his compere are hopeful despite the “gloomy undertones.” They seem united in a conviction that European versus American jazz is too blunt a distinction to be meaningful.

And yet, jazz's birthplace retains its tutelary force. “America is the birthplace of jazz, and there are direct links there to its development in the form of individual musicians,” Wright said. “The kind of interactions between younger musicians and the older musicians who helped shape the language can often foster a deeper connection and responsibility that the younger musicians take on as the next generation of architects.” Empirical is very much engaged in what he calls a “dialogue with history,” sometimes through living musicians they've met, sometimes through the rich, recorded legacy.

He thinks that the seriousness of study within the group contributes to its uniqueness, one forged on four distinct creative identities.

—Brian Morton



Sun-Mi Hong 'JAZZ WAS A MORE POWERFUL DRAW'

The South Korean drummer and composer Sun-Mi Hong has been living in Amsterdam for the last 11 years, becoming immersed in its jazz scene. She's just been signed to the increasingly international Edition Records in the U.K., and the third album by her quintet, *Third Page: Resonance*, will be released later this year.

During 2021's Amersfoort festival in the Netherlands, Hong appeared with two outfits,

playing with the Israeli guitarist Eran Har Even and with Sojourner's Truth, led by the flautist Mark Alban Lotz. In the first set, Hong opened with direct hand-tapping on her snare, soon finding a timbale resonance once she picked up her sticks. The second gig found her adventuring into a dub style, leading a briskly stepping, adhesive groove. Hong was one of the most marked revelations of that festival, formally precise, but not at the expense of spontaneous

wildness. She picked up an Edison Jazz Award in 2021 for the well-titled *A Self-Strewn Portrait* and back in 2018 she'd already won the SENA Dutch Jazz Competition.

"I was looking for a label to release my upcoming album, and who might be interested in my music," she said. "Meanwhile, I got invited to join the Edition Records program called Direction in Music. Dave Stapleton [the label's founder] and I talked, and a week later he signed me to Edition."

Hong didn't plan to become a long-term Dutch resident. "I was in a Conservatory Pop department in Korea, and I just wanted to touch lightly on a bit of jazz in the Netherlands and then come back to Korea. Therefore, I didn't learn to speak or understand English well. Jazz was a more powerful draw than I imagined, so I stayed.

"Amsterdam's music scene is beautiful, and blossoming, full of amazing talents arriving from all over the world."

Hong also leads Dance In Four Colours, combining drums, strings, electronics and choreography. Beyond that, she plays in a duo with trumpeter Alistair Payne, and she also formed a trio in 2021 with the Dutch pianist Harmen Fraanje and the Portuguese alto saxophonist José Soares.

—Martin Longley



Robocobra Quartet 'WE'VE ALWAYS BEEN SUPER-ACCEPTED IN EUROPE'

Northern-Irish outfit Robocobra Quartet straddles jazz, punk and experimental music — which may evoke a daring and jazz-ish take on The Pixies.

Vocalist, drummer and producer Chris Ryan is a charismatic frontman leading from the back. His creative storytelling is delivered with dry, satirical flair. The group uses Quartet in its name, but the personnel fluctuates between four and 12 musicians. It's six who make the line-up for the band's forthcoming third album, *Living Isn't Easy*, which will

be released through London-based label First Taste Records.

The lead single "Heaven" is about the "cult-like mania of capitalism," said Ryan. "I grew up listening to Dead Kennedys and always liked how they would write songs from the perspective of a character they didn't necessarily agree with. I wanted to get inside that chaotic, self-absorbed headspace of a corporate cult leader."

The band has a loyal following across the continent. "To be honest, we feel closer to Europe than we do with the U.K.," said Ryan.

"We've always been super-accepted in Europe. We've played 12 Points Festival, Bimhuis in Amsterdam, Montreux Jazz. European jazz festivals are open to having experimental sounds."

Robocobra Quartet refuses to keep to a predictable path. Each of its three albums sits at varying degrees of texture and size. "One of the things we do best is play live. With *Living Isn't Easy*, the plan was to write it all together instead of me coming down from the pulpit with sheet music. It's more focused than any of our other stuff."

—Tina Edwards



Marta Warelis

CREATING UNUSUAL TIMBERS AND BEGUILING CONSTRUCTIONS

Since moving to Amsterdam in 2014, the young Polish pianist Marta Warelis has gradually emerged as one of the most versatile, daring and skilled musicians in European improvised music.

Last June, she finally released a debut album under her own name, a stimulating solo recording titled *a grain of Earth* (Relative Pitch). But in recent years, she's increasingly operated within a number of collective projects where she deftly adapts and expands her full diapason.

In the trio Hupata!, which released a terrific 2020 album for Astral Spirits titled *Microclimates*, she toggles between pointillistic explosions, post-Cecil Taylor clusters and spidery, complex lines in response to and as provocation for reedist Ada Rave and percussionist Yung-Tuan Ku. She's thrived in other improv settings, matching the chamber-like delicacy of the long-running duo of reedist Ab Baars and violinist Ig Henneman with jagged feints, post-classical counterpoint and sudden outpouring of lyric splendor, while in a quartet with drummer Frank Rosaly, saxophonist John Dikeman and bassist Aaron Lumley, she toggles between free-jazz extroversion and harmonically ambiguous exploration.

Recently, trumpeter Dave Douglas included her in the centuries-spanning aesthetic of his *Secular Psalms* project. But her finest collaborative endeavor is the trio called Omawi with bassist Wilbert de Joode and drummer Onno Govaert, where her melodic fluency and rich technical vocabulary dazzle. That group will release a new album for Relative Pitch in 2023. Until then, we can bask in prepared piano experiments, abraded textures and beguiling melodic constructions that emanate from the super new solo effort.

—Tina Edwards

Laura Jurd

AN IMPOSSIBLY ACCOMPLISHED NEW MOTHER

British trumpeter Laura Jurd just had a baby. Without wanting to seem indelicate, one wonders how she found the time. One of the busiest and most respected improvisers and composers on the British scene, the Hampshire-born musician has led the Mercury Prize-nominated band Dinosaur, the more elusive Blue-Eyed Hawk, collaborated with the London Sinfonietta, the Ligeti Quartet, and the Chaos Orchestra, and released three acclaimed albums under her own name — from *Landing Ground* in 2012 to *Stepping Back, Jumping In* in 2020, just as COVID-19 stepped in and spoiled the party. Perhaps that's how she found the time.

Jurd claims influences as wide apart (or not) as the Beatles and Stravinsky and writes music that seems impossibly accomplished. Her sense of form and structure is admirable. Every piece has its own logic and sense of direction, but with no predictability or easy resolution. They echo and subtly differ from a familiar British



instinct for the pastoral. The clarity of her brass playing, reminiscent, perhaps, of Kenny Wheeler, cuts through. A synthesizer is called on when she needs other textures and colors.

As an improviser, she seems open-eared and highly responsive to those around her, making her an ideal collaborator. The long list of those she's worked with will just get longer, diapers permitting. Understandably, she wasn't free to talk to DB.

—Brian Morton



Sundogs

NO STANDARDS ALLOWED

Sundogs has become a crucial element during the annual scene of Poland's Jazztopad. The three players run that festival's nightly improvising session in Mleczarnia, a basement café in Wrocław, inviting visiting artists, as well as musicians from all parts of Poland. No standards are allowed. Free playing abounds. The setup has produced inspiring sets featuring Brad Mehldau, Shabaka Hutchings, Nicole Mitchell, Amir ElSaffar, Alexander Hawkins and James Brandon Lewis, among many others.

When the trio plays without guests, it also operates on improvisatory resourcefulness. Mateusz Rybicki plays tenor saxophone and clarinets, while Zbigniew Kozera swaps between upright bass and Moroccan gnawa sintir. This pair of Poles is joined by drummer and

percussionist Samuel Hall, an Australian living in Berlin.

Currently shaping its next album, Sundogs seeks a new direction. "In the past we've taken advantage of spontaneous recording locations, such as an old shopping center and a forest," Hall said. "This time around we'll be heading into the studio."

The group plans to tour Poland in the early fall, and meanwhile they are all working on personal projects. Hall is completing his first solo album, *Sunken Temple*. Kozera is in Portugal working on a new album with German saxophonist Julius Gabriel and Swedish cellist Helena Espvall. Rybicki has been working on an album with his Ascetic band, playing minimalist modal jazz, inspired by sacred music.

—Martin Longley

Marek Pędziwiatr

A RADICALLY OPEN APPROACH TO JAZZ

Since 2016, Polish label Astigmatic Records has been releasing music that takes a radically open approach to jazz. Artists such as Bloto combine fragments of jazz arrangements with the thundering bass of trap and drill, while the Pakistani group Jaubi blends North Indian classical music with hip-hop and modal jazz, and the EABS septet pieces together pre-made hip-hop deconstructions of jazz and funk in a new guise.

Present throughout these releases is the enduring hand of pianist Marek Pędziwiatr.

A subtle inclusion on Jaubi's album *Nafs At Peace*, Pędziwiatr's synth work lifts the group's classical compositions into an experimental space, adding new, metallic textures to an ancient, acoustic sound. On EABS's recordings, meanwhile, his melodic right hand anchors the mercurial nature of its thumping rhythm section. And among the low-end foundations of Bloto, Pędziwiatr provides a tripping lightness with his voicings.

On his debut album as a bandleader — using the new moniker Latarnik — Pędziwiatr



shines, unadorned. Released in 2022, *Marianna* takes a far more personal approach in its composition and gives Pędziwiatr space to explore his musicality. Inspired by the life of his great-grandmother and recorded using a 100-year-old Steinway on analog tape, the result is a beautifully rich collection.

Doing away with the bluster of contemporary fusion, Pędziwiatr is instead left to roam through. It is an expressive sound honed through a career spent collaborating in alternative genres and ultimately finding a home in the warmth of piano jazz. —Ammar Kalia

Liudas Mockūnas

FIERCE MULTI-INSTRUMENTALISM FROM LITHUANIA

The Lithuanian reedsman Liudas Mockūnas has made a startling impact in improvised music with his background in jazz, as well as his growing reputation as a modern classical interpreter and sometime composer. He plays a range of saxophones, from soprano to bass, as well as a clutch of clarinets. Lately he's been experimenting with water-filled horns. Mockūnas has strong connections in Copenhagen, where he studied, but has also been touring internationally for the last two decades.

Mockūnas often chooses to play in small formations, either duos or trios, and has recorded with Barry Guy, Marc Ducret and Stefan Pasborg. The exceptional *Purvs* album was released in 2021 by the Riga-based Jeriska Records, which specializes in analog, reel-to-reel sessions and only issues vinyl. Jeriska took its equipment to a peat bog for the *Purvs* sessions, where Mockūnas teamed up with fellow saxophonist Arvydas Kazlauskas.

"It was very special indeed," Mockūnas recalled. "Recording outdoors, in the wild nature, is already special. Some of the music was recorded at night, hearing the wind, trees and birds. Another part during the day, the



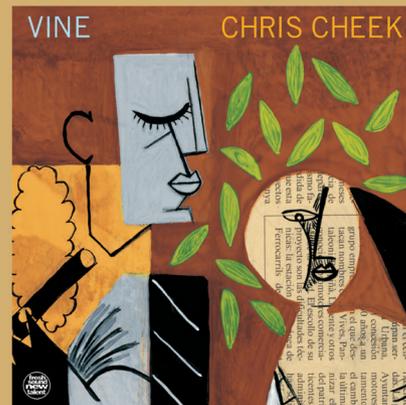
wild atmosphere was interrupted by tractors and trucks working on the fields. The third part was a live concert played on the makeshift peat amphitheater, with an audience. All of that created a very different musical energy, but [it was] united by the very special acoustics of nature."

That duo played a powerful set at the 2021 Rigas Ritmi, the prime jazz fest in Latvia. They moved from extreme depths to thrilling heights. Mockūnas switched from baritone to soprano, and ultimately ended up with two horns in his mouth, issuing a doubled fanfare, before delivering a final aural retort on his towering bass saxophone. The duo emitted a fierce odor of tension. —Martin Longley

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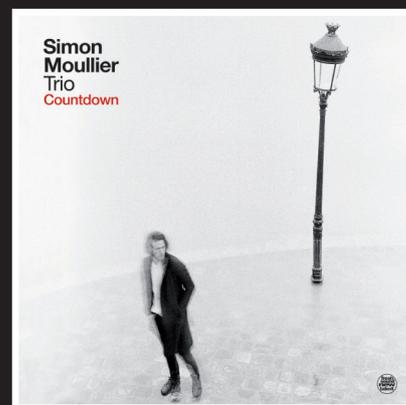
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MICHAEL WILSON



With her twin solo albums *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna*, Mary Halvorson proves that she's top-of-the-field within the formal realm of tunes and arrangements and the spontaneous magic of improvisation.

Mary Halvorson

Amaryllis

NONESUCH

★★★★★

Belladonna

NONESUCH

★★★★★

It's hardly news that there are two levels of composition in jazz — first, the formal realm of tunes and arrangements, and second, the spontaneous magic of improvisation. With her twin solo albums *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna*, Mary Halvorson proves that she's top-of-the-field on both fronts, operating in two distinctly different milieus.

Amaryllis uses something more like a conventional jazz combo, built around drums,

bass, vibes and horns, with string quartet sweetening only its second half. There are moments, as with the mock-solemn opening of "Anesthesia," when Halvorson's charts evoke the idiosyncratic charm of Carla Bley (it would not have sounded out of place on *A Genuine Tong Funeral*).

But most is pure Halvorson. Take "Night Shift," with its stuttering, chordal head, and guitar cloud-chords floating over a gruff solo by trombonist Jacob Garchik. Or "Amaryllis," which sets its dark, breathless melody over an étude-like ostinato that has the band ticking like an overwound clock.

Belladonna, by contrast, is just guitar and string quartet, although given breadth of the results, "just" is perhaps an understatement. Halvorson has great fun playing with form, pushing against the playful call-and-response

of "Flying Song" or building witty counterpoint into "Moonburn," but what truly dazzles is her compositional audacity. "Belladonna," for instance, has the snap and rhythmic drive of a Bartók string quartet, plus searing electric guitar.

What more could a listener want?

—J.D. Considine

Amaryllis: Night Shift; Anesthesia; Amaryllis; Side Effect; Hoodwink; 892 Teeth. (37:57)

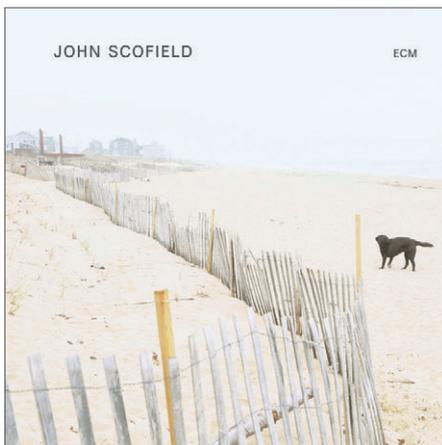
Personnel: Mary Halvorson, guitar; Adam O'Farrill, trumpet; Jacob Garchik, trombone; Patricia Brennan, vibraphone; Nick Dunston, bass; Tomas Fujiwara, drums; Mivos String Quartet: Olivia De Prato, Maya Bennardo, violins; Victor Lowrie Tafoya, viola; Tyler J. Borden, cello (4–6).

Ordering info: nonesuch.com

Belladonna: Nodding Yellow; Moonburn; Flying Song; Haunted Head; Belladonna. (37:19)

Personnel: Mary Halvorson, guitar; Mivos String Quartet: Olivia De Prato, Maya Bennardo, violins; Victor Lowrie Tafoya, viola; Tyler J. Borden, cello.

Ordering info: nonesuch.com



John Scofield

John Scofield

ECM
★★★★★

The isolation induced by the pandemic has been harsh, but for many it has also afforded a positive opportunity for reflection and reassessment. John Scofield's first-ever solo album, his second as a leader for ECM, fits that bill. Spare, honest and true to his wide angle view of American music, it taps deeply into jazz, pop, rock and folk. And it works, because Scofield is as fluent in the glow-and-flow language of stinging bebop as he is in the plangent effects

and curling cries of blues and rock. When he mixes both in the same solo, there's no one quite like him.

On a menu of five originals and eight covers, the uptempo swingers are especially savory. Scofield slips pre-recorded comping beneath vaulting, cliché-free solos on American songbook standards "It Could Happen To You" and "There Will Never Be Another You" as well as his own springy blues "Elder Dance." Early rock gets the nod on Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away," with a second voice duetting in real time via looper, and on the keenly twanging delta prison classic "Junco Partner." From Hank Williams comes a break-your-heart wistful "You Win Again." Scofield's Monkish eight-bar classic "Since You Asked" is hypnotic.

Scofield opens the album in an appropriately contemplative mood with Keith Jarrett's harmonically intriguing early ballad "Coral," letting the melody emerge like a gradually developing photograph. The drily amplified open chords of "My Old Flame" resonate with nostalgia. Every note here feels as if it came from the bottom of Scofield's heart.

—Paul de Barros

John Scofield: Coral; Danny Boy; Elder Dance; Honest I Do; It Could Happen To You; Junco Partner; Mrs. Scofield's Waltz; My Old Flame; Not Fade Away; Since You Asked; There Will Never Be Another You; Trance de Jour; You Win Again. (53:55)
Personnel: John Scofield, electric guitar, looper.

Ordering info: ecmrecords.com

Nduduzo Makhathini

In The Spirit Of Ntu

BLUE NOTE
★★★★★

Some albums experiment with fresh notions, some refine ideas previously shared. Nduduzo Makhathini says his second Blue Note record is a chance to "summarize everything" he's done so far, employing past musical gambits and philosophical beliefs. The result is a program uniting the breadth of cultural precepts that have informed the South African pianist's work.

It's a bevy of experiences, including meditative chants of the Zionist church, lessons learned at the alters of Mseleku, Ibrahim and Tyner, political forays in sync with protests erupting in his homeland, and the bonding of voices, both on the bandstand and in the streets, an act he calls the "invocation of collectiveness." In lesser hands, its delivery might have been muddled, but Makhathini sculpts his presentation with insight and authority.

So *In The Spirit Of Ntu* is a sweeping statement by default, built on sacred ruminations and thoughtful jaunts similar to those guiding 2020's *Modes Of Communication: Letters From The Underworlds*. Fluency and fervor are the cornerstones of each, but Makhathini's latest, his 10th album since 2014, is more balanced,



expansive and piercing than its predecessor.

With a resumé that includes both a TED Talk on art's ability to yield "a new humanism" and revered status as a sangoma (Zulu healer), Makhathini's visionary character, especially when rendered in a rich program like *Ntu*, becomes more fascinating with each new endeavor.

—Jim Macnie

In The Spirit Of Ntu: Unonkanyamba; Mama; Amathongo; Nyonini Le; Emililweni; Re-Amathambo; Abantwana Belanga; Omnyama; Senze Nina?; Ntu. (69:00)

Personnel: Makhathini, piano, vocals; Robin Fassie Kock, trumpet, flugelhorn; Linda Sikhakhane, tenor and soprano saxophone; Dylan Tabisher, vibraphone; Gontse Makhene, percussion; Dane Paris, drums, cymbals; Stephen de Sousa, bass; Omagugu, vocals (A2); Jaleel Shaw, alto saxophone (B3); Anna Widauer, vocals (C1).

Ordering info: bluenote.com



Joey Alexander

Origin

MACK AVENUE
★★★★½

At the core of *Origin* — Joey Alexander's Mack Avenue debut and his first all-originals album — lies a quadrangle of compositions inspired by the changing seasons. In his approach to such conceptual writing, Alexander could have crafted impressionistic program music, and a listener would be forgiven for any expectations based on the album's song titles. But the pianist's strong heads challenge our usual thinking about certain musical tropes: Isn't fall also exhilarating and life-affirming? Can't winter be active and heated? Isn't spring kinda sad sometimes? All of these antithetical notions make their way into Alexander's musical understanding of his subjects.

Thus the rhythmic imperative between bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Kendrick Scott on "Dear Autumn" asserts a kinetic positivity; the fleeting harmonic friction in Gilad Hekselman's guitar on "Winter Blues" enflames; the somber acoustic vibe on "Promise Of Spring" gives meditative pause; and the vibrant motion of "Summer Rising," an electronic face-off between Hekselman and Alexander, swells voluptuously.

But Alexander's stated intent, in laying down the 10 tunes for *Origin*, was this: to manifest hope amid the pandemic gloom. This intent, more than any thematic concept, is what gives the album its compositional cohesion.

Alexander's optimism is not absolute, however. On the abbreviated closing track, "Hesitation," he moves away from the resolution of the final cadence — a joke, he explains, that underscores the uncertainty of the future.

—Suzanne Lorge

Origin: Remembering; On The Horizon; Dear Autumn; Winter Blues; Promise Of Spring; Summer Rising; Midnight Waves; Angel Eyes; Rise Up; Hesitation. (52:42)

Personnel: Joey Alexander, piano, Fender Rhodes (4, 6); Larry Grenadier, bass; Kendrick Scott, drums; Gilad Hekselman, electric guitar (4, 6, 9); Chris Potter, soprano saxophone (2), tenor saxophone (4, 9).

Ordering info: mackavenue.com

The Hot Box

	Critics	J.D. Considine	Paul de Barros	Jim Macnie	Suzanne Lorge
Mary Halvorson <i>Amaryllis & Belladonna</i>		★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★½
John Scofield <i>John Scofield</i>		★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★
Nduduzo Makhathini <i>In The Spirit Of Ntu</i>		★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★	★★★★½
Joey Alexander <i>Origin</i>		★★	N/A	★★★	★★★★½

Critics' Comments

Mary Halvorson, *Amaryllis & Belladonna*

The heraldic feel of the sextet on *Amaryllis* feels new to Halvorson's music, and it's a delight, especially Patricia Brennan's sparkling vibraphone. Halvorson organically integrates her gorgeous writing for the Mivos String Quartet into the sextet and those classical strings make a lovely foil for her warbling, scronky guitar on *Belladonna*. —Paul de Barros

Her vision has led to a spot where thick ensemble interplay is able to present itself as frolic — abstract yet approachable. The interaction is on the *Amaryllis* pieces is delicious. —Jim Macnie

In orchestral strings, Halvorson finds another platform for her elegant compositional designs and deeply committed playing. Alternately discordant and poetic, these thrillingly variegated pieces tap into deep feeling — ultimately pushing the bounds of modern chamber work performance. —Suzanne Lorge

John Scofield, *John Scofield*

Is it still solo guitar if you've overdubbed yourself as duets? When the results are this good, who cares? And as much as I enjoy applying of pitch-bending pedals to standards like "It Could Happen to You," I like the way he voices harmony even better. —J.D. Considine

It's the music's intimacy that throws you off guard — like being in his den as he applies an offhanded expertise to tunes close to his heart. Nuance FTW! —Jim Macnie

It's easy to forget that this is a solo record, so complete is the listen: Scofield conjures entire worlds with the jangly riffs, easy grooves, and implied harmonies on these cherished tunes. Even unaccompanied, he travels a creative distance few can claim. —Suzanne Lorge

Nduduzo Makhathini, *In The Spirit Of Ntu*

It isn't the relentless vamp driving "Unonkanyamba" that slays; it's the laidback cool that trumpeter Robin Fassie Kock maintains atop it. At its best, this album is a master class in rhythmic tension. And damn does Makhathini have a left hand! —J.D. Considine

In the spirit of his South African precursor, Abdullah Ibrahim, pianist and composer Makhathini has created an original fusion of African tradition and jazz, no mean accomplishment. When he's thundering away like McCoy or playing freely with his hard-hitting band, the music is irresistible; the atmospheric vocals verge on cloying neo-soul. —Paul de Barros

The musical foundation of this album is its unremitting pulse — in Makhathini's sophisticated pianism, the powerful band arrangements and the gripping, near-spoken vocals. Makhathini uses this pulse less to engage than to conjure, however. In listening to Makhathini, it's easy to imagine an ancestral past exalted in the present. —Suzanne Lorge

Joey Alexander, *Origin*

If great technique and tasteful playing were all it took to attain greatness, this would be a five-star effort. Unfortunately for Alexander and crew, interesting ideas still matter. —J.D. Considine

Tantalizing in several ways, but a little too pat. The pianist's touch can seem profound, but in the service of tunes that don't fully register, it feels somewhat wasted. —Jim Macnie

(Paul de Barros was recused from reviewing this album because he did work on the project.)

THE SOUND OF SMOKE





Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini

Auburn Whisper

GROUNDUP

★★★★

Trombonist Natalie Cressman and Brazilian-born guitarist Ian Faquini — who are also both vocalists — released their first album as partners in 2019. They planned a tour to promote their creation, but the pandemic forced them into a necessary retreat to California, where they began to spend quality time together at a studio owned by Cressman's father, trombonist Jeff Cressman.

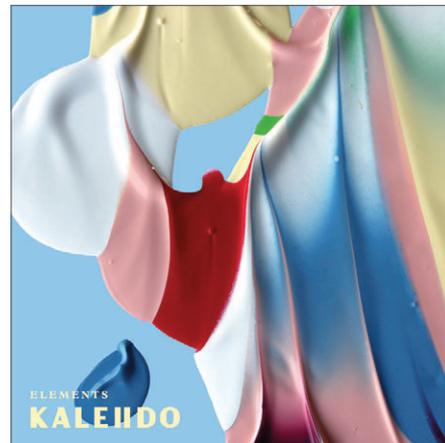
The songs they made there have become yet another reflection of their musical compatibility and personal affinity. Limited to their own musical gifts, they have made a collection of original musical stories with a truly unique presentation featuring Faquini's nylon-string guitar, a trombone choir featuring Cressman's arrangements and overdubs, with either or both singing in Portuguese and sometimes English.

On "Canaa," Cressman's airy vocals provide stark contrast to the low brass quartet, which introduces the tune, blending with Faquini's eloquent guitar and voice as he enters. "Curandeiro" is an especially lovely, loping folk melody that manages to be smooth and punchy all at once. "Already There" is a tuneful jazz waltz that would be a welcome addition to an updated Great American Songbook, allowing Cressman to show how her lyricism transfers effortlessly from her voice to her trombone soloing. But their love of Brazilian music is evident throughout; and that music, which originally brought these two together, continues to draw them deeper into musical understanding, and deeper into each other. —Gary Fukushima

Autumn Whisper: Afoxé; Rear Window; Canaa; Auburn Whisper; Benção de Iansá, Segredo de Dadá; Cazadero; Curandeiro; Already There; Ralando Coco; Hood River; Dourour Escobar; Madrugaça. (50:19)

Personnel: Natalie Cressman, trombones, vocals; Ian Faquini, guitar, vocals.

Ordering info: groundupmusic.net



KALEIIDO

Elements

EXOPAC

★★★★

Danish saxophonist Cecilie Strange first made a name for herself as the leader of a trio whose rich, tonal soundscapes produced two evocative albums: *Blue* (2020) and *Blikan* (2021). Then she met her musical soulmate, guitarist Anna Roemer, and blossomed into her latest incarnation as the co-leader of KALEIIDO. During a series of live performances, the two mind-melding artists began evolving their shared vision of ambient improvised music and released *Voyages*, their 2021 debut. Now comes the hauntingly beautiful *Elements*, which is like a prayer for the Earth at a time when our natural environment sorely needs to be healed.

"Sky Part I," the first multipart track devoted to four elements, wafts in on the gentle breeze of Roemer's shimmering guitar. Drifting up through low-hanging clouds, Strange's saxophone paints the sky with colors, and Mikkel Hess' drums rumble into "Sky Part II" like a gathering storm. Giant-step guitar chords take us back down to "Terra Part I," "Terra Part II" and "Terra Part III," but those tracks are hardly Earthbound. Hannah Schneider's choir of heavenly voices is like a siren call that lures listeners to the currents of "Ocean Part I" and "Ocean Part II."

The whole ensemble burns hotter and brighter on "Ember Part I" and "Ember Part II." Introduced by the glowing coals of Anders "AC" Christensen's bass, and powered by crackling drums, vocals soar above the saxophone's dancing flames and mysterious guitar plucks. Need a deep-healing balm for these uncertain times? Turn down the lights and let *Elements* wash over you.

—Cree McCree

Elements: Sky Part I; Sky Part II; Terra Part I; Terra Part II; Terra Part III; Ocean Part I; Ocean Part II; Ember Part I; Ember Part II. (45:36)

Personnel: Anna Roemer, guitar; Cecilie Strange, saxophone; Mikkel Hess, drums; Anders "AC" Christensen, bass; Hannah Schneider, vocals

Ordering info: kaleiido.bandcamp.com

Steve Davis

Bluesthetic

SMOKE SESSIONS

★★★★

Bluesthetic is one of those delightful albums that can fall through the cracks in terms of garnering wide attention. There's nothing overly complicated in the song structures; there's nothing pointing toward the horrors of the pandemic or the U.S. racial injustices; and there's nothing pandering to the latest newfangled musical trends or the inscrutable mandates of lofty artistic grant. But damn if it doesn't swing.

Oftentimes, feel-good albums are unsung saviors in stressful times. With his agile melodic phrasing, heartfelt tone and compositional guile, trombonist Steve Davis comes across like a congenial hero leading a team of other superheroes, each gifted with individualized musical strength and personalities. Yet they know how to parse through their respective resources to enliven the music with exactly what it needs.

Even though the post-bop setting, melodic swagger and infectious swing hint at Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the lineup on *Bluesthetic* still intrigues. Instead of sharing the front line with other horn players, Davis recruits guitarist Peter Bernstein and vibra-



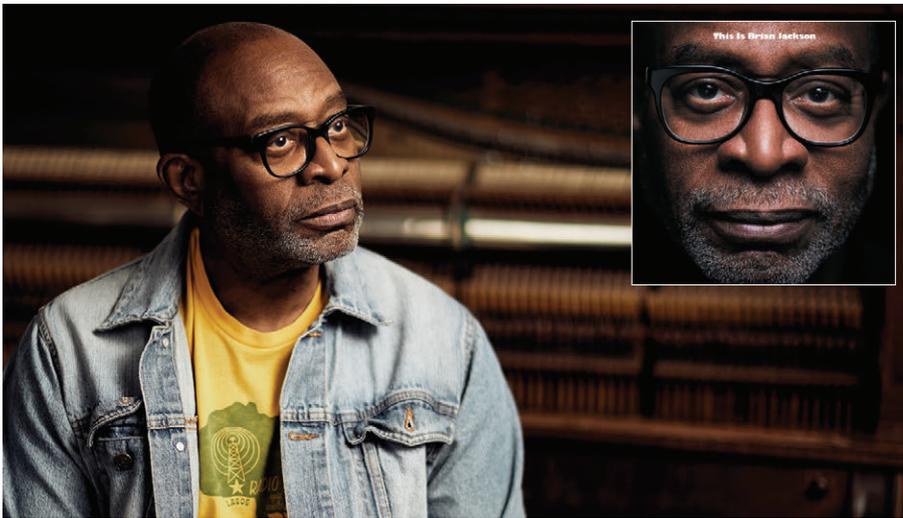
phonist Steve Nelson, which affords the music with a different, more lissome harmonic palette. The same front line, sans alto saxophonist Mike DiRubbo, appeared on Davis' 1998 album *Vibe Up!* But on *Bluesthetic*, the front line is propelled by the superb rhythm team of bassist Christian McBride and drummer Willie Jones III, while Geoffrey Keezer fuses the two forces with grace and ingenuity.

—John Murph

Bluesthetic: Encouragement; Silver At Sundown; Maybe So; Bedford Stroll; Faraway Dream; They Wore 44; Off The Cuff; Indigo To Azure; Bluesthetic; A Star For Chick. (60:03)

Personnel: Steve Davis, trombone; Peter Bernstein, guitar; Steve Nelson, vibraphone; Geoffrey Keezer, piano; Christian McBride, bass; Willie Jones III, drums.

Ordering info: smokesessionsrecords.com



Brian Jackson
This Is Brian Jackson

BBE
★★★★½

In 1967, Roland Barthe proclaimed, “Every new Fashion is a refusal to inherit, a subversion against the oppression of the preceding Fashion.” That statement, originally referring to sartorial choices (mohair and satin), can just as easily be applied to musical trends. In the case of *This Is Brian Jackson*, we have been gifted a subversion against the oppression of the

current fashion. With tracks like the effervescently hopeful “Hold On” and the positively groovy “All Talk,” Jackson describes a predilection for utopian optimism and self-improvement rooted in a populist spiritualism that fell out of fashion in popular music around the same time that platform shoes became passe.

The sound that Brian Jackson pioneered laying the melodic underpinning in Gil Scott Heron’s classic era has since become shorthand for a certain 1970s hip soul-jazz aesthetic, one that countless artists have referenced.

This Is Brian Jackson, the artist’s first solo

project in two decades, is a clear-eyed continuation of the artist’s iconic work. “Little Orphan Boy” percolates with kinetic energy, and would have as easily found its home on the more discriminating dance floors of the late 1970s as at will today, while “C’est Cette Comète” simply glows with Jackson’s inspiring keys. A contemporary record produced by Daniel Collás of the Phenomenal Handclap Band, Brian Jackson is interwoven with orphan demo material (including work utilizing the fabled T.O.N.T.O. synthesizer) from an abandoned 1970s solo effort.

This album never loses the plot, because unlike any number of contemporary records laced with Fender Rhodes or Arp synth to evoke a certain feel, this is an album artful creator thankfully working in his singular, natural style.

By the way, platforms are back at the moment, too. —Ayana Contreras

This Is Brian Jackson: All Talk; Force Of Will; Little Orphan Boy; C’est Cette Comète; Nomad; Mami Wata; Path To Macondo; Hold On. (43:48)

Personnel: Brian Jackson, vocals, keyboards, flute (1–3, 5–6), T.O.N.T.O. (6–8), drums (8), kailimba (5); Binky Brice, guitars (1–2, 5–8), bass (3, 4, 6), sitar (5); Moussa Fadera, drums (1, 5); Daniel Collás, congas (1–3, 5), bongos (1), tambourine (1–3); timpani (4), percussion (5), drums (6), minimoog (6), organ (6); Nair “B.T.” Rebor, Arp Omni (2), minimoog (5); Ben Romans Hopcraft, bass (2); Juliet Swango, vocals (2, 5), rhythm guitar (6); Monika Heidemann, vocals (2, 5); Aurelio Valle, guitar (3); Caito Sanchez, drums (3, 4); Camellia Hartman, violin (4); Claire Solomon, cello (4); The Sampa-guita Strings (4); Domenica Fossati, alto flute (5, 6); David Lackner, EWI (6); Lucio DeColdest, congas (6), percussion (6), minimoog (7), tambourine (7); Barnett Williams, congas (8); Harvey Mason, drums (8).

Ordering info: bbmusic.com

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Morgan Guerin (left), Theo Walentiny, Claire Dickson, Tyrone Allen and bandleader Chase Elodia

Seeking Pollination

The spring has brought about numerous new releases worthy of attention, assortedly impressive like wildflowers seeking pollination in the welcoming sunshine.

Chase Elodia is a hell of a drummer and on his debut album for the Biophilia label, *Portrait Imperfect* (38:27; ★★★★★½), he has written songs and amassed a band that shows this off impeccably. These songs are ambitious, tricky, artful, and they all stick the landing. Claire Dickson takes the front on vocals, serving the lyrics, providing just the faintest bits of flavor to the notes and leaving room for the rest of this band to work together. Tyrone Allen finds numerous ways to stick out on the bass, subtly making his presence known. Theo Walentiny on keys shimmers and shapes. Morgan Guerin on the EWI is a natural fit for an instrument that doesn't often naturally fit places without true intention. The ending section of album closer "Silent Keeper" is a real head-turner that could maybe pull some tears if one isn't careful.

Ordering info: biophilarecords.com

Evanston, Illinois-based saxophonist **Chris Greene's** long-standing quartet rounded out with pianist Damian Espinosa, bassist Marc Piane and drummer Steve Corley totally burn on their new live album, *Playspace 2: Play Harder* (67:22; ★★★★★½), on his own Single Malt Recordings. The stage banter remains to keep the energy of these Chicago-area clubs on their latest release, but the stretching these fellas do on these songs express that energy all the same. Most of these songs are over 12 minutes and take the listener on a journey, but it's a welcome one with storied travelers gregariously telling their tales. It delivers the exact kind of hard driving energy one would want in a live album.

Ordering info: chrisgreenejazz.com

Cuban-born guitarist **Jorge Garcia's** independently released new album *Dedicated To You* (27:07; ★★★★★½) is a neat, not-over-the-top release of a few originals and standards that's not trying to impose. It's not

exactly an afterthought, but it doesn't have enough going on much of the time to keep it in the forethought, either. The album starts off with some of the last recordings of alto saxophonist Richie Cole, working spryly alongside bassist Rick Doll and drummer James Common. The take on Cy Coleman's "You Fascinate Me So" with Paul Banman on piano, Jamie Ousley on bass and John Yarling on drums is immensely charming.

Ordering info: jorgegarcia.com

Saxophonist **Nikola Bankov's** independently released sophomore album, *Dream Chaser* (35:13; ★★★★★), is spacious, trippy, produced; it's also very easygoing, one could almost say smooth. Even the opening track "Soul Purpose" featuring Blacc El has rapping that feels inspirational on a surface level. It's chipper. It's darling. It's heart-on-its-sleeve earnest in the choices made, but still somehow it works. Closer "In The Zone" featuring Randy Brecker has moments that feel like *You're Under Arrest*-era Miles Davis. Bankov has good taste, chops and attention on him, so perhaps with restraint he can get that dream he's chasing.

Ordering info: nikolabankov.com

New Orleans-based bassist **Quinn Sternberg's** *Cicada Songs* (37:09; ★★★★★) on his own Mind Beach Records is yet another shimmering example of the fantastic contemporary jazz sound that comes out of the Crescent City scene. His band of tenor saxophonist Sam Taylor, pianist Oscar Rossignoli, drummer Peter Varnado and guitarist Charlie Ballantine sounds complex but digestible. These are guys you'd want to catch at their assorted gigs around Frenchman Street because they always bring the fire, in the clubs or in the studio, just as they did there in Marigny Studios. There are certain kinds of attributes to the contemporary jazz sound, particularly of New Orleans, that this album has all over. It's practically coming out of its ears.

Ordering info: quinnsternbergmusic.com

DB



Various Artists Alternative Guitar Summit: Honoring Pat Martino, Volume 1

HIGHNOTE

★★★★

Eight months before legendary guitarist Pat Martino died in November 2021, the Alternative Guitar Summit, an annual conference organized by Joel Harrison, paid tribute to him with a series of live-in-the-studio performances, nine of which are preserved here. The program is split between solos and duos, four of the former and five of the latter, and the tunes come both from Martino's early releases and the records he made after undergoing brain surgery and being forced to re-learn the guitar from scratch.

Some of the arrangements are similarly wholesale rebuilds, like Fareed Haque's take on "Line Games," which, by playing a highly electric line on acoustic and adding tabla, transforms a rockin' late-'70s fusion track into something vivid and sparkling.

Dave Stryker and Paul Bollenback dive headlong into "On The Stairs" from 1974's *Consciousness*, and it's a fascinating contrast of not-that-different styles. Both men are coming out of Grant Green, but Stryker's playing has more bite. Bassist Dezron Douglas and drummer Allan Mednard drive them hard; Mednard takes a machine-gun solo to end the piece.

What makes Martino's music memorable — and what these performers recognize — is that he wrote extraordinarily strong tunes that blossom in almost any arrangement.

—Philip Freeman

Alternative Guitar Summit: Honoring Pat Martino, Volume 1: Inside Out; Black Glass; Line Games; Willow; Noshufuru; Lament; On The Stairs; Joyous Lake; Country Road. (59:08)

Personnel: Rez Abbasi, Sheryl Bailey, Peter Bernstein, Paul Bollenback, Ed Cherry, Nir Felder, Fareed Haque, Joel Harrison, Russell Malone, Jeff Miles, Oz Noy, Adam Rogers, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Dave Stryker, guitars; Kevin Kozol, keyboards; Alex Austin, Dezron Douglas, Chulo Gatewood, basses; Greg Funds, Allan Mednard, Tobias Ralph, drums; Richard Christian, tabla.

Ordering info: jazzdepot.com



Erik Friedlander
A Queens' Firefly

SKIPSTONE

★★★★½

Chalk one up for the jazz cello cause. Erik Friedlander, as sideman and leader/composer, is a significant player in the still sparsely populated field of cellists working in jazz, new music and pop, and one with his own musical mission at hand.

The latest album from his band — a formidable outfit with pianist Uri Caine, bassist Mark Helias and young drummer Ches Smith — finds Friedlander doing a wary and sometimes dizzy dance between gently accessible musical matters and the more challenging turf we might expect of this downtown New York scene-maker.

A Queens' Firefly is an album of sharp contrast, as when the affable, easy-on-the-ears title cut opens the album, but takes a left turn into

the spiky angularity of “Match Strikes.” With “Glimmer,” we can detect a touch of Chick Corea-esque phraseology in the melody line.

For this project, Friedlander has quoted and lifted song titles from a quote from Virginia Woolf’s innovative, landmark novel *To the Lighthouse*, celebrating the “little daily miracles” and the profundity to be savored in the everyday. Sometimes, however, the breezy pleasantry of a tune — including “Little Daily Miracles” — feels at odds with the structure-mutating proto-modernism of Woolf’s prose.

It seems a bit disarming to hear such soft-sell lyricism from this quartet, made up of players known for adventurous and edgy music. But that edgier aspect of their spectrum is duly flexed and revealed in the tune “Aurora,” which starts out in freely improvised mode before settling into one of Friedlander’s organically progressive metric structures.

On the metrically complex closer “The Fire In You,” we get hints of an influence from Corea and his Return to Forever unison riff-slinging, but with an all-acoustic menu and the distinctive timbre of cello gamely leading the charge.

—Josef Woodard

A Queens' Firefly: A Queens' Firefly; Match Strikes; Chandelier; Glimmer; Little Daily Miracles; Aurora; A Simple Radiance; The Fire In You. (39:11)

Personnel: Erik Friedlander, cello; Uri Caine, piano; Mark Helias, bass; Ches Smith, drums.

Ordering info: erikfriedlander.com

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David Virelles
Nuna

PI
 ★★★★★½

It's impossible to sum up David Virelles' music in one word, but if one were forced to do so, "limitless" is better than most. The Cuban-American keyboardist/composer's recordings have combined Cuban and classical forms, hip-hop grooves and avant-garde dissonance, ceremonial chants and fluid jazz improvisation to express a musical concept that uses ancient roots to inform future dreams.

The recording at hand is Virelles' response to the incontrovertible limits upon assembly

imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. What, after all, is a piano player to do when they can't convene a band or audience?

Play piano, of course. Aside from its first track, which is played on the marimbula (a large, bass-register variant on the thumb piano), Virelles plays only piano on *Nuna*. He plays it alone, save for some percussion supplied by Julio Barreto on three of the album's 16 (20 on the accompanying download, if you purchase it from Bandcamp) tracks.

From the first phrases of "Ocho," Virelles' unwillingness to accept confinement is on display. The delicacy with which Virelles mutes notes on "Rezo" attests to his command of his instrument.

He gets everything he needs from his forthright touch on the keys, his moderating use of pedals and his encyclopedic stylistic reach. However, the injection of rhythmic intrigue that takes place each time Barreto appears suggests that while Virelles has a lot to say on the piano, he plays best with others.

—Bill Meyer

Nuna: Spacetime; Ocho; Ghost Town; Rezo; A Tres Voces; Nacen; Al Compás De Mi Viejo Tres; Simple Answer; Ignacio Villa; Danza De Rosario; Mambo Escalonado; Tesselations; Cuando Canta El Cornetín; Pórtico; Germania; Casa. (58:27) Bonus Tracks: Camino Del Escultor; Reckoning; Blueprint; Meji. (14:21)

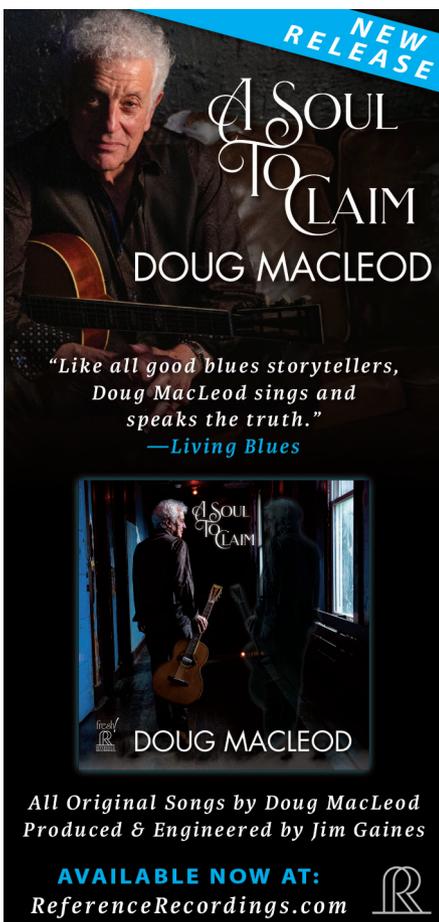
Personnel: David Virelles, Steinway D piano, marimbula; Julio Barreto (3, 9, 14), cajón, guataca, conga, claves.

Ordering info: pirecordings.com

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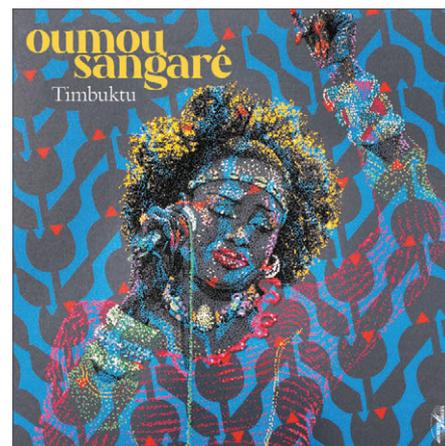
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Oumou Sangaré
Timbuktu

WORLD CIRCUIT
 ★★★★★

Oumou Sangaré was visiting New York City when the pandemic shut things down. She used her time in isolation to compose most of the songs on *Timbuktu*, co-writing a few with her long time kamele n'goni player, Mamadou Sidibé. As things opened up, she traveled to Baltimore, Mali, Burkina Faso and Paris to record. More than a dozen musicians participated in the sessions.

The music is still rooted in the sounds of her home in the Wassulu region of Mali, but there are subtle, international elements in the arrangements. One of her co-producers, Pascal Danaë, adds bluesy guitar licks to several tracks, including the album opener, "Wassulu Don." Sangaré's lyrics celebrate the culture of Wassulu, with Danaë's guitar and a funky drum loop supporting her free-flowing vocals. "Kèlè Magni" laments the hardships of the civil war, that's been raging in Mali for more than decade. It starts with rippling balafon and n'goni rhythms behind Sangaré's call and response with the backing vocalists. Halfway through, Danaë's distorted blues guitar and a rolling bass line provide a propulsive lift to Sangaré's har-



rowing vocals. She wraps things up with "Sabou Dogoné," a traditional tune that asks Allah to connect her to the ancient knowledge and wisdom of Mali. Sustained organ chords and sparse piano back her fervent vocals.

—j. poet

Timbuktu: Wassulu Don, Sira, Degui N'Kelena, Gniani Sara, Timbuktu, Sarama, Kanou, Demissimw, Kèlè Magni, Dily Oumou, Sabou Dogoné (41:43)

Personnel: Oumou Sangaré, Vocals; Pascal Danaë, dobro, percussion, slide guitar, guitars, backing vocals, piano, keyboards, Moog, production; Nicolas Quéré, Moog, piano, clarinet, keyboards, percussion, production; Mamadou Sidibé, n'goni, backing vocals, percussion, keyboards, co-writing; Baptiste Brondy, percussion, drums; William Calhoun, percussion; David Coltun, violin; Rob Coltun, guitar; Cheick Diabata, banjo; Adama Diarra, djembe; Abou Diarra, percussion; Bala Kouyate, balafon; Emma Lamadji, backing vocals; Michael Coltun, bass; Eliéser Oubda, keyboards; Rafgee, subbassophone; Diarra Moussa Saifal, flute; Laurent Vernerey, bass.

Ordering info: worldcircuit.co.uk



DIVA Jazz Orchestra
DIVA Swings Broadway

DIVA JAZZ
 ★★☆☆½

The swagger and creativity of the DIVA Jazz Orchestra comes through instantly on “Heart,” the opening track of *DIVA Swings Broadway*, the group’s homage to Broadway musicals. The tune, from *Damn Yankees*, bristles with broad brass flourishes and boisterous solos from

flugelhornist Jamie Dauber, tenor saxophonist Roxy Cross and trombonist Jennifer Krupa. Steven Felfke’s backbeat-heavy arrangement drives the feel-good track, presaging the upbeat way the album ends. All nine tracks burst with joy, even ones with a pensive cast, like “Pure Imagination” and “Love Who You Love.” But the ones with the greatest impact are the high-energy “Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin’,” “Seventy-Six Trombones” (with three rowdy trombone solos) and “Get Me To The Church

On Time,” the closer. Adding color to the package: Annette Aguilar, percussionist on “Pure Imagination” and “Mornin’.”

The album is as much about soloing as ensemble. It’s also about recasting standards and lesser-known tunes in ways that don’t hew to the originals: Arranger Lee Pfizer’s baritone saxophone on “The Sounds Of Music” replaces the sugar of the tune with a humorous approach, for example. The 15 women who make up this expert and passionate orchestra clearly love these tunes, many from the dog-eared Great American Songbook. Despite the familiarity of much of this material, these re-imaginings remind us why these songs got a grip on the popular imagination in the first place. Bringing novelty, as bassist Noriko Ueda does on Michael Abene’s radical arrangement of Gershwin’s “The Man I Love,” gives such material fresh life.

—Carlo Wolff

Diva Swings Broadway: Heart; Pure Imagination; The Man I Love; With Every Breath I Take; The Sound Of Music; Oh, What A Beautiful Mornin’; Seventy-Six Trombones; Love Who You Love; Get Me To The Church On Time. (61:00)

Personnel: Annette Aguilar, percussion (2, 6); Mercedes Beckman, soprano and alto saxophones, flute; Roxy Cross, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Jami Dauber, trumpet, flugelhorn; Laura Dreyer, soprano and tenor saxophones, clarinet; Leslie Havens, bass trombone; Sara Jacovino, Jennifer Krupa, trombone; Barbara Laronga, trumpet, flugelhorn; Sherrie Maricle, music director, drum set; Tomoko Ono, piano; Leigh Pilzer, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet, flute, clarinet; Alexa Tarantino, soprano and alto saxophones, flute; Rachel Therrien, trumpet, flugelhorn; Noriko Ueda, bass; Liesl Whitaker, trumpet, flugelhorn.

Ordering info: divajazz.com

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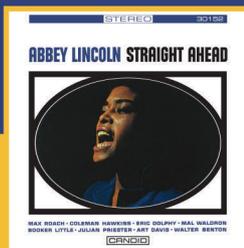
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Candid Records, an early 1950s pop label, was transformed by journalist-critic Nat Hentoff in 1960 but since '68 has passed through several hands. The label is currently rejuvenating itself with five remastered back-catalog classics that attest to the enduring powers, pleasures and relevance of African-American music. These two bedrock blues albums and three hard-core, truth-telling all-star jazz projects remain powerful after 60 years, and Hentoff's liner notes, direct from the studio sessions, highlight why the music mattered then and does still.

Otis Spann Is The Blues (★★★★★) is the first and best album by the most soulful 20th century blues pianist; *Walking the Blues*, recorded at the same session, was not released until 1972, two years after his death. Having joined Muddy Waters' band in 1952, Spann gives his all, without artifice or reservation to his debut, accompanied only — but brilliantly — by electric guitarist Robert Jr. Lockwood.

Both men are masters of the idiom. Spann sets his warm, throaty, expressive singing over a keyboard touch that's forceful but never pounding. His blues bounce, roll and become grand, every note of thick chords distinct, time solid but fluid. There's hope in his voice ("Little Boy Blues, please come blow your horn!") but wracking resignation, too. The piano-guitar format is problematic — how can two polyphonic instruments stay out of each other's way? — but Spann and Lockwood, featured on his mentor Robert Johnson's "Rambling On My Mind," interact as brothers.

Lightnin' In New York (★★★★) is an equally remarkable date by the Texas bluesman who had just been introduced to New York City via a celebrity folk music bill at Carnegie Hall. Lightnin' Hopkins, born in 1912, was quickly recognized as the real deal, a protégé of Blind Lemon Jefferson

at age 8 who for decades had entertained Black audiences around Houston. He'd recorded prodigiously starting in 1946 but was little known beyond a niche audience.

Hentoff writes that his shows for white Northerners had been politely restrained, but in the studio Hopkins waxed mischievous. He is alone, but a man of many parts — on "Take It Easy" singing, playing piano and guitar. His voice is rich with experience and rugged of timbre; his guitar picking treats time with off-hand daring, his story-telling rudimentary but true, his storytelling charming.

Hopkins, like Spann and Lockwood, may have been considered traditionalists but they weren't relics: They lived in the present. That connects their works to *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite*, Abbey Lincoln's *Straight Ahead* and *Charles Mingus Present Charles Mingus*. Being created deliberately in their time, these recordings transcend time.

Directly political during the crux of the Civil Rights era, ***We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite (★★★★★)*** is virtually music theater, with lyrics by Oscar Brown Jr. written for a chorale ensemble and sections conceived for a ballet. It is compelling, ambitious, polemical but not pretentious. Lincoln, then married to Roach, dramatizes, embodies, abstracts and finally flat-out screams, setting a standard for uninhibited vocalizing with the tracks "Driva' Man" and "Freedom Day," that singers pursue to this day.

Coleman Hawkins and Booker Little blow crackling solos, and Olatunji leads an African/Caribbean/American rhythm jam on congas with percussionists Ray Mantilla and Tomas DuVall and Roach commanding on traps.

Straight Ahead (★★★★½) is Abbey Lincoln's album, her declaration of per-

sonality after a career start as a sexy chanteuse. Roach is unfailingly supportive, with Hawkins, Little, tenor saxophonist Walter Benton and trombonist Julian Priester also returning from *We Insist!*, plus Eric Dolphy on reeds and pianist Mal Waldron. The production showcases the singer through lyrics she wrote or molded with partners, adapted from poems and inherited via Waldron from Billie Holiday ("Left Alone"), her tone ranging from clarion perfection to a growl.

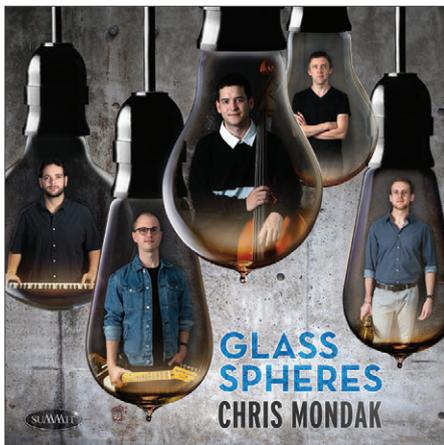
"When Malindy Sings" (words by Paul Lawrence Dunbar) is unforgettable due to Lincoln's unabashed satisfaction in her imagined predecessor's glory, Little's shape-ly flight and Dolphy's flute effects. Nervy and without missteps, Lincoln displays determination and vulnerability, a sardonic perspective and intense yet suppressed frustration (for example, about money on "In The Red"). The horns and rhythm section, abetted by congas on Randy Weston's "African Lady" provide grainy harmonized backdrops and propulsion that seem to grow up and around the singer organically.

Mingus Presents Mingus (★★★★★) is simply a masterpiece of complete quartet engagement. Sans chordal instrument, the feisty bassist, his deft drummer Dannie Richmond, his most profound collaborator Dolphy on alto saxophone and bass clarinet and inspired trumpeter Ted Curson perform like an alternate half of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* octet, reveling in blues-rooted melody-making.

The remastering reveals more of Mingus and Richmond's scabrous mutterings on "Fables Of Faubus," anticipating the Art Ensemble of Chicago's "Jackson In Your House."

This is a great album, consistently shape-shifting, creative and exciting. **DB**

Ordering info: candidrecords.com



Chris Mondak *Glass Spheres*

SUMMIT
★★★★½

Venezuelan-born and now Nashville-based Chris Mondak, 24, is building upon a sturdy reputation in upward motion. Here, he steps out as leader of an impressive young quintet, venturing assuredly over Mondak's well-crafted compositions, though not breaking particularly new ground. *Glass Spheres* was recorded in a single day in Nashville, old-school style, and has an infectious and organic live feel without additives (apart from the occasional effect from guitarist Lindon McCarty).

Album opener "Low" hits the ground running at an easy, steadily swinging pace, introducing the fluid aplomb of tenor saxophonist Hunter Smith and pianist Gabe Feldman. An offbeat structural concept sneaks into the album's highlight, "Oath Keeper," reportedly inspired by a *Game of Thrones* episode. In the introduction, teasingly loose layers of Mondak's scampering bass, a simple Mingus-y sax motif and piano murmurings in the margins congeal into drummer Chris Broomhead's bright, slap-happy groove. Hints of the earlier elements fly in and out in a happy mesh, and the tune ends with sax abruptly fluttering into the wings, a welcome raggedy edge. "Blume" is an intriguing almost-waltz.

"Juicy Red" commences with that rarity in jazz, a fade-in, as if the party is already underway when we arrive, fashionably late. Guitarist McCarty summons up his finest solo of the date, taking some enticing harmonic liberties around the changes. Closing out the easygoing but also engaging album, Mondak heads over to New Orleans, in spirit, for the second-line grooving "Hats Off." In a final winking twist, the band gets a jolt of accelerando on the off-ramp.

—Josef Woodard

Glass Spheres: Low; Oath Keeper; Brume; In Sleep; Juicy Red; The Only One; Hats Off. (41:04)

Personnel: Chris Mondak, bass; Hunter Smith, saxophone; Gabe Feldman, piano; Lindon McCarty, guitar; Chris Broomhead, drums.

Ordering info: summitrecords.com

Doug MacLeod *A Soul To Claim*

REFERENCE
★★★★

Doug MacLeod's *A Soul To Claim*, like many of his 21 previous albums, makes it clear that he's an archetype of the top-level blues storyteller: wry, sharp-witted, virile, inclined to poke fun at sentiment.

This time in the studio, MacLeod spins his tales with the help of acclaimed producer Jim Gaines, who backs MacLeod's lived-in singing voice and stirring guitar work on half the program with a soundscape crafted by first-call Memphis soul-blues musicians.

Old pro MacLeod bestows his music with a human intimacy that's a function of his affable personality and the original material he works with. With natural authority and charisma, he communicates one-on-one with listeners. "Only Porter At The Station," one of six solo performances, finds him generating tension between stoical self-interest and caring about someone who carries excess baggage. Alone again for "Dodge City," MacLeod gives good swift kicks to the backsides of rancid politicians. (In his younger years, he was even more irritated — hear "Whose Truth, Whose Lies?" on his 2000 album of the same name.)



A former Navy sailor of strong moral purpose, MacLeod performs a tune about homeless veterans called "Where Are You?" in an emotional tone of mingled sadness and compassion. Rick Steff's organ solo and the gentle lilt of bass and drums provide an approximation of his state of feeling. Several more tunes lie just as snugly in the sage's lap. —Frank-John Hadley

A Soul To Claim: A Soul To Claim; Be What You Is; Money Talks; Where Are You?; Dodge City; Smokey Nights And Faded Blues; Only Porter At The Station; Mud Island Morning; Dubb's Talking Disappointment Blues; Grease The Wheel; Somewhere On A Mississippi Highway; There Is Always Love. (54:53)

Personnel: Doug MacLeod, vocals, guitar; Dave Smith, bass guitar; Rick Steff, keyboards; Steve Potts, drums.

Ordering info: referencerecordings.com



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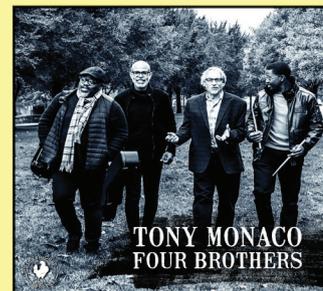
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CHICKEN COOP



J3
Opus One
 SHANACHIE
 ★★½

The legacy of prodigious musicians from South Africa hearkens back to the 1950s, when the Jazz Epistles spawned the careers of both Hugh Masekela and Abdullah Ibrahim.

But for 15-year-old Johannesburg-born Justin-Lee Schultz and his 18-year-old sister Jamie-Leigh Schultz, a better comparison can be found in Jonathan Butler, whose R&B-infused guitar playing and singing helped to entrench the jazz-fusion movement in the 1980s.

Julius Schultz was another successful South African guitarist who began to feature his young daughter Jamie-Leigh on drums at some of his concerts. Soon, her younger brother took an interest in piano and guitar, and, after moving to the U.S., the teens find themselves in

musical circles of ever-spiraling-upward status, with the likes of Harry Connick Jr., Jeff Lorber and Quincy Jones, among their endorsers.

The 16-year-old bassist Jaden Baker completes this trio of J-names, producing a combustible display of virtuosity and professional polish hard to fathom as coming from any pre-college band.

The arrangements reveal a deep connection to fusion and contemporary jazz; covers of Michael Jackson melodies bookend the album, and the music is designed more for high-energy entertainment value than for artistic introspection. Yet, the unique brilliance of all three players is undeniable, particularly in the case of Justin-Lee.

Tucked near the end of the album are tributes to two keyboard mainstays: Lorber's "Stainless Steel" features a piano solo by Justin-Lee of endlessly spinning eighth-note passages (followed by a blazing guitar solo by — you guessed it — Justin-Lee), while "Got A Match?" by the late Chick Corea pushes the band into straightahead Akoustic Band territory, the shifting harmonies and brisk tempo not a problem at all for the trio.

It's not a stretch to mention these youngsters in the same breath as Jacob Collier or Joey Alexander, ambassadors of a new generation overseeing jazz's evolution into the unforeseeable future.

—Gary Fukushima

Opus One: Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough; Junebug; Vibe Cleanse; Eldos; Justice; My Playground; Look To The Sky; Hela; Stainless Steel; Got A Match?; Michael Jackson Medley. (44:37)
Personnel: Justin-Lee Schultz, piano, keyboards, synth bass (11); Jamie-Leigh Schultz, drums; Jaden Baker, bass, keyboards (5, 8, 11), trombone (2); David Mann, horns (4); Roy Cotton, strings (5).

Ordering info: shanachie.com



Cameron Graves
Live From The Seven Spheres
 ARTISTRY/MACK AVENUE
 ★★½

Pianist Cameron Graves came to fame as a member of the West Coast Get Down alongside saxophonist Kamasi Washington, trombonist Ryan Porter and bassists Miles Mosley and Thundercat, among others. But before that he was a member of Jada Pinkett Smith's metal band, Wicked Wisdom, and he's subsequently recorded standards with Michelle Coltrane (Alice's daughter), and is currently in bassist Stanley Clarke's band.

Graves' first album as a leader, 2017's *Planetary Prince*, featured Washington, Porter and Thundercat, though the music was a bombastic kind of post-Chick Corea fusion, with two-fisted, hooky melodies providing a launch pad for epic solos. His second album, 2021's *Seven*, introduced an entirely new band and a totally different approach. The pieces were short and meticulously composed; guitarist Colin Cook, bassist Max Gerl, and drummer Mike Mitchell whipped the music through hairpin turns and sudden stops and starts, all played with fierce intensity and mixed with the impression of stunning volume. It was like a cross between the fusion of Return To Forever and the intricate progressive metal of Meshuggah.

This live album features versions of five tracks from *Seven* that hew close to the studio versions, and sprawling, shredtastic interpretations of two pieces from *Planetary Prince* that allow everyone to cut loose. One of the latter, the closing "The End Of Corporatism," runs to 23 minutes as each player gets a moment in the spotlight and makes the most of it, Mitchell in particular. This is music meant to be played at wall-rattling volume.

—Philip Freeman

Live From The Seven Spheres: Sacred Spheres; Planetary Prince; Sons Of Creation; Red; The Life Carriers; Mansion Worlds; The End Of Corporatism. (53:16)

Personnel: Cameron Graves, piano; Colin Cook, guitar; Max Gerl, bass; Mike Mitchell, drums.

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Chicago Soul Jazz Collective Meets Dee Alexander *On The Way To Be Free*

JMARQ
★★★★

For some artists, the studio environment is kryptonite. No matter how strong their artistic vision and capabilities may be, the results of their studio albums sound neutered in comparison to their live performances. That is the case here.

The ensemble admirably channels a lot of the Windy City's upsouth Black music traditions that's rooted in Mississippi delta blues and Memphis soul yet gleaming with the northern migration electricity. Amr Fahmy's greasy work on Rhodes piano, organ and clavinet paired with bassist Andrew Vogt and drummer Keith Brooks' loose rhythmic pockets provide a comforting bedrock for Larry Brown Jr.'s whiskey-soaked blues guitar licks and improvisational passages and trumpeter Marques Carroll and saxophonist John Fournier's swamp horn harmonies. Together, they sound like a splendid residence band, playing regularly at your favorite neighborhood bar, that is capable of accommodating any wandering guests.

On this occasion, Dee Alexander is that guest, whose grainy alto and emotive tone imbue the album's succinct melodies and plaintive lyrics with been-there conviction as the material touches upon some of life's struggles. But for all its apparent boons, the urgency of the songs never crackles beyond a lo-fi simmer. Perhaps more frustrating is knowing that in concert, the Chicago Soul Jazz Collective would tear the roof off the sucker with this material.

Kryptonite be damned. —John Murph

On The Way To Be Free: Mama Are We There Yet?; On The Way To Be Free; So Alive; The Man Is Coming Back; Crazy Wrong; Carry Me; Behind The Crusaders; Sweet Things; Nothing Good Ever Goes Away. (46:38)

Personnel: Keith Brooks, drums; Larry Brown Jr., guitar and vocals; Marques Carroll, trumpet; Amr Fahmy, Rhodes, organ, clavinet; John Fournier, tenor saxophone; Andrew Vogt, bass; Victor Garcia, percussion; Dan Leali, tambourine (1).

Ordering info: jmarqrecords.bandcamp.com

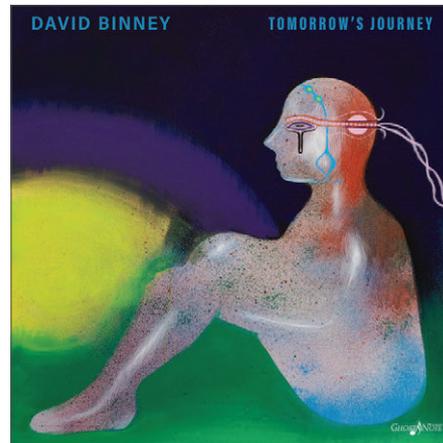
David Binney *Tomorrow's Journey*

GHOST NOTE RECORDS
★★★★½

All the elements alto saxophonist David Binney brings to *Tomorrow's Journey* are in play on the long title track, which showcases Binney's compositional daring and the prowess of his latest, Los Angeles-based band.

With its thick brass bottom, Binney's "Journey" sounds huge but not intimidating. He keeps it on course, leading mini-movements that in their changeable textures and rhythms keep the tune absorbing.

"Second to None," the opening tune, is shorter and more straightforward. It's a jaunty adventure marked by peppery brass and declamatory Binney. The whole album is an absorbing sequence that ends with "Cali Culture," a mutable work by Binney and the trumpet trailblazer Ambrose Akinmusire. Along the way, Binney delivers "Opal," a showcase for bassists Logan Kane and Ethan Moffit; pianist Luis Mendoza's cerebral, metrically tricky "Casa," featuring a Mendoza solo of impressive velocity and purpose; and the ballad "Loved (for cousin Vince)," the heart of the album. Led by Binney at his most tender, the ruminative "Loved" never deviates from its austere, comforting path.



If "Loved" is the most direct track, "Resembling," spurred by Binney's lanky lines and the circling keyboards of Mendoza and Paul Cornish, may be its least predictable. It's certainly a trip, vibrating with vitality and risk. If at first "Resembling" feels like a work-in-progress, the rhythmic repetition that propels it toward the end brings it together powerfully.

—Carlo Wolff

Tomorrow's Journey: Second To None; Tomorrow's Journey; Casa; Resembling; Loved (for cousin Vince); Opal; Cali Culture. (61:67)

Personnel: David Binney, alto saxophone; Paul Cornish, piano; Jon Hatamaya, trombone; Aaron Janik, trumpet; Logan Kane, bass; Luca Mendoza, piano; Ethan Moffit, bass; Benjamin Ring, drums; Kenny Wollesen, bowed vibes, percussion.

Ordering info: davidbinney.com

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5 Emerging Young Talents

While doomsayers have been predicting the death of jazz since at least the early 1920s, and the passing of so many veteran greats in recent years can make one pessimistic for the future, the truth is that the jazz scene is currently overflowing with bright young talents. The five covered in this column are each making their recording debuts as leaders.

Yu Nishiyama is a promising arranger-composer originally from Japan and now based in New York. Inspired by her period attending the University of North Texas, she grew to love the sound of modern big bands. ***A Lotus In The Mud (Next Level, 42:38; ★★★★★)*** contains five of her compositions plus a samba version of “Skylark” performed by an 18-piece jazz orchestra. Altoist Adam Hutcheson is impressive on “Retrospections” (depicting the beginning of a new day) and the turbulent “Honorary Whites,” the latter a reminder of the discrimination that Nishiyama felt when she moved to the U.S. The jazz waltz “Time Is Money” features trombonist Peter Lin, while an uptempo “A Lotus In The Mud” matches tenor saxophonist Alex De Lazzari with trumpeter David Di Trapani in colorful fashion.

Ordering info: outsideinmusic.com

The Esthesis Quartet (pianist Dawn Clement, flutist Elsa Nilsson, bassist Emma Dayhuff and drummer Tina Raymond) began on Zoom in the spring of 2021, partly to overcome the isolation they felt due to COVID. The musicians are based individually in Denver, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles but came together through the wonders of modern technology. They played their first live gig in August 2021 and recorded their self-titled debut (***Orenda, 39:28; ★★★★★***) all together in the studio. The set consists of three original compositions from Nilsson and one song apiece from the others. Highlights include Clement’s piano playing on “Two Moons,” her wordless voice on “Finding What’s Lost,” Nilsson’s lyrical flute on the thoughtful “The Garden-er” and Esthesis’ attractive group sound.

Ordering info: orendarecords.bandcamp.com

Dan Schnelle has been a busy drummer in the Southern California area for quite a few years. On ***Shine Thru (Outside in Music, 53:03; ★★½)*** he sought to create his own musical world and, judging by such titles as “Spaceman Spiff,” “2nd Orbit” and “Vistas,” take listeners on a trip to a new destination. While there are plenty of adventurous and often heated solos from his sidemen (altoist David Binney, keyboardist Jeff Babko and/or pianist



Dan Schnelle

ROBBIE JEFFERS

Josh Nelson, guitarist Anthony Wilson and bassist Alex Boneham), it is the stormy ensembles and the assertive drums during Schnelle’s 10 originals that create the biggest impressions during a consistently stimulating outing.

Ordering info: outsideinmusic.com

Julius Rodriguez, who begins his career as a leader with ***Let Sound Tell All (Verve, 34:28; ★★★★★)***, has had diverse experience playing keyboards and drums in church from a young age, dropping out of Juilliard to tour with rapper A\$AP Rocky and working as Carmen Lundy’s pianist. He plays piano a bit like McCoy Tyner on the uptempo “Blues At The Barn,” utilizes electronics for color on several numbers, displays his classical background during the first half of “Where Grace Abounds” and accompanies Mariah Cameron’s strong singing on Stevie Wonder’s “All I Do” and his gospel piece “In Heaven.” It will be interesting to see what musical direction he emphasizes in the future.

Ordering info: jazz.centerstagestore.com

While she may be a singer from Brazil, **Tetel Di Babuya** does not perform bossa novas on ***Meet Tetel (Arkadia, 43:29; ★★½)*** other than “Voce.” A classical violinist who switched to jazz, she mostly focuses on vocalizing during a program that consists of 10 originals and a beautiful version of “Someone To Watch Over Me.” The scat-filled opener “Lullaby Of Loveland” is the most swinging performance of the set. Otherwise, Di Babuya (who is joined by Daniel Grajew on keyboards and accordion, bassist and guitarist Nilton Leonarde, drummer Emilio Martins, and occasionally Richard Fermino on various brass and reed instruments) performs dramatic cabaret, torch songs, a few ballads with a country tinge and some joyous romps. Her lyrics are sometimes rather witty — “Not About Love” is about the difficulty of trying to write songs that are *not* about love — and at other times are assertive or witty. As with the other leaders in this column who are making their debuts, she displays plenty of potential for the future. **DB**

Ordering info: arkadiarecords.com



Alex “Apolo” Ayala *Bám-bula*

TRUTH REVOLUTION

★★★½

Bám-bula literally means “the memory of a forgotten place.” According to the Puerto Rican bassist Alex “Apolo” Ayala, that word refers to “the act of re-remembering who you are as a person, tapping into the collective unconscious. The *Bám-bula* is [also] the oldest known rhythm of the Bomba complex.”

Bám-bula clearly expresses Ayala’s intent. An homage to his ancestors (and specifically to the matriarchs of his family), the recording draws from time-honored Afro-Puerto Rican Bomba traditions, bebop jazz and even mambo to illustrate his heritage and identity.

This is Ayala’s first recording as a bandleader but he’s traversed the Latin jazz scene in New York for many years, playing with Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz, Mambo Legends Orchestra and Spanish Harlem Orchestra. That experience serves him well, and his comfort level with a spicy stew of rhythms and sensibilities is put to good use here.

The rhythm section’s exciting repartee on “Las Caras Lindas,” a song composed by Afro-Puerto Rican composer Tite Curet Alonso and recorded by the singer Ismael Rivera, feels like overhearing a juicy conversation at a coffee shop, while “Agosto” captures unhurried pace of the dog days of summer.

Bám-bula is a solid first outing, hitting just the right notes for a Sunday morning sipping café with a loved one (the tableau beautifully captured with “Café y Bomba Eh”), and yet it doesn’t quite say anything new.

But, perhaps that’s yet another reference to the theme of the collection. After all, we can’t move forward without reverence for our roots and for the past.

—Ayana Contreras

Bám-bula: *Bám-bula*; Jilbaro Negro; Bozales; Café y Bomba Eh; Matriarca; Agosto; Ma; Bendición; Las Caras Lindas. (49:46)
Personnel: Alex “Apolo” Ayala, bass; Ivan Renta, saxophone; Fernando Garcia, drums; Nelson Garcia Gonzalez, bomba barrel; Anna Louise Andersson, vocals (4).

Ordering info: truthrevolutionrecords.com



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Jim Hall's Comping Propels Sonny Rollins' 'Without A Song'

The *Bridge*, saxophonist Sonny Rollins' seminal 1962 album, has always been one of my desert island discs. It's a strong album from start to finish with a sensitive, interactive band, beautiful solos and inventive arrangements. It features some classic and inspired playing by Rollins and guitarist Jim Hall. One of the things that makes the music swing and propels it forward is Hall's comping. I've always thought that his comping on the tune "Without A Song" is a master class in jazz chord playing.

Often, we focus on the melody or solos in a piece, but if we draw our attention to the comping behind the scenes, a lot of valuable musi-

cal information can be found. Hall is a master at creating harmonic, rhythmic and melodic interest, while also supporting, interacting with, contrasting and pushing the soloist and band.

I have included Hall's chord work behind the first chorus of Sonny Rollins' saxophone solo on "Without A Song" here. Guitarists can visit my website (kenwessel.com/lessons) to view this transcription with guitar chord grids, in addition to Hall's comping behind the melody. Note that everything is transposed up one octave for guitar, and an "x" symbol indicates a ghosted note.

One thing that is evident in Hall's rhyth-

mic vocabulary is his economical use of chords. He almost never uses more than one or two "hits" per bar. If he makes an exception, the following bar will be less busy. Often guitarists coming to jazz from other genres (like rock, folk, etc.) can be too busy, strumming and playing too many hits. The bass and drums cover the time-keeping territory by playing quarter notes steadily. Our job as accompanists is not to keep time but to comment, interact and have a conversation. We want to respond to — and inspire — the soloist.

Hall is in constant conversation with the soloist. He interjects his harmonic comments in the spaces of Rollins' lines. It's almost as if Rollins, by leaving a gap, is inviting Hall's response. Hall utilizes different aesthetic criteria in responding to the solo: sometimes repeating or mimicking the rhythm, sometimes contrasting Sonny's melodic statements, but always listening. As Rollins' solo gets busier starting in his second solo chorus, Hall's comping becomes a bit more regular, as there is less space between the horn phrases.

Hall uses rhythmic motifs in his comping duties. He takes a common jazz rhythm — dotted-quarter note and eighth note (often referred to as "Charleston Rhythm") — and repeats it occasionally, setting up expectations. Hall also displaces the motif to different beats. Check out how Hall starts the chorus with the Charleston on the upbeat of 1, then in the next bar on beat 1, then, in bar 7 on beat 2. Later on in the chorus, in bars 41–46, Hall answers the saxophone with the Charleston motif, displaced to the third beat of the bar. This rhythmic response gives the music forward motion, encouraging and pushing the soloist.

Examining Hall's guitar voicings, we find a lot of comping wisdom. First of all, there is the density of his chords. Behind the head, he plays single-note counterlines (one-note chords) and shells (voicings containing only the third and seventh). As the solo continues, Jim continues to use sparse voicings: two-, three- and four-note chords. Guitar voicings tend to be less dense than piano voicings because we have only six strings and four fingers available on the fretboard.

Often people call a guitarist when they want a more open, transparent sound in the rhythm section. By playing shells (bars 34–36), you are providing the least amount of harmonic information necessary to define the chord type (major, minor or dominant), and it leaves a lot of freedom for the soloist to choose their harmonic pathways. A common harmonic theme in Hall's choice of voicings is the shell with an extension (i.e. ninth, 11th, 13th)

on top to create a three-note voicing (bars 11–12, 50–52, etc.).

Note the use of voicings built with fourths throughout the tune. The quartal sound is more open and ambiguous than chords built with thirds. Hall uses this same shape in different situations — proving the fact that in music, something is always something else. (Try taking a voicing, and putting it over all 12 different bass notes, to see what harmonies are generated; some may be a little strange, but some may end up being surprisingly useful.) Jim uses stacked fourths on major chords (bars 1–3, 41–44, etc.), minor chords (bar 14) and, with diatonic fourths, dominant seventh chords (bars 4, 8, 52, etc.).

Hall was a deep and active listener, embodying probably the single most important skill a musician needs, and his sensitive and supportive playing reflects that. We've all been in that situation when you get on a gig with someone you haven't played with before, and in a matter of seconds, you know if the gig is going to be fun or a drag by the way the person is listening to you.

Hall stays pretty close to the harmony of the tune, not reharmonizing much. But note his use of chromaticism (bars 9–11, 14–16, 26–27, 50–51). Listen to how he varies the articulations of the chords: some short, staccato hits, and sometimes letting a voicing ring for a beat or two. This is a subtle but effective way to create contrast and interest behind the solo.

Hall is a supreme melodist. If you follow the top voice of his chords behind Rollins, simple and elegant melodic lines unfold. In bars 1–8, he employs a motif of an ascending fourth, then repeats it four times, changing the direction of the melodic movement while answering Sonny's initial solo statements with his own melodies. This melodic conversation continues throughout the solo.

“Without A Song” is a Rosetta Stone for jazz comping. I encourage you to listen closely to this recording, particularly the interplay between saxophone and guitar. Hall's presence in an ensemble always facilitated interplay. Explore other favorite records (with Herbie Hancock, Bill Evans and other great accompanists), and listen carefully to uncover the beauty of the composer's craft. **DB**

Guitarist and composer Kenny Wessel has worked in projects playing jazz, ranging from straightahead to free music, and continues to explore world music, investigating points of intersection between jazz and North Indian music. He toured and recorded with Ornette Coleman for more than 12 years as a member of Prime Time. A vital and personal voice on the jazz guitar, Wessel has also worked with Donald Fagen, Badal Roy, John Abercrombie, Karl Berger, Debashish Bhattacharya, David Liebman, Adam Rudolph and many other artists from the jazz, world music and pop spectrum. He has released four CDs as a leader, including his most recent release, *Unstrung* (Nonotes Records). He is currently on the faculties of Western Connecticut State University and the New York Jazz Workshop. For more info, visit kenwessel.com or contact Wessel directly at kw@kenwessel.com.

Sounds 8vb
x = ghosted

The musical notation is presented in a series of staves, each with a key signature of one flat (F major). The notation includes various chord voicings and melodic lines. Section markers A1, A2, B, and A3 are used to denote different parts of the piece. Chord symbols are placed above the notes, and some notes are marked with 'x' to indicate ghosting. The notation is in a style that is common in jazz guitar books, with a focus on chord voicings and melodic lines.



COURTESY OF DAVE ALLEN

Advanced Rhythmic Concepts for Improvisation

The demands and expectations of improvising musicians have never been greater than they are today. Players are expected to have an expansive rhythmic vocabulary and the bar is set very high. Rhythm is the more abstract, more difficult to codify element of improvisation. Developing a strong time feel, cultivating a personal approach to rhythmic phrasing, playing fluently within complex rhythmic structures, navigating odd and multi-meter compositions: these concepts are not talked about as much in jazz education because they are more difficult to put down on paper or make into a method.

Chord progressions, arpeggios, scales and lines usually take up a large part of any jazz curriculum. These things are undoubtedly very important and must be worked at vigorously, but it is important to keep in mind that any accumulated harmonic information is relatively useless if it is played without a strong time feel. A few simple notes placed beautifully within a swing feel or any other groove have more value than hundreds of notes that may be correct and very clever, but do not connect well with the rhythm section or with the underlying pulse. These crucial elements of developing as an improviser are sometimes neglected, or they are expected to come about naturally without conscious effort and attention. The

most important step is raising your awareness of everything you are doing rhythmically.

Time Feel

As jazz musicians, or better yet, modern improvising musicians, improving our sense of time and our control of our time feel, and expanding our rhythmic vocabulary, will enrich everything and anything that we might play. This takes a lot of practice and years of playing situations that push each player to experiment, progress and grow. Just like we have a natural speaking or singing voice, and maybe a melodic or harmonic vocabulary that is personal, we can also discover our true rhythmic voice.

This is a process of discovering what your time feel sounds like. Paying close attention to it, becoming more sensitive to the nuances of time, will help you on this journey. Ultimately, we want to be able to express ourselves in the most fluent and flexible way across the bar line or structure, while at the same time being clearly and firmly anchored to the underlying groove. The stronger our sense of time, the better off we will be when playing with other musicians. Your time feel is your *relationship* to the basic pulse.

We can break down a time feel into the following elements:

- Being firmly anchored in the pulse.

- Knowing where the downbeat is at all times (without having to state it).
- Feeling and internalizing the subdivisions.
- Paying close attention to the placement of each note and its relationship to the pulse.
- Holding the tempo (not rushing/dragging).
- Being consistent.

Metronome Exercises

Start the following exercises using just one scale or mode that you are very familiar with. You can also play free of any harmonic restrictions, so as to focus entirely on rhythm.

Exercise #1: Choose a medium to slow tempo to start with. Set the metronome on 2 and 4 for a swing feel. Start out playing quarter notes only. Ground yourself in the beat and concentrate on making the quarter notes as large and relaxed as you can, the way a bass player would. Then play through the following sequence, spending as much time as needed on each subdivision and paying close attention to your placement and feel.

Play the following sequence:

- Play only quarter notes.
- Play only quarter note triplets.
- Play only eighth notes.
- Play only eighth-note triplets.
- Play only upbeats (the second eighth note of each beat, which will feel like the third note of each eighth-note triplet).

Try not to break the flow once you have started. Keep a steady stream of notes or alternate between measures of notes and measures of rests. Focus your attention on the consistency of the time feel and flow. Experiment with your placement of the notes. Does it feel ahead of the beat, or behind it? Is it rushed, laid-back, swinging, or is it dragging and becoming disconnected from the pulse? The sequence can then be played in reverse so you arrive back at the quarter note.

Now add some harmonic motion to see if you can stay consistent rhythmically while playing chord changes. Try this same set of exercises on a blues form. If that feels strong enough, move on to standards of various difficulties. Once you are playing a chord progression, this exercise becomes both a rhythmic and a harmonic workout. Whatever the harmonic or formal difficulty, the priority will still be on a consistent, relaxed flow of notes. If that proves too difficult, simplify the chords or decrease the tempo.

Exercise #2: Set the metronome to click on beat 1 only and then play or sing the melody of a standard. Now do the same thing with the metronome on only beat 2, then beat 3 and 4. Keep your place by feeling the downbeat at all times.

Next you can try improvising through the changes of the tune with the metronome set the same way. If you are unsure whether or not you are accurately staying aligned with the metronome, record yourself while doing this exercise and listen back to it while counting. For another challenge, you can set the metronome to give you the downbeat only once every two bars or every four bars.

Exercise #3: Set the metronome to a tempo of 30bpm or slower. Each click will represent one beat. Start by playing one note along with the click until you are until you are very accurate. This in itself is a test of our concentration and can be a good way to begin any practice session. Next you can slowly move from that one note up to 16 notes, spending enough time on each grouping to be sure the notes are placed evenly within the beat. In this exercise it is important to map out each number of notes from a set scale or melody that will allow you to play the right number of notes without needing to count them. For example, when playing five notes, use C, D, E, F, G. This is especially useful when we go above eight.

Using Cross Patterns on Standard Forms

It is a fun challenge to place or displace the chords of a song using cross patterns to change things up rhythmically. In Example 1, we have a three-beat, dotted-half pattern applied to the 12-bar blues form. The underlying form remains the same as a typical blues. Depending on the chord progression of the song, we may have to make some adjustments to the placement of the chords to conform to this rhythmic pattern. Some chords will be anticipated, and some delayed. There are times when a chord needs to be played twice, or a passing chord can be placed in those spots to keep the harmonic movement flowing. Keep in mind that you do not want to feel this pattern as if it is in 3/4. Feel the threes only in their relationship to the 4/4 as they pass across the measures.

If playing this with a group, it is good to start out with everyone playing the hits, while the drummer can keep a swinging ride pattern going. When applying this pattern to other standards, it is helpful to create a rhythmic turnaround every eight or 16 measures by placing the last chord on the “and” of beat 3.

Odd Meters

Becoming fluent playing in odd meters, as well as multiple, changing meters, has become an essential part of the modern improvising musician’s vocabulary. Any meter can be broken down into twos and threes or felt as a series of long and short pulses. We need to understand the numbers involved, but the sooner we can stop counting and start feeling the groove, the better. It is extremely interesting (and beyond the scope of this article) how the body can feel the math of rhythm without there being any actual numbers involved.

Basic steps to learning a groove include:

- 1) Subdividing the beats in a measure (by twos, threes and fours).
- 2) Subdividing each beat (by eighths, triplets or 16ths).
- 3) Rhythmic layering (polyrhythms, groupings and accents).

It is a common mistake for players new to odd meters to think that 5/4 is 4/4 plus an extra beat, or that 7/4 is two bars of 4/4 with a beat missing. Thinking like that will not lead to a round, flowing groove. We want the groove to feel circular and continuous, just like when we play 4/4. We don’t want to start over at each downbeat. Odd meters should not sound odd at all (the term irregular meter is a better term).

The best way to become more comfortable playing odd meters is to play them. Start by trying the most common claves. Set a metronome to steady quarter notes and clap each clave. Then try to keep the quarter note in one hand and play the clave in the other. Examples 2–5 use the bass line to hold things in place. It is a good idea to record a backing track so that you can improvise on it at length. The upper lines have a suggested comping pattern you can try. Clap the rhythms first, then try them on your instrument. In my book *Advanced Rhythmic Concepts for Improvisation*, there is a chapter devoted to each meter including differ-

ent rhythmic breakdowns as well as backing tracks for improvisation.

Once we begin to feel the contour of each meter or groove, we can begin to take some chances with trying to play over it without counting. There will be plenty of mistakes where you may fall off the structure, and you will probably experience a feeling of precariousness. That is quite natural and is an important part of the process. With time, you begin to have a kind of physical understanding of the pattern and can start to shape your lines in a way that connects to the underlying rhythms. When attempting this, try not to be overly concerned with accuracy at first. A dancer can’t expect to land perfectly the first few times they try a new jump. Falling down is an important part of the learning process as you find your footing.

DB

Dave Allen is a guitarist, composer and educator based in New York and Philadelphia. He has released three critically acclaimed recordings, the most recent being *The Sky Above Her*, and has toured with his own projects throughout the U.S., Europe and Asia. As a composer, Allen is known for his challenging but lyrical music, which features multi-meters and rhythmic layering, as well as intricate chromatic-based harmonies. His book *Advanced Rhythmic Concepts for Improvisors* is available from Mel Bay Publications. Allen has taught at New York University and Temple University, and is currently a senior lecturer at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Email him at dallen@uarts.edu.

Example 1: Three-Beat Cross-Pattern Blues

Example 2

Example 3

Example 4

Example 5



Christone "Kingfish" Ingram

Christone 'Kingfish' Ingram's Guitar Solo on 'Another Life Goes By'

It's good to hear the blues is still alive, and that's thanks in no small part to modern artists such as Christone Ingram, or Kingfish, as he's known. Since 2019, he's been keeping the blues both alive and modern, and his most recent release, *662 (Alligator)*, is continuing in this tradition. The number 662 is the telephone area code for Ingram's northern Mississippi home in the city of Clarksdale in Coahoma County, located only 10 miles from the legendary crossroads of Highways 61 and 49.

Take the track "Another Life Goes By," a slow G minor blues but with a modern beat. Also, it's a 12-bar that's four measures too long. After the v-iv, where a standard blues

would typically return to the tonic, this one instead moves back up to the v and then ascends through the vi and VII to get back to the I. It still sounds like a blues, though. Kingfish's one chorus is presented here, as well as his improvisation on the tag, which is over a G minor vamp. Guitar is an octave transposed instrument, so pitches are written an octave higher than they sound.

How Kingfish improvises is also looking forward, as well as honoring tradition. We have a lot of straight-up minor pentatonic (a staple in blues of any era), such as in the first two bars, as well as measures 12–16. Since these are the final four measures of the chorus, Kingfish is book-ending his improvisa-

tion with minor pentatonic. The outro exhibits its minor pentatonic from bars 17–21 and 23–24.

When adding the flat fifth to minor pentatonic, it produces what's commonly called the blues scale (also ubiquitous in blues music), and its first appearance is in measure 5. Kingfish doesn't revisit this sound through the remainder of his solo, and it's not until the coda (in bar 22) that we hear it again. And then, in measures 28–30, there's an entire run based on this sound, as well as in 33, almost the very end of the song.

It's curious that a sound so associated with this genre is used so sparingly, especially in the solo proper, but that's part of what

makes this improvisation special, as we'll see as we examine it more.

The G minor pentatonic scale consists of G-B \flat -C-D-F (root- \flat 3-4-5- \flat 7). There are two letters (or numbers, if you prefer) missing from this series. By adding in variations of these we can create the three minor modes (I recall devoting an entire article to this in a past issue of *DownBeat*). How do we know which to add? They're in the chord progression. There's an A natural in the Dm and F chords (it's the fifth and third, respectively) and no A \flat s in any of the chords. (This is an important thing to check, and the thing that my students often neglect, and then wonder why in some bars they have trouble not sounding "out").

The E \flat occurs within the Cm (and also in the E \flat , of course). Since these (A and E \flat) are the second and flat sixth, inserting them into the G minor pentatonic produces the aeolian, or natural minor, scale. This scale fits well over the entire progression since the notes are all in the chords (or, the scale has been constructed from putting the chords together is another way of looking at it). And this is exactly the sound Kingfish uses in bars 5-7, 11, 25-26 (though here it is only the A that shows up) and 31-32. That's almost 25% of his improvising devoted to a traditionally non-blues sound.

So Kingfish is taking three sounds that fit these harmonies: minor pentatonic, blues scale and the aeolian mode (some might consider the minor pentatonic with the addition of the ninth as a separate sound, which he used in measures 25-26), and moving between these to produce variety in his improvisation. For the coda, where there is only one chord, continuing to use these various sounds connects it to his previous improvisation.

There are two instances when we hear double stops: measures 6-7 in the first solo and 26 and 30-33 in the second). In the first instances (6-7 and 26), he's playing diatonic thirds, which is a very guitaristic thing to do. It sounds a bit more Spanish than blues, but fits here quite well. Also, it's a nice touch how he plays this in both sections, creating a connection between the main solo and the tag.

Also notice Kingfish's use of various types of slurs. We hear string bending, which is a crucial aspect of blues guitar. Measures 9, 13, 14, 21 and 28 all exhibit bending. Notice how some of them are half-step bends and some are full-step. The first bend in bar 11 is intriguing as it doesn't bend exactly to the G \flat (there's no way of notating this that I know of). This use of in-between notes is also part of the blues tradition. Listening to this music is the best means of learning these between-the-notes sounds and how they are traditionally used in the genre.

We also hear slides in measures 1, 4, 5, 12, 15, 16 and 23. In bars 31-32, Kingfish even slides into octaves.

And, of course, there are hammer-ons and pull-offs, which are created when a guitarist plucks one note and then either hammers a finger down on a higher note or plucks the string with a left-hand finger to produce a lower note (bars 2-3, 5, 6, 9, 12, 17, 19, 22, 23, 24, 28, 30 and 33). These effects are used to create more of a fluid, legato sound and also make the tone a bit closer to singing. They're such staples of guitar vocabulary that if they weren't there, we would miss them.

In bars 30-33 we hear octaves, popularized by jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery in the '50s and '60s, so this comes off as particularly jazzy, especially since he emphasizes the ninth, and yet it fits well within Kingfish's encompassing view of the blues.

Kingfish is clearly using traditional blues language, as well as elements not commonly associated with the blues. The way he combines them so as to sound natural together is what makes this solo so idiosyncratic while still fitting well within the style. **DB**

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Jimi Durso is a guitarist and bassist based in the New York area. He recently released an album of Indian classical music played on the string bass titled *Border Of Hiranyaloka*. Find out more at jimidurso.bandcamp.com.



Roger Sadowsky Crafts Frank Vignola Archtop

An Affordable Tool for Working Guitarists To Use on Stage, in Studio

For guitar maker Roger Sadowsky, it has always been all about the player, and he sees his creations simply as tools for musicians to utilize in expressing their art. Planting his roots in the heart of New York's active music scene, Sadowsky has surrounded himself with some of the world's top players, and his close relationships with those musicians has been a driving force in refining his craft. Sadowsky first entered the archtop market with the introduction of the Jim Hall model in 2003 and has since expanded the line to include numerous offerings. The newest member of his jazz guitar family is the Frank Vignola Signature Model, a fully hollow archtop featuring a slimmed-down body and dual pickup configuration.

Sadowsky started his luthier career in 1972, building flat-top acoustics under the guidance of Augie LoPrinzi. He soon moved into performing restoration and repairs for many of New York's top studio players. "Having to meet the needs of players of this level really helped me raise the bar in what I do," he said. He founded Sadowsky Guitars in 1979, initially offering solid-body electric guitars and basses and later expanding into archtops.

Sadowsky had been servicing Hall's guitars since 1982, and, as the archtop market really began to take off, he became frustrated with the high prices of both the vintage and new guitars on the market. "A lot of these instruments were 10 to 15 thousand dollars, and I just didn't know any gigging musicians who could afford that," he said.

With a clear vision of what he wanted, Sadowsky worked with luthier Dana Bourgeois to design his first archtop. Focusing on creating an affordable instrument that would meet the needs of gigging musicians, the decision was made to use laminate wood in the construction. After an extensive search, Sadowsky located a five-ply maple laminate in Japan that met his criteria. He needed it to be extremely light and capable of offering a decent level of acoustic response while also providing feedback resistance when amplified. This special laminate is used throughout the entire Sadowsky archtop line. In addition to supplying the laminate, the Japanese factory also manufactures the guitar bodies under the close supervision of Sadowsky's production liaison. With his materials and manufacturer in place, he began to design his first signature archtop, the Jim Hall model, followed by the Jimmy Bruno, and the Frank Vignola signature guitars. The archtop line also includes the Semi-Hollow and the SS-15.

The Frank Vignola signature model came about due to a backstage

meeting at the New York club Birdland between Vignola and Sadowsky. Vignola was hosting his regular "Guitar Night" with Hall, and Sadowsky mentioned that he had just come out with a two-pickup version of his SS-15 model. Vignola felt he needed a guitar that could produce more volume when playing against bass and drums, and after auditioning the guitar, "Frank absolutely fell in love with it," Sadowsky said.

Sadowsky's archtops follow a logical evolution beginning with the 16-inch-wide, 2¼-inch-deep Jim Hall model, which gave birth to the slightly smaller-bodied Jimmy Bruno model, followed by the thin-bodied Semi-Hollow, the SS-15. The Frank Vignola is essentially a two-pickup version of the SS-15 with an additional pickup in the bridge position.

Sadowsky is extremely selective when it comes to his signature guitars and does not actively solicit artists. In fact, there are only three artist signature models within his current archtop line. He seems to let the artist come to his guitars rather than the other way around. The Vignola model evolved from the guitarist's love of the two-pickup SS-15. Interestingly, he asked for no modifications from Sadowsky's original design. "I offered to dial the guitar in to Frank's specifications, but he said, 'No, the guitar is perfect — you nailed it,'" Sadowsky remembered.

As with other Sadowsky guitars, the Vignola model is constructed in Japan, but all hardware, fretwork and setup are done in the U.S. by Sadowsky, who said that a minimum of 20 hours goes into each instrument once it arrives from the factory. The guitar has a 15-inch bout and 1¼-inch body depth but remains fully hollow with no center block and sports a floating ebony bridge and suspended archtop tailpiece. The body is constructed from Sadowsky's five-ply maple laminate and the neck is mahogany. The two pickups are stock DiMarzio 36th Anniversary PAFs, "one of the finest pickups I've ever worked with," Sadowsky said. He has consistently utilized body-mounted pickups as opposed to floating in order to provide the player easier access to swapping them out.

"I want my guitars to be player-friendly, and being able to put a different pickup in is part of being player-friendly," he said.

Sadowsky sees the Frank Vignola Signature model as a tool for musicians to use, and he wanted it to be both affordable and functional. Priced at \$6,500 with a hardshell case, it is true workingman's instrument.

—Keith Baumann

sadowsky.com

Yamaha SLB300PRO Silent Bass

Further Refined Tone & Playability

Building on the success of its SLB300SK, introduced two years ago as a major update on the original Silent Bass design, Yamaha has developed the SLB300PRO. Suited for the professional performer, the SLB300PRO goes way beyond the standard definition of an electric upright bass, offering unprecedented tonal control and nearly unlimited creative potential. As the flagship of Yamaha's Silent Bass line, the new instrument offers tone that is remarkably close to an acoustic bass, plus even more refined playability.

Starting with the SLB100 model, introduced in 2000, Silent Bass has been used extensively by performers who note its playing comfort and its clear, rich, full upright sound. The original design gave players a true ergonomic feel by including all the touch points of an acoustic upright bass.

The SLB300PRO mainly benefits from several material improvements to the SLB300SK design. "The woods we used are more seasoned," said Ken Dattmore, strings marketing manager, Winds & Strings, Yamaha. "Acoustically, it sounds better because of that."

The body is made of spruce and maple, hardwoods used for centuries by luthiers to craft full-sized orchestral basses. Mahogany is also included to produce a cool-looking light/dark layering effect on the instrument's through-body design.

The SLB300PRO employs an ebony fingerboard that distinguishes it from the SLB300SK, which has a rosewood fingerboard. Slight adjustments have been made to the instrument's bridge, which uses Yamaha's new Acoustic Resonance Enhancement technology to create a dynamic boost.

"If the SLB300SK went to 10, then the SLB300PRO goes to 11," Dattmore said, in the spirit of the musical mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*.

Like the SLB300SK, the SLB300PRO uses proprietary Studio Response Technology to model an acoustic bass played through different high-end acoustic microphones, ranging from the clear, crisp sound of a dynamic mic to the well-balanced timbre and warm low-frequency emphasis of classic and vintage vacuum-tube mics. SRT provides performers with complete control of their sound directly from the instrument itself.

The SLB300PRO comes in a soft, padded case. It can be broken down and packed into a TSA case without fear of being damaged during transportation. And it gives bassists the flexibility to take their acoustic sound to places that they might otherwise think twice about bringing an expensive, classic, acoustic instrument — like an outdoor gig on a cold, rainy day or in a hot, humid setting indoors. Amplification is as simple as plugging the instrument into a cube, mixing board or recording console. A headphones jack allows for hours of silent practice.

"More professional bassists are becoming interested in having an electric upright because it offers better portability and high-quality sound amplification," Dattmore said. "At just under 16 pounds, the SLB300PRO is extremely portable and offers the best microphone modeling options, making it possible for professional players to use it every day, in any situation."

—Ed Enright

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Norah Jones and Christian McBride open their duo set with Hank Williams' "Cold, Cold Heart" at the sixth annual Jazz House Kids Jazz Set fundraiser.

Sinclair Powell (left) and Miles Schreiner perform "Autumn Leaves" during Jazz Set.

Jazz House Kids: The Art of Instilling Joy

HIS LEFT HAND ON THE BASS, CHRISTIAN McBride spoke as he does with playful conviction: "You're out of your mind." Norah Jones smiled. From her duo mate, she coaxed a reluctant solo out front as the two artists opened their set at the Ralph Pucci Gallery on West 18th Street. A moment later, blowing his charming self-effacement into oblivion, McBride delivered a brief and greasy solo before they dug in to Hank Williams' "Cold, Cold Heart."

Jones and McBride hadn't played together before that evening. But their February performance marked the sixth annual Jazz Set benefit concert, one that designer and arts patron Ralph Pucci has curated for the New Jersey-based education and performance organization Jazz House Kids. Before long, the artists' distinct, recognizable expressions settled into a single gesture of spontaneity and joy. For Jazz House Kids founder and President Melissa Walker, that's the whole idea:

"Jazz says, 'You don't have to sound exactly like me. You can be Cannonball Adderley, and you can be John Coltrane, and we can be in the same piece of music.'"

Jones and McBride, the latter serving as JHK artistic director, played selections from the singer/songwriter's canon as well as "The Nearness Of You," inviting current students and alumni to join them on "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" and evening closer "Centerpiece." Other student performances punctuated the hits, including those of "Autumn Leaves" and "Work Song," performed by saxophonist-composer and former Jazz House Kid Birsa

Chatterjee's ensemble.

Over the years, Jazz Set has evolved to showcase three levels of student development, providing rising stars the opportunity to play with internationally acclaimed artists that have included Diana Krall, Laurie Anderson, John Pizzarelli, Wynton Marsalis and Esperanza Spalding. They glean valuable insight from their bandstand conversations, such as Jones' recommendation to treat restaurant gigs as paid practice. This method of mentoring alongside practical curriculum renders the Jazz House attractive to students pursuing careers as touring artists. But its mission has a broader reach: to empower the whole student, positioning each of them toward diverse career success.

"Jazz House is the perfect place for someone who is super-serious about jazz," Walker said. "But [it's also] a fertile training ground for young people on and off the stage." Citing former students who have assumed leadership roles in business, cybertechnology, law, military service and finance, she credits an intentional model for interdisciplinary success that combines community building and risk-taking. "When you're pulling from 40 different communities — in the summer, seeing kids nationally and internationally — you get that rich cultural aspect of this music. Kids gravitate to that."

That sense of community, at once sprawling and intimate, is integral to the Jazz House philosophy that students feel confident enough to make themselves uncomfortable only when they feel meaningfully supported. Ted Chubb,

the organization's director of cultural programming, as well as a trumpet player and composer, views the organization's unique curriculum delivery as integral for student engagement and empowerment.

"When the music is taught from a perspective of cultural expression," he said, "students feel more ownership ... and see themselves as a part of the legacy and future continuum of the music."

Jazz House instructors have included Mike Lee, Camille Thurman, Anthony Ware, Alexis Cuadrado and Abraham Burton, among other working artists. Luminaries who have shown their support with hands-on engagement have included Sheila E., Dee Dee Bridgewater, Wynton Marsalis, Dianne Reeves, Wayne Shorter, Angélique Kidjo and the late George Duke. Because leadership and faculty consider exposure and deep listening elemental, curriculum repertoire is staggering in volume and sophistication. Students face new challenges every week. But community-centered programming creates a kind of low-impact discomfort for students, promoting healthy risk-taking and leadership skill development. For a generation transforming every corner of the workplace and normalizing the career pivot, that skill set proves crucial.

"These young people are poised for today," Walker said. "They know how to manage their time, set their priorities, collaborate and approach what they're doing with confidence. And they really can rise and improvise."

— Stephanie Jones

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Marc Johnson

Bassist Marc Johnson says, “Rhythmically, a bassist has to perform very secure and confident phrases to really communicate their ideas clearly. That is true of any improvising musician, but especially a bass player.” He’s a veteran who broke into the spotlight with Bill Evans, joining up with him in 1978. His bands have included Bass Desires, with Bill Frisell and John Scofield, and Right Brain Patrol. He serves as the anchor for the band led by his wife, pianist/vocalist Eliane Elias. And, in 2021, he released a solo album, *Overpass* (ECM), which received 4½ stars in the December issue of *DownBeat*. At his home study in East Hampton, New York, Johnson took his very first Blindfold Test.

Stanley Clarke

“I Mean You” (*Standards*, Kind of Blue, 2006) Clarke, bass; Patrice Rushen, piano; Ndugu Chancler, drums.

I like the Monk tune with its rhythmic possibilities, where you can jostle around. The bass player goes into the upper register à la Gary Peacock. He’s doing so much extraordinary stuff on the double bass like playing fast with leaps, but it’s hard to take solos in this context. So, this isn’t compelling enough. I’ll give it 3 stars.

Gary Peacock

“Only Now” (*Just So Happens*, Postcards, 1994) Gary Peacock, bass; Bill Frisell, guitar.

This is right up my alley. I don’t know who this is, but that adventurous repetition is something I’ve done a lot in my career. The approach to the content is something I can relate to. The guitar stuff is so Frisellian. I’m so fond of Bill’s playing. The bass player sounds like it could be some ECM Scandinavian, but it could also be Gary Peacock, even though I didn’t know he was into that kind of repetitive sound. I can hear his warmth, point and elasticity of his bass. He articulates so well. I can hear the juice of the sound with his bass and Bill’s pointillism and oddball intervals in little clusters. This is fun, like a Kandinsky painting in sound.

Christian McBride Trio

“Ham Hocks And Cabbage” (*Out Here*, Mack Avenue, 2013) McBride, bass; Christian Sands, piano; Ulysses Owens Jr., drums.

They’re playing in a sound that’s Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson. The playing is competent. The tune starts out good, then has some wobbly moments that get cleared up toward the end. The intention is from that traditional school. The bass is recorded well, probably with a microphone. I was thinking maybe John Clayton, but it doesn’t quite sound like him. It’s Christian? He does walk like Christian. At the beginning of his solo he was laying back on the phrasing, and it doesn’t sound like his bandmates were hanging with that. But you can hear Christian as a student of the bass driving the beat like nobody else can. He’s imaginative, soulful and articulates with his left hand really well. His playing can be contagious, but for this tune, 3 stars.

Ron Carter

“Blues Farm” (*Blues Farm*, CTI/Sony, 2003, rec’d 1973) Carter, bass; Hubert Laws, flute; Bob James, piano; Billy Cobham, drums; Ralph Peterson, percussion; others.

A couple of things clued me in to who this could be. With those low extensions on the bass, it had to be Ron Carter. With this particular track, I don’t know if this was his intention or the studio producer: “Hey, let’s do a rock tune. We can record and overdub the melody.” I’m sure Ron was game. There are hallmarks of his playing, like his subtle glissandos. This is not my favorite Ron Carter track by a long shot. I would not have gravitated to this. But I love him. I’ll give Ron 5 stars for anything.

“This is right up my alley,” Marc Johnson said of a Gary Peacock cut.



CAROLINE FONTANIEU

Ben Allison

“Realization” (*Peace Pipe*, Palmetto, 2002) Allison, bass; Michael Blake, saxophone, bass clarinet; Frank Kimbrough, keyboards; Michael Sarin, drums.

This to me is real music. The bassist has the sensibility of playing through the harmony and interjecting things while he’s walking and using the sensibility of the horns in the way the harmony moves. It’s just gorgeous. Ah, Ben Allison. I don’t know this track, but I strongly relate to his approach. He’s a man after my own heart. He’s such a good guy on so many different levels. He’s a community builder who embodies the spirit of jazz.

Dave Holland/Kenny Barron

“The Oracle” (*The Art Of Conversation*, Impulse, 2014) Holland, bass; Barron, piano.

This starts out nice. It’s pretty with nothing clanky to distract you from entering the sound space. It’s reminiscent of the Bill Evans/Scott LaFaro approach. The bassist plays up and down the strings with a little bit of legato. He’s not attacking every note. I can hear the details, but at some point, it’s not compelling. At times the bass player hits some tension notes, but for the most part he was just up and down. For the most part, this is hitting me kind of average. It’s Dave? Holy cow, I don’t usually associate that sound with Dave’s playing. At one time in my development, he was very important. His sound is beautiful and is a little more aggressive than what he’s playing here. Still, I’ll give this 4 stars.

Charles Mingus

“Serenade In Blue” (*Debut Records Story*, Debut/Fantasy, 1997, rec’d 1955) Mingus, bass; Eddie Bert, trombone; George Barrow, tenor saxophone; Mal Waldron, piano; Willie Jones, drums.

This could easily be Mingus because of the arrangements and the way the horn parts are distributed in the ensemble. He starts the piece out bowing and blending that sound into the same passage the horns are taking. Very cool. This track sounds like early Mingus, but it’s got that essential spirit and soul. I love Mingus.

Charlie Haden/Jim Hall

“In The Moment” (*Charlie Haden/Jim Hall*, Impulse, 2014) Haden, bass; Hall, guitar.

There’s too much reverb and the bass is tucked back so far. But I could hear phrases that sound like Charlie Haden. Charlie and the guitarist play angular, a little free. They have motivic material to play off, and there’s definitely a tune in there. The composition hangs together when they solo. Even though it’s free, it still has structural integrity. Great improvisors who play in the free world imply structure and impose structure in the process of creating. 5 stars.

DB

The “Blindfold Test” is a listening test that challenges the featured artist to discuss and identify the music and musicians who performed on selected recordings. The artist is then asked to rate each tune using a 5-star system. No information is given to the artist prior to the test.

MATTHEW MUÑESES

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With the release of his sophomore album, *Noli Me Tángere*, saxophonist, composer and educator Matthew Muñeses magnifies the late 19th century revolution in the Philippines on an impassioned and vigorous set of original compositions, as he pays tribute to Filipino writer and national hero Jose Rizal. Featuring Stu Mindeman on piano, Clark Sommers on bass and Dana Hall on drums.

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