

## KRISTEN LEE SERGEANT

Vocalist Kristen Lee Sergeant's new album is titled *Smolder*.



JORDAN FREY

# 'I'LL NEVER BE SETTLED'

It's no coincidence that Kristen Lee Sergeant sings several lyrics referencing wine on her sophomore release, *Smolder* (Plastic Sax). That's because when Sergeant moved to New York in 2005 armed with a clear plan to pursue a career in musical theater, she paid the bills with, as she puts it, an "easy, low-stress" job in a wine store that "gave me space to focus on developing my voice." Then, at the onset of an aesthetic journey that would proceed from opera to musical theater to cabaret to jazz, Sergeant took notes on bottles, immersed herself in oenological fundamentals and developed sufficient chops to land a sommelier gig at the popular restaurant Gotham Bar & Grill, before moving to The Grill, which the New York Times designated Restaurant of the Year in 2017.

"New York quickly tells you who you are, and I recalibrated," Sergeant said over espresso at a Greenwich Village cafe, explaining her artistic shift to more intimate styles of performing. "I needed to know how to use a microphone, and really sing to people in the audience—the fourth wall had to go. I put a lot more on the line now than I did when I was performing."

You can hear the truth of this self-description on *Smolder*, a concept album that opens with a vivid rendition of Spandau Ballet's 1983 hit "True" and two original songs on the subject of troubled erotic love. Then Sergeant moves into well-wrought interpretations of seven songs culled from various corners of the jazz and musical theater canons that address the "smolder" metaphor from different angles. Throughout the proceedings, Sergeant interacts organically with a swinging rhythm section (Jeb Patton, piano; Cameron Brown, bass; Jay Sawyer, drums). And she coalesces her investigations into the disciplines of orchestration and arranging, expanding her palette to incorporate the instrumental voices of Jody Redhage Ferber on cello, and Ted Nash on alto flute and alto saxophone.

"If I like something, I want to dig in," Sergeant said. "I want to know what makes it work." She applied those imperatives when establishing a

business model for *Smolder*, for which she incorporated herself, taking on investments, rather than angel donations. "It's about taking ownership over myself as an artist and a business woman," she said. "I've tried the model where someone else does it for you. It hasn't worked. For me, to be creative is to be an entrepreneur. 'Entrepreneur' just means you want to make things."

These days, Sergeant is making her own wine. In 2014, she and Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra stalwart Nash, with whom she recently began cohabiting, launched the Two Notes brand. "Ted had an idea to plant grapes, and I had wonderful connections through the wine industry that allowed us to connect with a like-minded winemaker," she said.

Nash elaborated in a separate conversation. "This wine exemplifies how Kristen and I love to explore and express things that we are passionate about—as is music," he said. He noted that Sergeant, born and raised in 390-year-old fishing village Manchester-on-the-Sea, Massachusetts, "loves Old World style, French wine," whereas he, a Southern Californian, is "more New World—hit me over the head with a big, rich taste. Two Notes blends both worlds, to satisfy both of our tastes."

Last August, with releases of *Smolder* and a second Two Notes vintage both impending, Sergeant left The Grill to devote more time, care and attention to creative endeavors. "I was working with the best in the business," she said. "I tasted some of the greatest wines in the world. Some of these need to be cellared awhile because in youth they haven't become cohesive. I feel that the wine industry helped me cellar myself for the music world."

"New York City is the home to nomads who don't feel at home in the world, and jazz is the home for musical nomads. It has infinite possibilities. It demands you bring all of yourself musically to the fore, and then go further. I'll never be settled, but being unsettled is what the art form of jazz demands."

—Ted Panken

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## VICTOR HASKINS

## PATH TO SELF-DISCOVERY

When trumpeter and composer Victor Haskins teaches young students about jazz, he tries to explain to them that the music is less than a “what” and more of a “how” when expressing ideas. “Everything is centered around driving that point home,” said the Richmond, Virginia-based Haskins after giving a presentation to students at Washington, D.C.’s Oyster Adams Bilingual School this spring.

Haskins, 26, came to Oyster Adams as director of the Kennedy Center’s in-school jazz ensembles program. Students were mostly kindergartners, a situation that in lesser hands could prove challenging, given the level of sophistication and maturity typically required to appreciate jazz.

But the trumpeter believes that by not pandering to his young audience and being honest with them about what he’s teaching, he reaches them more effectively. “Everybody has the capacity to understand things that are complex, difficult or deep,” said Haskins, who also is the director of jazz ensembles at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg. “So, I just try to present what we are doing in a way that’s very logical and very exciting. And I try to bring in a wide variety of sounds, grooves and ideas that you might hear in any range of jazz music.”

In addition to playing trumpet, Haskins piqued many students’ curiosity by playing an electronic wind instrument; he wanted them to understand that jazz isn’t solely about acoustic instrumentation. Drummer Tony Martucci and bassist Randall Pharr—Haskins’ regular trio mates—joined him for the school presentation.

The bandleader features the EWI prominently on his self-released sophomore album, *Showing Up*. On the billowing “Grey,” the strutting “Five In The Pocket” and the probing “Psithurism,” Haskins creates striking electro-textures and tonal colors on the EWI that place him in the lineage of trumpeters like Miles Davis, Jon Hassell and Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, who all have used electronics to articulate and extend their music vocabularies.

The EWI typically is associated with reed players, Michael Brecker being among its more notable practitioners. When Haskins was attending Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, many of his friends were into the late saxophonist’s work. “He was an amazing musician, but I wasn’t into Michael Brecker, personally. But I became aware of the EWI through his music,” Haskins recalled.

Haskins sought the sonic explorations of the EWI while conceiving his “Improvi-Story” presentation. He had become frustrated with trying to make the trumpet emit sounds and textures that were beyond its capacity. “I felt like I was trying to fit a square peg inside a round hole,” he said.

Haskins found it challenging to imbue the EWI with some of the more human elements that the trumpet lends itself to: the manipulation of sound through embouchure, facial muscles and the positioning of valves. “Most of the emotional content on the EWI comes from how you design and trigger the individual sound patches,” he explained.

Haskins’ 2013 debut, *The Truth*, is an acoustic jazz affair. And even though some of the compositions on *Showing Up* were composed between 2013 and 2014, Haskins wasn’t compelled to release a sophomore album until six years later, partly because he felt that he didn’t have anything worth saying musically. The following year, though, he began exploring the EWI.

In addition to searching for new sounds, he yearned for personal growth, which led him to start going to therapy in 2018. “I realized that I let that sit on the back burner while I was working on music,” he



JOSH MARCUS

Victor Haskins cultivated his affinity for EWI as a student at Richmond’s Virginia Commonwealth University.

explained. “I realized that I wasn’t completely satisfied with how I was living life, even though I was accomplishing quite a few things professionally. That’s where the title comes from.”

Haskins applied for an arts grant to help fund the making of *Showing Up*, but didn’t get it. At first, he contemplated that as an excuse to delay the release. But his newfound sense of self-discovery, both personally and professionally, continued to propel him forward.

“I’m in the process of becoming; we are always in the act of becoming,” Haskins said. “So, I decided to make *Showing Up* as a timestamp. Everything sort of happened when it was meant to happen.”

—John Murph

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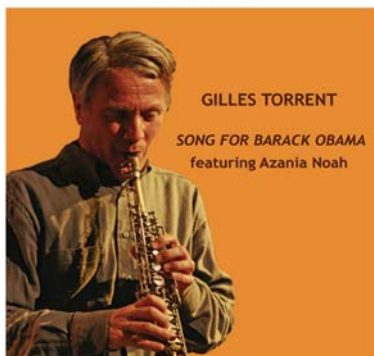
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GERHARD RICHTER



Pianist Simon Nabatov has released dozens of albums on Leo.

# ENDURING PASSION

Leo Feigin brought lots of passion but little music-industry experience to the job when he launched his namesake label in 1979, heralding the arrival of the Leo imprint with the now-classic album *Salutes Bessie Smith* by keyboardist, singer and AACM pioneer Amina Claudine Myers. Still, he was savvy. Fresh on the heels of that title, Feigin introduced the sounds of Soviet jazz to the world, with the first album by the Ganelin Trio to see release beyond the Iron Curtain. Four decades later, the label head laughs when asked if he initially envisioned his endeavor lasting this long.

"There were no ideas beyond one LP," Feigin said. "After several LPs, I realized this is what I want to do."

This year, the label celebrates its 40th anniversary: While other imprints dedicated to the avant-garde have come and gone, Feigin's has soldiered on. His catalog is flush with recordings of major figures like Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Evan Parker and Marilyn Crispell. But perhaps his greatest achievement has been giving a platform to artists from countries that weren't known for free-jazz or improvised music.

"The origin of the music is not important," he said. "What is important is the originality of the music."

During Leo's first decade, Feigin released dazzling sounds from Soviet artists like Sergey Kuryokhin, Valentina Pomomareva and Sainkho Namtchylak. And in 1989 came the monumental 10-disc set *Document: New Music From Russia*, showcasing a wildly divergent array of work, much of it produced illicitly amid Soviet suppression. Feigin, who left Russia in 1973 and settled in London, where he worked for the Russian service of the BBC, drew on a growing set of contacts from his homeland to share the music.

Pianist Simon Nabatov, another Russian émigré, has released dozens of albums on Leo during the past two decades, and recognizes the importance

of Feigin's work: "It was nothing short of a heroic act for everyone involved—smuggling forbidden music out of the Soviet Union, giving musicians their voice in the West and placing this cultural phenomenon on the global map, not known prior to Leo's activities."

"Russia is a very special case for me," Feigin said. "The music scene is phenomenal. But it's very difficult to penetrate, even now. That's why I've always had this compassion. I always wanted to bring some Russian stuff."

This fall, the label founder will take a touring jazz festival to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Arkhangelsk and other cities for its eighth iteration.

Nabatov is just one of many figures who've maintained a long relationship with the label. "Leo combines the best qualities one can wish for in a label chief: curiosity and passion for creative music, and unwavering integrity in dealing with musicians," he said.

Part of that integrity involves encouraging artists to work freely with other imprints. "At a very early stage, I realized that the more exposure an artist gets with other labels, the faster his progress towards the top is going to be," Feigin said.

These days, Feigin lives in remote Kingskerswell, some 200 miles from London, and no longer takes an active role in producing music, instead handling administrative tasks while the musicians themselves record and design artwork. But he remains committed to the task.

While Leo continues to work with established figures like Ivo Perelman, Silke Eberhard and Frank Gratkowski, much of its energy is invested in lesser-known talent. "There are different reasons why I produce a CD, but one of the reasons is to encourage," Feigin said. "The music might not be perfect, but the encouragement must be there, and it always pays, always."

—Peter Margasak



Trips is a good old samba jazz session. The six instrumentalists bask in the joy of playing songs written by one of their own, someone they trust; someone whose music they interpret through arrangements of an undeniable quality. And when instrumental music reaches this level of harmony, its allure immediately catches the ear of anyone who hears it. And that is when instrumental music becomes even more beautiful. Recorded in Rio de Janeiro with Brazilian musicians.

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