

# THE BEYOND ISSUE

# DOWNBEAT

Jazz, Bl-

## JACOB COLLIER'S BOUNDLESS FIRE

Meshell  
Ndegeocello

Cecil Taylor's  
Final Years

John Clayton  
& Rufus Reid  
Blindfold Test, Part 2

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SEPTEMBER 2024

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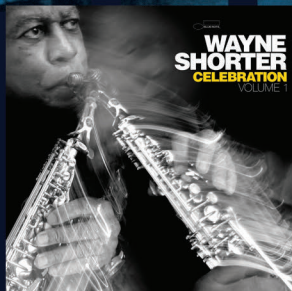
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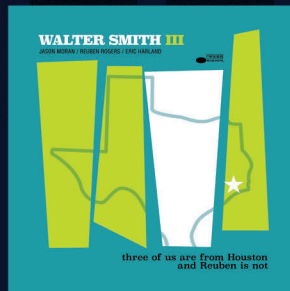


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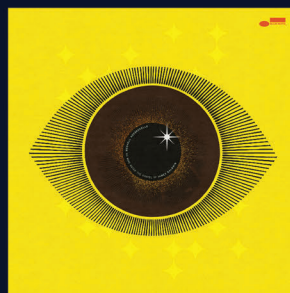
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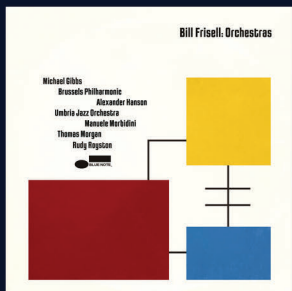
### MESHELL NDEGEOCELLO NO MORE WATER

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### LINDA SIKHAKHANE ILADI

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# SEPTEMBER 2024

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BY TINA EDWARDS

Jacob Collier has been described by fans and the press on countless occasions as a “genius” and a “musical prodigy,” and such praise is backed up by his chosen “godfathers” Quincy Jones and Herbie Hancock as well as Hans Zimmer and Chris Martin of Coldplay. Such descriptors don’t appear to faze the London-born musician, who is the first Brit to win a Grammy for each of his first four albums — six Grammys in total.



“It wasn’t until I moved to New York City when I was 22 that I met people like Beverly Jenkins, Greg Tate and Arthur Jafa that I expanded the knowing of myself,” says Meshell Ndegeocello of the path that led her to the work of James Baldwin.

Cover photo by Michael Jackson

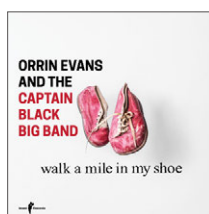
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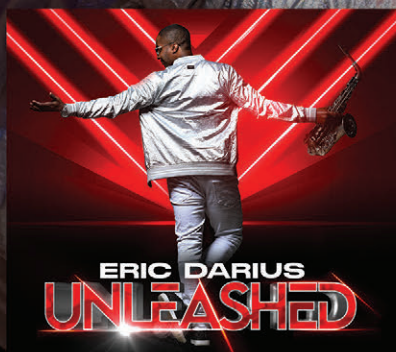


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## First Take > BY FRANK ALKYER



Maynard Ferguson and Roy Hargrove at Universal CityJazz in 1999.

# So, What's 'Beyond'?

**AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, WE STILL GET** the question: "What the heck is 'Beyond' in our tagline, Jazz, Blues & Beyond?"

Back in 1990, DownBeat's tagline was "For Contemporary Musicians." It might have been cool at one time, but as the decade clicked from the '80s into the '90s, "contemporary" translated to "smooth" jazz — a bit confining and not what this magazine was about. So, we searched. We went back to some old ones, like "The Jazz Bible." (Let's not bring religion into this, but I've always felt this music is mightily spiritual!) Or, "Jazz, Blues, Rock." (Well, rock had a confining feeling, too, considering that the hottest music of the day was hip-hop.)

So, we wracked our brains. It's funny to note that at one time DownBeat ran a contest offering a \$1,000 prize to the lucky reader who could find a new, more accurate name for jazz because jazz had come to mean too many things to too many people. The winning entry was Crew Cut.

That was in 1949, and it obviously caught on!

We were facing a similar conundrum entering the '90s. Jazz, 40-plus years later, had branched, morphed and spread its wings so far and wide. How could you capture it in just a few words?

The answer was in the master's voice. I was listening to a live recording of Duke Ellington, and heard him say, "Ladies and gentlemen, that was a musician beyond category, Harry Carney."

And Jazz, Blues & Beyond was born. DownBeat remains rooted in the blues, dedicated to jazz and a champion of artists who create sound that is boundless, borderless and beyond category.

With that, welcome to The Beyond Issue. It's

packed with stories about artists who choose blank sonic canvases over tight genres. It's an issue where the memory of the great avant garde pioneer Cecil Taylor can rest next to a young vibrant pop star in Jacob Collier and an intensely thoughtful, searching bassist and composer like Meshell Ndegeocello.

And if you say these things don't fit together, we don't mind. In our universe, they do.

A quick insider story before we close. Back in 1999, this magazine agreed to have the DownBeat Hall of Fame open at Universal CityWalk in Orlando, Florida, in a club called CityJazz. It didn't last long, as big commerce and jazz don't often mix well, but on the night of the opening, it was glorious. Five Hall of Famers were there: Artie Shaw, Horace Silver, Elvin Jones, Maynard Ferguson and Cecil Taylor. The Roy Hargrove Quintet played first (see the April and May 1999 issues). Universal insisted one of their artists, specifically a smooth jazz band that will remain nameless, perform as the headlining act.

Our Hall of Famers dug the Hargrove Quintet's amazing set. Maynard even jumped onstage and jammed with Roy. But we were ready for them (and some of our more hard-core fans) to bolt when the second band came on.

That didn't happen. They stayed and listened. And when we saw Maynard and Cecil dancing together in front of the stage — one of the craziest sights I've seen in 35 years on the gig — you just had to smile and join in.

Beyond category. It all fits, if the mood is right. Thank you, Sir Duke!

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## Chords & Discords



### Anniversary Issue Kudos!

I've never written a letter or email to the editor of any magazine or paper before, but I wanted to write to y'all about how much I am enjoying the 90th anniversary issue (July 2024). Before I read about the concept of the two sides, I thought there was a

printing issue, but combining both historical articles and a look to the future in that way was great!

In particular I really like the "25 For The Future" article. I was disappointed in the lack of younger musicians in your 90 Greatest of All Time list (June Issue), but you made up for that in this expanded feature. It has given me a good listening list of newer musicians, and I was happy to see Elena Pinderhughes on the list. I've loved her playing for a while, and I was glad to read that she'll be releasing two debuts soon.

This is why I subscribe to DownBeat: It makes jazz music feel alive and thriving in the present. There is so much good music still to be made and so many talented artists still making it. Thank you!

BRET TURNER  
MOUNT VERNON, WASHINGTON

### Don't Belittle Kamasi

J.D. Considine's review on Kamasi Washington's latest album concludes with the belittling comment "Jazz for dummies ...". This is the latest episode in a long series of polemics that Washington has faced. A few years back, Branford Marsalis — whom I highly admire — instinctively reacted on a request to characterize Washington's music by stating, "Kamasi is not jazz." When we see a daring new artist coming under fire, we should remind ourselves of what Miles Davies had to go through when he released *Bitches Brew* in 1970. The critics pretty much brushed him a sell-out; however, 54 years later, as it has turned out, the only thing wrong with *Bitches Brew* was that Davis was half a century ahead of his time. I am not overly impressed by *Fearless Movement*, either, but duly recognize and appreciate that it's a bold step forward, even at the risk of proving a failed experiment. Experiments by their very nature are not guaranteed to succeed; they just show you what to do, or not to do, next time. But it could also prove to be — quoting Ralph Gleason's liner notes on *Bitches Brew* — "Just different. A new beauty. A different beauty." Check out the track "Dream State" as an example. Conservative purists can go home.

JOACHIM PEKTZILIKOGLOU  
ST. CATHARINES, ONTARIO, CANADA

ing the artist with a more relevant and contextually valid appraisal of their art.

STEVE WINTER  
VIA EMAIL

**Editor's Note:** Steve, I can't tell you how many times we've considered doing something along these lines. And every time we do, we say, "Yes, but that space could go to highlighting another artist." Still, it's a good idea, and we'll give it more thought.

### Tinney, Not Terry

Your 90th Anniversary issue featured an article about Charlie Parker that mentions pianist Allen Terry. However, my father, Allen Tinney, played with Mr. Parker.

ANGELA D. LEAVY  
VIA EMAIL

**Editors Note:** That's an error dating back to 1949. We're happy to correct the mistake!

### Corrections

We hate errors, but we make them. And we truly regret them. Our apologies.

- In the July issue, we misspelled bassist Stephan Crump's first name.
- In the July Blindfold Test, we misspelled Clare Fischer's first name.
- In the August Critics Poll issue, Cal Tjader's name was auto-corrected to Cal Trad-er (and we're embarrassed!) in listings for Historical Album of the Year.
- In August's Trombone category, Ryan Kerberle's name should have been bolded for his first-place tie with Michael Dease.

Have a Chord or Discord? Email us at [editor@downbeat.com](mailto:editor@downbeat.com) or find us on Facebook & Twitter.



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### Steve's Dream

My long-standing dream for all art form publications is for the editor to mandate that for each published review, the reviewer must include a brief disclosure of their professional experience plus artistic likes and dislikes. Having the reviewer's information printed at the beginning of every published review would give the reader a better understanding of a reviewer's perspective while provid-



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MICHAEL PUTLAND



Vocalist Norma Winstone writes of lost love, melancholy and dreams on her new recording with pianist Kit Downes.

## Winstone-Downes Duets Are the Stuff of Dreams

U.K. vocalist Norma Winstone took the title of her new album, *Outpost Of Dreams*, from the first piece that she and pianist Kit Downes had ever written together: his music, her lyrics. She listened over and over again to Downes' melancholic instrumental until the words for their tune, "The Steppe," began to take shape.

"I remember the starting line," Winstone said in a remote interview with DownBeat. "It's about a feeling of losing somebody, and there's no way that you can find them."

The song's last line, though, gives the

album its thematic title: "I thought that I heard you today/The slow drip, drip of a fantasy/I'm almost submerging/In this lonely outpost of dreams."

Conveying such strong emotions — without a whiff of the maudlin or precious — is Winstone's bailiwick as both a lyricist and vocal interpreter of modern jazz composition. Her lyric-writing in particular stands out for its captivating imagery: "A Timeless Place" — her poetic adaptation of pianist Jimmy Rowles' breathless ballad, "The Peacocks" — has become something of a vocal jazz classic,

recorded by singers as distinguished as Mark Murphy, Tierney Sutton and Jazzmeia Horn.

Winstone's authorial intent seems eminently personal, almost private. And she writes to her own vocal mien, suited for more sparing melodic lines and nuanced jazz soundscapes. Such vulnerability is all the more visible in a duo setting like *Outpost Of Dreams*, where Winstone's vocals stand starkly against the minimal background of Downes' intuitive playing. Creatively, there is no place to hide.

The idea of recording an album together —





Downes and Winstone on stage

# 'It seemed to work because I love the sense of danger in music.'

—Winstone on playing with Downes

and a duo record specifically — was Downes'. Winstone and Downes had first met when he was subbing for Nikki Iles, Winstone's regular trio pianist, on a London gig; the easy musical rapport between the two had sparked that initial conversation.

It was only a coincidence that soon thereafter ECM contacted Winstone about doing another album, the first for her longstanding label after a six-year hiatus. Given Downes' professed interest in recording together, she asked him to join her on the project.

"Kit loved the duo recording that I did with [pianist] John Taylor, *Like Song, Like Weather*, and he preferred to use just voice and piano," Winstone recalled. "[By then] we'd done one or two concerts together, and they were always last-minute — but it seemed to work because I love the sense of danger in music. That's why I loved working with John Taylor — you never knew what was going to happen. It could go anywhere."

During the 50-plus years of her career, Winstone herself has garnered accolades for her ability to "go anywhere" vocally, whether

reframing a standard, fronting jazz ensembles of any size or exploring experimental vocal improvisation. She's been known mostly for the latter, however, especially with the avant-garde trio Azimuth, formed in 1977 with her then-husband Taylor and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler. Winstone first recorded for ECM as a part of Azimuth and has since appeared on more than a dozen of the label's releases.

Her ECM work gained a new audience when rapper Drake sampled a track from Azimuth's eponymous debut on his 2023 album *For All The Dogs*; a one-minute clip from "The Tunnel," featuring Winstone's ethereal voice and pensive lyrics, opens "IDGAF," one of Drake's chart-topping singles. That Azimuth's sound still resonates with artists and listeners alike almost 50 years on speaks to the universality of its appeal — due in no small part to Winstone's contributions. The 10-track lineup on *Outpost Of Dreams* furthers this legacy.

The opener, "El" — the second of Downes' four compositions on the album — brims

with forward motion and optimism, and Downes' lullaby-like solo (honoring his young daughter) shows how expertly this composer commandeers simplicity. By contrast, "Nocturne," a piece that he'd originally written for classical piano, proved more difficult as a rangy vocal piece, but Winstone meets Downes' harmonic challenge with her haunting, resolute lyrics. Last, Downes fashioned a free composition to enhance Winstone's spoken-word performance on "In Search Of Sleep," a sorrowful musing that underscores the album's reflective theme.

The pair also tackled selections by some of Winstone's earlier co-creators: The rhythmic "Fly The Wind," with music by Taylor, afforded Winstone the space to play with an equally cadenced vocalese line. And composer Ralph Towner's "Beneath An Evening Sky," a time-shifting elegy, became a free exposition under Downes' touch, prompting some of the most romantic lyrics on the record.

Winstone also wanted to include Carla Bley's "Jesus Maria," drawn by its tricky, intervallic melody. Not knowing that the tune already had words, she wrote her own delicate verse, with a nod from Steve Swallow, Bley's longtime partner. (Of note, Winstone and Swallow, frequent collaborators, are releasing their own duo album on ECM later this year.)

Winstone also found herself captivated by a radio broadcast of fiddler Aidan O'Rourke's "Every Morning She Steps Out Of The Back Door," only to realize at its end that Downes was the other half of the on-air duo (playing harmonium, no less). She chose to add the song to the album, retitled as "Out Of The Dancing Sea," her sensate lyrics retaining all of the original's joyous feel.

Finally, toward the end of the record, Winstone added two traditional tunes: the Celtic air "Black Is The Color," with the original words, in a surprise turn as an expressionistic jazz tune, and "Rowing Home," a Scandinavian folk song reharmonized by Downes. In this final track, Winstone's lyrics again return to a sense of loss: "The perfect moment is gone," she sings.

After the album's July release, Winstone had several gigs booked throughout the U.K., with one of special interest: the We Out Here jazz festival, with her two sons, drummer Leo Taylor and singer/guitarist Alex Taylor. For this particular show she planned to pull from both her first solo record, *Edge Of Time* (Arco), and her sons' album with their father, *2081* (Cam Jazz), released after his passing in 2015. Post-Drake, she said, given the renewed interest in her 1970s work, she wanted to call the project "Edge Of Time Revisited."

"I don't know what might come of that," she added. "But I'm up for exploring." As always.

—Suzanne Lorge



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Jim Black, left, and Natsuki Tamura

# The Bombastic Reunion of Natsuki Tamura & Jim Black

IT WAS BACK IN 1999 THAT VOLCANIC forces were unleashed on *White & Blue* (Dutch Buzz Records), the second release by Japanese trumpeter Natsuki Tamura under his name. That ferocious free-improv manifesto — released on the heels of his 1997 solo trumpet debut, *A Song For Jyaki* (on Leo Lab, a subsidiary of the British avant garde jazz label Leo Records) — paired Tamura on different tracks with drummers Jim Black and Aaron Alexander. A showcase of the trumpeter's highly idiosyncratic vocabulary blending jazz lyricism with extended, otherworldly techniques on the trumpet, it recalled the adventurous, cutting-edge expressions of avant garde trumpet pioneer Wadada Leo Smith, who remains a huge influence on Tamura's current aesthetic. "He is the musician I respect the most right now," said Tamura. "He's also a friend."

That original *White & Blue* session emerged organically 25 years ago, as the trumpeter explained: "At the time, Jim, myself and

many other musicians were living in the Park Slope area of Brooklyn, and we often hung out together. Jim was already active in various bands. I had experience working in Japan as a Top 40 and studio musician, but I thought I could do something more interesting in New York, so I recorded duos with Jim and Aaron, which became *White & Blue*."

Spinning ahead 25 years after that initial encounter, Tamura and Black returned to the studio (this time in Bern, Switzerland) to record *NatJim* (Libra Records). And again, the sparks flew. "We are simply two more experienced improvisers and human beings," said Black of their reunion. "The musical mission remains the same as it did 25 years ago: to make what we would consider to be the best music possible in the given moment. And as usual with us, it was a fast and furious session. No wasted notes or output. And we sound-checked the minimum."

While short motifs and bits of notations that Tamura established at the beginning and

end of each piece provided some structural guidance, the rest was wide open for exploration. Only the ninth song, "Bonus," was completely improvised. Tamura covers a wide swath of textures and tones on *NatJim*, with Black alternately accompanying and engaging toe-to-toe with the trumpeter on his unusually deep-toned kit. "That's my one and only Sonor Hilite from 1989," he said. "I so rarely get to use it on sessions, but it was a treat to play because it responds exactly as I hear the sound in my head, no compromises. And it's tuned from very high to more low tones, just going for a wall-of-low-dense vibe."

On the very conversational "Afternoon City," the trumpeter conjures up the "jungle sound" of early Duke Ellington (courtesy of Bubber Miley and Cootie Williams) with some spectacular plunger mute work. Then, on the tightly crafted "Morning City," he executes some pristine, crisply articulated passages before engaging in some frantic exchanges with Black as the piece reaches an ecstatic



crescendo. Elsewhere on this highly interactive duo outing, Tamura unleashes torrents of breath-driven white noise on “Noisy City,” then mumbles/grunts/screams through the mouthpiece of his instrument on the audacious “Bright City.” As he said, “What kind of sounds can be produced from the trumpet? Does the sound that comes out match the music I’m trying to make? I’m still trying to figure that out. But I think some of those sounds I make are similar to a dog’s howling.”

Black, who first came to prominence in alt-jazz circles of the early ’90s, especially for his work with Human Feel, Tim Berne’s Bloodcount, Dave Douglas’ Tiny Bell Trio and the downtown collective Pachora, is the perfect complement to Tamura throughout *Natjim*. Whether doubling tightly crafted unisons on his kit, underscoring with deep Ginger Baker-like grooves, engaging in scattershot exchanges with Tamura on the energetic “City Of Night” or settling into a meditative zone on “Calm City,” Black is fully engaged. “Nothing was really spoken about beforehand,” he said. “And we came up with different rhythms and dynamics and velocities on the spot. That’s the beauty in working with the greatest improvisers.”

Pianist-composer Satoko Fujii, who produced the album and is also Tamura’s wife and musical soulmate, pointed out in her liner notes to *Natjim*: “They sound like whirling dervishes, playing with a vigor that utterly belies their ages [Tamura is 72, Black is 56]. Their fearless creativity is inspiring.” Regarding her trumpeter husband, she added, “Today, 55 years after his first playing gig in Japan, his playing is as powerful as ever.”

Tamura, who played in his high school brass band before gigging on Kyoto’s infamous negligee salon circuit as a young man, ended up joining the popular Tokyo big band New Herd Orchestra at age 26. He later became a ubiquitous session musician on Tokyo’s busy studio scene during the 1970s and finally came to the States, at age 35, to study at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, where Fujii also had studied.

The couple returned to Japan for six years before relocating to the States once again, this time to study at New England Conservatory, where Fujii studied with Paul Bley. Tamura made his debut recording as a leader in 1993 on *Tobifudo* with a quartet featuring Fujii on piano. They released their first duo album, *How Many?* (Leo Lab), in 1997 and have now

recorded 11 duet projects together, the most recent being 2024’s *Aloft*. Tamura has also appeared on a dozen recordings by his wife’s acclaimed Satoko Fujii Orchestra New York and another half dozen by her Sakoko Fujii Orchestra Tokyo. The couple currently resides in Kobe, Japan.

So, how was septuagenarian Tamura able to attack each tune on *Natjim* with such vigor? “I think the biggest factor is that I have been able to stay healthy,” he said. “Also, I know many older musicians around me who are still playing well, so maybe I am unconsciously playing in the same way. Really, I just love the music, and I love playing my instrument. I think that along with staying open to new sounds and approaches helps keep things fresh.”

And for Black, “The key to staying vital is to surround yourself with younger people and play music with them, share music with them and allow yourself to be influenced by them as much as possible. Also, further question, re-investigate and develop all of your knowledge and hard-earned, experienced wisdom. Stay an eternal student. Keep working and looking forward while also going back to the practice shed.”

—Bill Milkowski

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"I truly do love learning the history and what came before, and that's what I practice," says Meg Okura, pictured here with Kevin Hays. "But that's not necessarily what I do as a composer."

# Meg Okura's Multicultural Identity

**JAPANESE NATIVE MEG OKURA IS A NEW** York City-based Jewish-American composer and violinist. A graduate of Juilliard with two degrees in violin performance, Okura has steadily risen in the international jazz community, beginning in the early 1990s, and over the years has become intimately familiar with the significance placed on identity in music.

However, this awareness hasn't stopped her from embracing all of her musical gifts, regardless of style. It's a choice that in just a handful of years has led Okura to a copious amount of awards and recognition for her work, including 2022 and 2024 BRIO (Bronx Recognizes Its Own) Awards; 2021 NYC Women's Fund for Media, Music & Theater; 2021 Jazz Road Creative Residency; 2020 Copland House Residency Award; 2018 Chamber Music America New Jazz Works grant and more. Amid all of these honors, Okura has released *Lingering*, a new duo debut album with pianist Kevin Hays, a longtime collaborator.

Released via Adhyâropa Records, *Lingering* puts Okura's artistic instincts as a composer, improviser and collaborator on display across 14 original tracks: 12 by Okura and two by Hays. Though a soundly awarded jazz artist — this year, Okura won four different composition competitions for classical work and five for jazz — it's difficult to hear Okura's playing and writing styles and not wonder how her familiarity with classical and jazz come into play on the album. One minute she's delicately blending notes of harmonic double-stops on "Will

You Hear My Voice?" The next, she's employing frantic three-finger pizzicato, playing a flurry of notes in a way Okura likens to "how a bass guitarist would do it" on Kevin Hays' "Improvisation #1."

"I'm not really thinking, 'OK, let's do a classical thing here and let's do a jazz thing here.' But when you're doing something like [writing music], you try to access all of your resources, knowledge and experience," Okura says. "It's more like, 'What can I do with these materials?' A lot of the time, what I hear already has a combination of different styles."

Drawing on an abundance of stylistic inspirations may seem predictable based on Okura's musically diverse experience. However, her very approach to nurturing new ideas comes from another remarkable gift: perfect pitch. Often romanticized as a rare key to better performance, easier writing and flawless tuning, this innate ability isn't a cheat code. That said, in Okura's case, there are definite benefits. For her, it's more about composing than tonal refinement, specifically when it comes to trying to capture lightning in a bottle.

"I do hear a lot of things in my head so as far as composition goes; I can write where there is no piano," Okura explains. "I live in New York City, so I'd take the subway or I'd be waiting for something and in that time, I can kind of compose in my head, and I can chart [the music] out."

When it came to working on *Lingering* in the studio, especially tracking alongside Hays, Okura's tonal awareness and compositional instincts served as a complementary support whenever the duo played through an improvised

motif or crafted a progression. "Coming from classical, I didn't have the background of improvising based on jazz harmony training," says Okura. "So for me, [perfect pitch] has been very useful for [*Lingering*] and working with Kevin."

"We would leave an open improvisation section so [Kevin] could go to another chord, another key center, and I have to catch it. Whatever note he plays, I can emulate, go with it or create a chord with what he's playing."

Though this scene sounds like an effortless exchange between the duo, Okura doesn't discount the value of good old-fashioned studying and practice — her mastery of pitch merely serving as support rather than a main character that enables her to compose or stay in sync with Hays.

"It's been very important that I acquire more knowledge and study harmony, especially when I first started improvising," says Okura. "I was using my ears, then I had to start studying harmony so I could play chord changes. Like with bebop, you change every two beats. With [John Coltrane's] 'Giant Steps,' there's no way you can wait until you hear it [to figure out chord changes]."

"I truly do love learning the history and what came before, and that's what I practice. But that's not necessarily what I do as a composer. I don't try to emulate what came before. I try to be authentic and not deny what I've studied and all of my backgrounds as a composer."

Okura's very relationship with music itself has been intertwined with her quest for full authenticity for years, even from the early days of her group, the Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble — far preceding *Lingering* or even her 10-year collaborative relationship with Hays. "When I first started the Pan Asian Chamber Jazz Ensemble [in 2006], I used all of my multiple cultural and musical identities as an inspiration, in order to write original music," she says.

Though *Lingering* is the latest display of Okura finding new ways to write music that feels authentic to herself, how she pursues that feeling has changed with her perspective about how performing and composing jazz fit into her life. "Today it's kind of the opposite," she says. "I use music and the processes like composing and improvising in order to make sense of my rather complicated identity. In jazz composition I find solace."

The music of *Lingering* has put Okura's newfound inner peace into the spotlight. Not only that but over the whole process of reflection, composition, collaboration and performance to make this improvisatory record, she has uncovered freshly charged positivity about herself and the music she makes going forward, undeterred by prohibitive traditions or impossible expectations.

"I can embrace all of my backgrounds and feel accepted and feel at home," Okura says. "Truly at home." —Kira Grunenberg





Rotondi honed his multifaceted craft as a trumpeter/flugelhornist, composer, arranger and educator.

## In Memoriam: Trumpeter Jim Rotondi, 1962–2024

**JIM ROTONDI, A RENOWNED HARD-BOP** trumpeter/flugelhornist, composer and educator, died suddenly on July 7 at a hospital in France. He was 61.

His death was announced on Facebook by his wife, the former Julie Van Parys, on July 8. Cause of death was a heart attack.

Rotondi was acclaimed for his wide, round trumpet tone, remarkable virtuosity and assured swing. It served him with distinction in his years of work alongside the likes of soul superstar Ray Charles; jazz organist Charles Earland; pianists Harold Mabern, Mike LeDonne and Toshiko Akiyoshi; vibraphonists Lionel Hampton and Joe Locke; and tenor saxophonist George Coleman.

His most frequent collaborators, however, were tenor saxophonist Eric Alexander, trombonist Steve Davis, pianist David Hazeltine, bassist John Webber and drummer Joe Farnsworth: the other members of One For All, all of whom worked regularly and in varying combinations with each other outside the collective's aegis. This frequently included work as members of Rotondi's bands, with whom he released 14 albums.

Rotondi was also highly regarded as a composer with a strong foundation in melody, the blues and bebop, and as an educator, teach-

ing jazz trumpet for 14 years at the University for Music and Dramatic Arts in Graz, Austria. (He previously taught trumpet at Rutgers University and SUNY Purchase.)

James Robert Rotondi was born Aug. 28, 1962, in Butte, Montana, the youngest of five children in a musical family. His mother was a piano teacher and required all of her kids to take piano lessons. In junior high school, he switched to trumpet — only after which he heard Clifford Brown for the first time. "Pretty eye-opening, to say the least," he recalled in a 2019 interview. "So clear, so perfect, it's unbelievable."

After two undeclared years at the University of Oregon, Rotondi transferred to the University of North Texas in 1982, studying jazz trumpet — and winning first place in the International Trumpet Guild's jazz trumpet competition in 1984. Graduating in 1985, he moved to New York, where he freelanced for several years before being hired into Ray Charles' touring band in 1991.

From there Rotondi made the leap into the big bands of Lionel Hampton, Toshiko Akiyoshi and Bob Mintzer, and small bands led by Charles Earland, Lou Donaldson, Curtis Fuller and Joe Chambers. He was also playing regularly at Small's with Eric Alexander,

where Criss Cross Records founder Gerry Teekens first heard Rotondi and recorded his debut album, *Introducing Jim Rotondi*.

While Rotondi was a frequent freelancer, Farnsworth, Alexander, Davis and Hazeltine remained his core cohort; together with bassist Peter Washington, they founded the "supergroup" hard-bop collective One For All in 1997. The band remained together for the next three decades, with John Webber eventually becoming the permanent bass player. In addition, Rotondi and Hazeltine co-led an electric group, Full House.

Rotondi moved to Austria in 2010 to teach at the University for Music and Dramatic Arts, where he was an accomplished and well-liked educator, reviving his electric band as a means of teaching. He also worked frequently in bands across Europe, maintaining homes in France as well as in Austria. His most recent album, *Finesse*, recorded with both big band and orchestra, was released by Cellar Music in February.

In addition to Julie, his wife of 20 years, Rotondi is survived by two brothers, Douglas and Frank Rotondi; two sisters, Susan Rotondi and Mary Ann Rotondi Heus; and several nieces and nephews.

—Michael J. West





Compay Segundo of Buena Vista Social Club

GERAINT LEWIS



David Bither, Nonesuch president

ROBERT EDWARDS



Ambrose Akinmusire

MICHAEL WILSON



Laurie Anderson

EBRU YILDIZ



The Black Keys

LARRY NIEHUES



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# After 60 years, Nonesuch Centers on Community

**CAN AN ONLINE EXPERIENCE MIMIC THE** record store hunt? Can streaming new singles transmit the feeling of stalking down aisles, through rows of familiar names and half-familiar images; of drawing from shelves a thin sleeve, shrink-wrapped and weighted, with the hope of discovery?

In the years since independent record stores and sprawling retail outlets began closing their doors permanently, avid listeners and collectors of the eclectic have established new rituals. Through the midnight album drop and the grocery-run playlist, they create their own communion with the music. Reddit threads reveal how many fans won't listen to single releases until they have streaming access to the entire album, from start to finish. But many still miss the freedom to explore, shielded from algorithmic matches and automated

RIYs. They miss those moments of strange solitude among clusters of people in search of something both physical and intangible.

"Everything we make, without exception, we put out a physical version of," says Nonesuch Records President David Bither, "whether that's vinyl in some cases or CDs in 100% of cases. That physical component is very important to us because it's the canvas on which the artists paint."

Now celebrating its 60th year, Nonesuch Records, which began as "a budget classical music label," has remained — much like those beloved indie record stores — steadfast in its commitment to the community that drives its purpose and sustains its success: the artists, listeners, writers, designers and conceptualists who value — who thrive on — originality and ambition.

"It's not a particular genre or style of music, but I think there was the intent, throughout the whole 60 years, to do something original that we weren't hearing anywhere else," says Bither, who began consulting at Nonesuch in the mid-1980s while at Elektra, its then umbrella label under Warner Communications. "We've never made decisions simply because we felt something would be successful. That's clearly one [reason for] everything we do, but it's not the only reason. It is about hearing something fresh and original that we feel we haven't heard anyone else try."

Among the artists and creative thinkers involved in what Nonesuch calls its "broad mission" through the years, the label advanced through the vision of "essentially three people," says Bither. Across six decades, he, Bob



Hurwitz and the late Tracey Sterne signed or closely partnered with a roster of individualists that includes Cesária Évora, George Crumb, Laurie Anderson, John Adams, Steve Reich, Buena Vista Social Club, Kronos Quartet, John Zorn, Rhiannon Giddens, The Black Keys, Brad Mehldau, Caetano Veloso, Wilco and Cécile McLorin Salvant. These and countless other artists have become part of the community that, according to Bither, “draws artists and listeners [to Nonesuch] more than anything else. Sometimes it starts early, sometimes it’s a little later. Cécile was a recognized, multi-Grammy-winning figure when she moved to Nonesuch. But I think [she], too, saw the community here and it spoke to her bigger ambitions as an artist.”

In December 2023 another such artist, Ambrose Akinmusire, issued *Owl Song*, the first of three records he’s partnered with Nonesuch to release following his prolific tenure with Blue Note Records. The trio album unites New Orleans drummer Herlin Riley and guitarist Bill Frisell, a former Nonesuch artist who released with the label for more than two decades.

And in the spirit of that broad mission, Akinmusire seized the opportunity to revitalize his creative impulses and stretch his sound. “I’m thinking a lot about how we’re living in a

day and age where a lot of energy is going into erasing boundaries and erasing these walls,” says the trumpet player and composer. “You see it in gender equality, you see it in genre, you see it in all these things. Even in a physical space — [for *Owl Song*] I thought about removing the bass [as] the wall between piano and drums.”

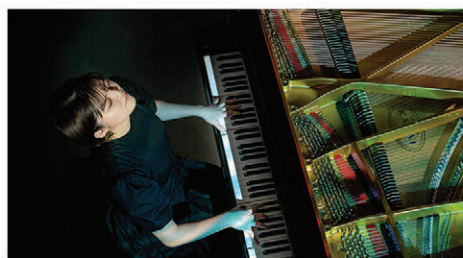
Roughly a year-and-a-half before the pandemic, Akinmusire began talks with Nonesuch with a desire to “have the freedom to do whatever I wanted to do, without associations.” Affirming his gratitude and appreciation for Blue Note, and acknowledging its earnest efforts to “stretch and push and deal with things,” he found himself drawn to the Nonesuch community of expansive styles, voices and perspectives. “I honestly have never felt comfortable only being [considered a jazz artist]” he says. “I’ve had classical commissions that I’ve wanted to release, and I didn’t feel comfortable doing that on Blue Note. I just wanted to have the freedom, going forward, to do what I wanted to do.”

According to Akinmusire, the encouragement, from a label, to abandon traditional classifications of genre transforms his approach to composing. “It changes my process completely,” he says. “Even if I do choose to do things that easily fit under the umbrella

of jazz, I think the music feels a little bit different if it feels like it can grow into other spaces.”

To celebrate 60 years of ambition, originality and an unwavering commitment to artistic expression, Nonesuch presents new listeners and longtime fans with a suite of programming and official merch, including a playlist of more than 750 tracks; an exhibition and portfolio set featuring 25 years of artist portraits by photographer Michael Wilson; and classic vinyl reissues, plus a partnership with Vinyl Me, Please to release its Paragon Series comprising reissues from Anderson and Kronos Quartet, The Black Keys, Philip Glass, Morton Subotnick, Allen Toussaint and Akiko Yano.

While no label in the digital age can replicate the treasure-hunt anticipation of an hour spent wandering through aisles of LPs, Nonesuch provides listeners a similar feeling of community and discovery. Its commemorative YouTube series *Nonesuch Selects* features artists like Anderson, Mehldau and guitarist Mary Halvorson stopping by the New York office to browse its physical archive and share recommendations. Through her three-minute video, pulling vinyls and CDs from drawers and shelves, Halvorson renews her sense of discovery, and repeats a refrain familiar to every ritualistic listener: “This is one of my favorite records.” —Stephanie Jones



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# Jacob Collier's

## TECHNICOLOR WORLD

BY TINA EDWARDS   PHOTOS BY MICHAEL JACKSON

Jacob Collier started to build his fanbase back in 2011 when he began sharing intoxicating arrangements to popular songs on YouTube. One of those fans was Quincy Jones, who in 2015 flew to Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London to watch Collier's solo show. Jones began managing him soon afterward. The rest, as they say, is history ... but not quite. Just turning 30 — with five studio albums and four world tours under his technicolored belt — the multi-instrumentalist, producer, arranger and educator is just getting started.





"I remember Wayne Shorter once saying to me, 'Play what you wish for,'" Collier says.

Collier has been described by fans and the press as a genius and a musical prodigy, and such praise is backed up by the likes of Jones and Herbie Hancock — his chosen “godfathers” — as well as film score composer-producer Hans Zimmer and Chris Martin of Coldplay. Such descriptors don’t appear to faze the young English musician, whose first four albums yielded a total of six Grammy Awards.

Music is in Collier’s blood. His mother, Suzie Collier, is a violinist, conductor and professor at the Royal Academy of Music; she had followed in almost the exact same footsteps as her father, Derek Collier. If you see Jacob perform with an orchestra, as he often does, you’ll likely spot his mom.

Collier could be called the first crossover jazz-infused star of the digital age. His YouTube versions of popular tracks like Stevie Wonder’s “Don’t You Worry ’Bout A Thing” and Gershwin’s “Fascinating Rhythm” demonstrated a rare level of talent, and not just in reference to his age. In his split-screen videos, Collier plays a band’s worth of instruments, from drums to upright

bass to keyboards, and performs harmony vocals divided into eight parts. His bedroom-based feats of ingenuity led directly to his first studio album, *In My Room* (Membrane International/Must Have Jazz/Qwest), released in 2016.

The *Djesse* period came next. Collier released a series of four albums between 2018 and 2024, each of them with distinct characters and showcasing remarkable virtuosity in harmony and composition. They boasted impressive lineups — not only featuring some of the biggest names in jazz, but chart-topping pop stars, too, from Alicia Keys to British rapper Stormzy. In total, Collier has worked with more than 150 collaborators.

The most notable collaborator of all, perhaps, is his audience. In 2019, Collier began to experiment with turning his audiences into split-harmony choirs. In fact, it’s this creative move that inspired the direction of *Djesse Vol. 4*, but Collier’s infatuation with the voice began much earlier. “If I look back at my earliest musical fascinations when I was aged 16 or 17 — recording in that room in London — they were all about the human

voice,” he says.

Collier is not guilty of gatekeeping. He frequently teaches master classes in music theory; at age 23, he took part in a 15-minute video on harmony for WIRED, explaining the concept to viewers through five levels of difficulty from “child” level through “Herbie Hancock” level, and, yes, Hancock shows up in the video. It went viral, with 15 million people watching Collier exchange wisdom with the legend.

Days before his 30th birthday on Aug. 2, Collier took a pause during one of the last dates of his U.S. tour to talk with DownBeat from a diner in Cincinnati. He was delivered a hamburger and fries as the conversation began.

Moments later, a mega-fan approaches the table. “I’m very sorry,” Collier says. “I can’t take a picture right now. I’m in an interview.” All the while, he politely refuses to bite into his burger as we talk, despite encouragement. He speaks with vibrant enthusiasm, as if this were the first and last interview he’d ever done. He is the most animated, excited-to-be-alive musician you could ever hope to meet.



**Tina Edwards:** I would love to ask you to reflect on your four *Djesse* albums, now that the final album, *Vol. 4*, has been released. Do you find that each one has a different character?

**Jacob Collier:** I do. When I laid out the four-album plan at the end of 2017, I knew that I wanted them to each be distinct, sonically. I knew that *Vol. 1* was going to be orchestral and vast, *Vol. 2* would be acoustic and intimate, *Vol. 3* would be more experimental and digital sounding, then *Vol. 4* was just a question mark — I didn't know! When I listen back to them now, they definitely hold an identity sonically, but I can also sense the person I was in each chapter; how I was amassing this experience, my priorities, my skill set — there's a sort of North Star that shone through the whole thing that led me to make certain decisions.

**Edwards:** How did you solve the question mark behind *Vol. 4*?

**Collier:** The interesting thing was that I really didn't know what it was going to look like; I didn't have a sense of it. I wasn't traveling

[due to COVID restrictions], and like many other artists around the world, I was just a bit thrown by the lack of people and the lack of reality that was surrounding the work I was doing. It took until I went on tour in 2022 to really figure out what the identity of that one was.

Ultimately, it was the audience choir that kicked it into being. It was standing on a stage and pushing the envelope within myself of what audiences can do when they're singing or when they're directed in interesting ways that completely rocked my socks off. That ended up being the anchor point of the album. Not just musically, but kind of spiritually.

**Edwards:** You've often used the voice very creatively, starting with your own vocal arrangements on YouTube. But what was the first moment where you thought about turning a live audience into a choir?

**Collier:** It dates back to my first memories of being a human. When I was 2, I used to watch my mom conduct the chamber orchestra at

the Royal Academy of Music — she still does it to this day. It was an amazing thing to watch her conduct and for the musicians to just spring into life. It's like casting a spell; I can't unsee that. I never thought of myself as a conductor of any kind. Then, when I started going on tour with a one-man show, I think I got excited about the audience getting involved. It wasn't until the end of 2019 that I first did the thing where I divide them into three parts and then move the parts up and down in pitch.

They would move by themselves, and it was a truly profound moment of realization for me because there was the feeling that it's so much bigger than me; I'm tapping into an understanding that everybody in the world has. As long as they've ever heard music, there's a sense that they understand what to do. I feel both at my biggest, but also in a sense at my smallest, in a beautiful way. I feel like a pixel in the image, but I don't feel like a main character in it. I still feel like I'm just scratching the surface, and I've been exploring it for five years.



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"You get to design the world you live in based on how you see it," says Collier of one piece of advice he got from Herbie Hancock.

## 'Quincy and Herbie are like my two godfathers!'

**Edwards:** Does it take courage to explore ideas like these? If so, what does courage look like to you?

**Collier:** Connecting with people always takes courage of some kind, right? It begins with the courage to look within yourself and figure out who you are, where you are, what matters to you, what interests you — and build a language out of those things. Then it becomes the courage to share that stuff. I think every artist on the face of the earth ... experiences

that feeling. It's a strange culture for creating things, because I feel like in some ways there's quite a pressure to be ready immediately. Pressure to come out of the gates knowing all the answers, knowing who you are, knowing what you want to say. I've embraced, over the years, the courage to take time.

**Edwards:** Your music theory knowledge feels infinite. I'm wondering how that affects your music making? Does the knowledge over-

whelm you, or liberate you?

**Collier:** That's a big question. I think of my love for music as having increased in resolution over time. What I mean by that is, I feel in an exciting way that if I hear something, or I play something, I'm able to understand both on an emotional level and then also on a technical level, the components that make it useful or meaningful or funny or interesting. Then there's also the part of music that no one really understands and can never understand, which is the magic and the mystery of it.

I've definitely spent a lot of time over the years deepening my understanding of things I love and reverse-engineering stuff. If I hear something I like, I'll think, "Why do I like that? What is this? How does this work? Where does this want to move? What are the emotional properties of this?" The thing I've come to realize — especially as an artist — is that if I rewind to 10 years ago, I was an explorer. Now I'm an artist *and* an explorer. You can't expect people to be moved by ideas or information. The only thing that can move a person is a person, right? So the best thing you can do as an artist is to embrace the idea of building a language out of the things that make you *you*. The stuff that feels the most *you* out of everything, you acquire that, and you stretch it and you understand it.

I would say, in a sense, when I'm writing music or playing music now, I'm not sitting there counting up numbers and solving equations and things with theory. In fact, I don't think about theory at all — it's kind of disappeared for me in a sense.

**Edwards:** Let's revert back to 10 years ago for a moment; you were building a name for yourself as the U.K. jazz scene was picking up steam. Did you feel a part of it?

**Collier:** To go back a couple steps further than that, I grew up deeply interested and fascinated by a lot of different kinds of music, including jazz. I remember there was a JazzFM compilation CD that ruled my car for the first 10 years of my life; I know every note of every song. But in the same car, there was Bartók, Bobby McFerrin, Queen, Sting and Stevie Wonder.

So, I think the first time I ever really encountered jazz as a defined concept was when I was about 16. I was starting to get really interested in harmony. I've always been absolutely obsessed with chords and what happens when you collide them in unusual, interesting ways. So that led me to start to explore the jazz scene as a student.

**Edwards:** Tell us about studying at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

**Collier:** I studied there, aged 16, in the junior





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"I see people as needing people more than they've ever needed people before," says Collier when asked about his worldview.

jazz department, and I auditioned for that on both bass and piano. I wasn't sure which to play, but I was encouraged to do piano as that's where the chords are. I never really went into the jazz education system thinking that on the other side, I would be a jazz musician. I guess the time I felt the closest to the jazz

scene was when I was studying it. When I left the Academy, halfway through my degree, I had this fierce hunger for expanding on the language of the things I was learning within the jazz world, but taking a step far beyond. I didn't think too much about genre and what kind of genre I wanted to live in, and I still

don't really think about that. Maybe I think about that now less than ever before.

**Edwards:** Your music and your mind have been championed by some of the greatest living legends, from Quincy Jones, who signed you in 2014, to Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. Is there anything they've shared with you that has influenced your music-making process?

**Collier:** Quincy and Herbie are like my two godfathers! It's been the most extraordinary privilege to get to know them. Some of the knowledge, wisdom and advice I've got from them is unsaid; it comes from hanging out and through osmosis. Quincy often talks about the balance between science and soul. It's the idea of understanding the criteria, the materials at play, the tool kit you have; his science has defined the game, but it's his soul that has moved people.

I forget when I'm hanging out with Herbie that he's not 18. He's one of these people that is so excited by life. Because of his deep Buddhist studies over the past 50-plus years, I think he's very connected to the world. He's the kind of spiritual being who is limitless; not opaque or intimidating. He wants to bring you into it. He also plays how he feels. Those two have really changed my life.

Me and Wayne Shorter have gone back so many years, and I remember Wayne Shorter once saying to me, "Play what you wish for." It's just one of those extreme bits of advice that hits you.

**Edwards:** You have a unique outlook; how do you see the world?

**Collier:** I see people as needing people more than they've ever needed people before. The world right now is more open, more vulnerable, more colorful than it's ever been. It's an interesting time to be creating music and creating things in the world. I think it's a challenging time to be creating things and to be a human in this world as well.

Foundationally, what I have noticed just from experiences, is that you get to design the world you live in based on how you see it. This is one of the things I've spoken to Herbie about — and it's a nuanced thing to articulate — but Herbie does such a good job of it.

If you look for fear in the world, you find it everywhere. If you look for doubt, if you look for cracks, then you find them.

It's true that a lot of things in the world right now are scary and unknown, and there aren't clear answers to a lot of the world's biggest problems. The other side of it is also true: If you look for love in the world, you will find it everywhere, in everything. Sometimes it's so deeply in disguise, but really everyone's just trying to love in the best way they know how.

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# Meshell Ndegeocello PREACHES *THE GOSPEL*

BY JOHN MURPH    PHOTOS BY ANDRE WAGNER

*It was less a matter of “if” and more of “when.” Meshell Ndegeocello’s transfixing new album, No More Water: The Gospel Of James Baldwin (Blue Note), seems an inevitability when one considers her career trajectory.*

**L**ike Baldwin, the iconic Black American novelist, essayist, playwright, poet and sociopolitical commentator, Ndegeocello is one of our most fearless, intimate, enthralling and at times confrontational artists to emerge in the 20th century. As a multi-instrumentalist, songwriter, singer, bandleader and conceptualist, she’s amassed a resilient discography that started in 1993 with the release of her intoxicating debut album, *Plantation Lullabies*. That LP caught the zeitgeist of the then-emerging jazz-hip-hop-soul hybrid, simultaneously anticipating the neo-soul movement as she covered a waterfront of themes such as institutional racism, personal sexual conquests, romantic yearnings and the comforting ecstasy of ’70s soul music.

As Ndegeocello’s solo career progressed, she addressed other controversies, such as religious hypocrisy, homophobia, capitalism, unbridled carnal lust and emotional infidelity, some of which challenged the often-conservative American soul music status quo. Musically, she has proven to be just as audacious, with a restive spirit that has fueled her explorations into modern jazz, Afrobeat, reggae, electronica and undefin-

able pop. She’s often laced her music with spoken word excerpts and references to various literary giants such as Eldridge Cleaver, Gil Scott-Heron, Angela Davis and Dick Gregory.

#### **The Roof, The Roof, The Roof Is On Fire ...**

*“Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?”*  
—James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

*No More Water* arrived on Aug. 2, 2024, the exact day of Baldwin’s centennial. The album drops during a time when the United States is facing another contentious time. President Joe Biden dropped out of the election following a disastrous debate performance. Vice President Kamala Harris stepped in.

All of this comes in the aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, violent attack on the U.S. Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump, who was defeated in the 2020 election. Three years later, after authorities prosecuted more than 350 of the assailants, the U.S. Supreme Court limited which defendants accused of participating in the Capitol riot could be charged by federal prosecutors.









Also, in a 6–3 ruling this year, the Supreme Court granted Trump partial immunity from special counsel Jack Smith’s election subversion case. In a fragile U.S. democracy, which routinely demonstrates that not all its citizens are held accountable under its justice system, the Supreme Court seems to have given Trump and some of his followers a pass for their collective violence. This is Trump, the first U.S. president in history to be convicted of felony crimes (34 charges); who exhibited hateful disdain to women, people of color and immigrants during; and whose rhetoric emboldened hate groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers.

When Ndegeocello recorded *No More Water* in 2020, the U.S. was at another boiling point. The country — and many other parts of the world — erupted in mostly Black Lives Matter-led protests after Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer, killed

unarmed George Floyd outside a grocery store. The world was already in the grips of a historic pandemic, but videotaped footage of Floyd’s murder lit the match for heated protests, many of which were already simmering with rage after the deaths of Breonna Taylor, killed inside her home by Louisville, Kentucky, police in March 2020; and Ahmaud Arbery, killed the month before by three white men while jogging in his neighborhood in Glynn County, Georgia.

Ndegeocello cites Arbery’s murder as inspiration for “What Did I Do?” a somber ballad marked by a lurking bass line, suspenseful synth chords and Justin Hick’s plaintive, soul-searching singing.

“That song started with the bass line,” Ndegeocello explained in late June, just weeks before embarking on a European and U.S. tour. “When I’m playing that bass line, I feel Ahmaud getting assaulted and eventually shot while jogging. Can you imagine someone

chasing you down just for jogging? I cannot.”

The genesis of *No More Water* dates even further back, to the fall of 2016, when the Harlem Stage premiered *The Gospel of James Baldwin: Can I Get a Witness*, a commissioned theater piece Ndegeocello created with director Charlotte Brathwaite.

During the initial performances of *The Gospel of James Baldwin*, Barack Obama was ending his second term as U.S. president with the backdrop of the Black Lives Movement ascending in full swing after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of an unarmed Trayvon Martin and subsequent murders of other unarmed Black people in the U.S. that included Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and nine victims of the Charleston church massacre.

“In 2016, I woke up from my delusions of being post-race,” Ndegeocello says, alluding to witnessing all of the atrocities in the aftermath of the U.S. electing its first Black president. “I woke up from my delusions of things were getting better. And [some things] are better. We are not dying of cankerous sores; we are not in chains. But the mentality of the political system is not that different. And that’s what *The Fire Next Time* ages in you. It gives you a blueprint. Baldwin breaks down the police; he breaks down the church. In a clear, succinct manner, he breaks down white society and the Black Muslim movement at the same time. [The struggle for equality for all] is not one-sided, because the color of my skin is not a unifying factor.”

*The Fire Next Time* refers to Baldwin’s 1963 masterpiece in which he writes to his nephew about the horrors of being Black in the U.S. during his time. A year prior to *The Gospel of James Baldwin*, award-winning journalist, essayist and novelist Ta-Nehisi Coates issued *Between the World and Me*, a nonfiction book written as a letter to Coates’ then-13-year-old son about his thoughts on being Black in America.

Coates’ *Between the World and Me* ignited worldwide renewed interest in *The Fire Next Time*, whose structure it recalls; Baldwin’s book inspired the title of Ndegeocello’s *No More Water*. Surprisingly, she hadn’t read *The Fire Next Time* until she co-created *The Gospel of James Baldwin*.

“My mind was blown; I was so ashamed that I hadn’t read that,” Ndegeocello says before explaining how the book helped her release some deep-seated resentment toward her now-deceased parents. “[*The Fire Next Time*] gave me more empathy toward them. Not only were they trying to raise children; they were experiencing white supremacy in a way that I could not imagine.”

Ndegeocello, however, had read a few of Baldwin’s other books prior to working on



the theater piece. She grew up in Washington, D.C., which has long been a bastion for Black art, culture, education and upward economic and political mobility. Still, it wasn't until Ndegeocello left D.C. that her literary horizons broadened.

"I grew up with Disney and Shakespeare; I was definitely brought up in the dominant culture," Ndegeocello says about formative years in D.C. "It wasn't until I moved to New York City when I was 22 that I met people like Beverly Jenkins, Greg Tate and Arthur Jafa that I expanded the knowing of myself. I was blessed to have people around me who didn't

*'With this record, I'm not trying to punish you; I'm trying to help you heal.'*

treat me like I was ignorant, but they could see my provincialism."

#### Baldwin: Mind, Body & Spirit

In conversation, Ndegeocello often speaks of Baldwin in the present tense, as though he's physically still among us. Throughout *No More Water*, she sounds as if she's interacting with Baldwin's work as a living, breathing entity. With keen insight, she explores not only Baldwin's incisive observations on race relations, queer life, love and life as an artist, she contextualizes them inside more recent movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter.

"Baldwin not only propelled me to my future; he helped me digest the past," Ndegeocello says. "It was Baldwin who taught me that white culture really believes that it has something to offer that it thinks Black people need. It's not until you realize that the American dream is something that you have to take part and parcel that you realize you have to figure out how it works for and against you."

Ndegeocello, however, addresses Baldwin beyond the iconic civil rights intellectual and advocate. She makes listeners consider Baldwin as a complicated human being. In the liner notes, noted arts critic and essayist Hilton Als writes of giving Baldwin his body back.

"Hilton wants to give Baldwin back his cultural self," Ndegeocello explains. "Baldwin became polemic in a way. His creative, artistic self shifted, and he became almost a spokesperson. There's the creative, theatrical Baldwin, who wants to be in the zeitgeist of pop culture. There's the essayist, the civil rights person. And then there's Baldwin, the man whose father said he was unattractive; the man who did the church schtick; the man who is going through life thinking that he would never be loved."

"In a kind of way, Baldwin has been idolized as an idealogue rather than a queer person of color," adds Als, who also contributed text and spoken word to the album track "On The Mountain," which zeroes in on the concept of delivering Baldwin's body back to him. "In that idealization, what happens is the draining of their blood. I don't want us to idolize him that way, because he's a figure who deserves the com-



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"With 'Pride,' I wanted to express something that kind of had a disco feel — something inside of gay glamour that sounds like Sound of Blackness, Diana Ross or Sylvester," Ndegeocello said of the tune. "That music transforms my soul."

plexity of a real, living person. He lives on the page. And he lives in our hearts."

In this process of giving Baldwin back his body and complex humanity, Ndegeocello ponders what he would do if he was still living. "If Baldwin were still alive, I would ask, 'In your heart of hearts, what creative project did you really want to do?'" she says. "What would Baldwin think of Lil Nas X? I would ask him, 'Do you feel loved? How does it feel, living inside your body with your sexuality as you age? What was it like to lose three people that you knew and loved: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Medgar Evers?'"

#### Fire Music Reimagined

*"All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations."*

—James Baldwin, *Sonny's Blues*

*No More Water* unfolds with multiple timbral and emotional temperaments, underscored by jarring, vibrant, transfixing sonic collages that allude to the best work of Romare Bearden. Like Baldwin's prose, the

lyrics and spoken-word pieces on *No More Water* punch with unflinching force.

"I am a collagist; I come from that hip-hop world and go-go," Ndegeocello says. "I started writing music in collage form: through sampling. I come from a jazz background, even though my bass playing is not virtuosic. But I think in a jazz virtuosic way. I want to be the musician who writes compositions that other musicians like to play. And within those rhythmic and harmonic structures, they can find things they want to play within the composition. It gives them a place for self-expression."

*No More Water* shows Ndegeocello surrounded by longstanding collaborators — guitarist Chris Bruce, saxophonist Josh Johnson, drummer Abe Rounds, keyboardists Jebin Bruni, Julius Rodriguez and Jake Sherman, and singers Justin Hicks and Kenita Miller. The album also features searing spoken word performances from acclaimed poet and political-social activists Staceyann Chin, Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza, poet Paul Thompson and French jazz radio host Caroline Fontanieu.

At various times, the album howls with clenched-teeth fury, sobs in soul-crushing despair, prances in queer joy with cau-

tious optimism, investigates the deeper corridors of love and hate, and calls for unity and strength during exhausting, never-ending social activism.

*No More Water* opens with the contemplative and wry "Travels," on which Ndegeocello embodies Baldwin, observing the plights of Black America and ruminating on his role in the advancement of the struggle, while living in France. More poignantly, it articulates why Baldwin fled the U.S.: so that he could breathe and be.

Ndegeocello inserts snippets of Chin vigorously reciting Baldwin's famous 1963 lecture "The Artist's Struggle for Integrity" on two occasions on the album. "As an artist, you have this lofty idea of yourself when you're young," Ndegeocello says. "Hearing ['The Artist's Struggle for Integrity'] really helped me. That speech hurts me; it uplifts me; it brings me to my knees; it makes me want to better myself. It's the whole foundation of the Baldwin experience."

Chin's oratory gifts burn hotter on the incendiary "Raising The Roof," which encapsulates the frustration Black America has endured watching police murder unarmed Black people with near-absolute immunity during the last decade; the rousing "Tsunami



Rising,” on which she takes on white patriarchy and its oppression against Black women, particularly with regard to the policing of women’s bodies; and on the subversive “Thus Sayeth The Lorde,” where Chin channels the writings of Audre Lorde — one of Baldwin’s literary friends and contemporaries — to address conservative Christian-sanctioned patriarchy and misogyny.

The carnivalesque “Pride,” which percolates to an ebullient soca rhythm, surrounded by glitzy synth riffs, takes listeners inside what sounds like a rousing gay pride dance party from the perspective of a marginalized participant, dissecting the class stratification of the LGBTQ+ community based upon gender, race and gender identity.

“With ‘Pride,’ I wanted to express something that kind of had a disco feel — something inside of gay glamour that sounds like Sound of Blackness, Diana Ross or Sylvester. That music transforms my soul,” Ndegeocello says. Nevertheless, she has reservations about how some aspects of the queer community have been gobbled up for mainstream public consumption.

“I miss certain aspects of the closet,” says Ndegeocello. “I miss the underground myth of the music, parties and the clubs not being so commodified by the dominant culture. Baldwin taught me how to think for myself as a queer person, as a woman [and] as a two-spirited person. There’s a great essay about manhood and freaks that he wrote. It healed my lesbian machismo and my understanding of being a jazz musician. I wish every jazz musician would read *Another Country*. Baldwin talks about how the music affects us; and how we affect the music.”

Other standout cuts on *No More Water* include the bucolic “The Price Of The Ticket” sung from the perspective of an unarmed person pleading for their safety from trigger-happy police; the sanguine “Love,” which examines how true love helps us, in Baldwin’s words, to “take off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within”; and the transcendental “Down At The Cross,” on which Ndegeocello sings from the perspective of Baldwin facing his own demise.

#### We Don’t Need No Water

*“Human freedom is a complex, difficult – and private – thing. If we can liken life, for a moment, to a furnace, then freedom is the fire which burns away illusion.”*

—James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*

Without a doubt, *No More Water* speaks to America’s current turbulent times, especially for people of color, women and queer people in the aftermath of such recent

Supreme Court decisions that repealed women the constitutional rights to have an abortion and ended race-conscious affirmative actions in higher education. There’s also the continuous onslaught of anti-LGBTQ bills, involving censorship against teaching queer culture and history, denying medical care to transgender people and abolishing drag queen performances.

If that’s not enough, there’s the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 on the horizon, which, if Trump is re-elected, calls for the president to have absolute power over the executive branch. It also seeks to abolish the Department of Education and the Environmental Protection Agency and partisan control of the Department of Justice, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Commerce, among other federal agencies.

As timely and crucial as *No More Water*

is, Ndegeocello worried briefly that the sentiments inside the music would be outdated, considering that she recorded it four years ago. “The fear of it being old — I had to catch myself,” she says. “I had to really think of my intention. The whole intention of this album is to perhaps [inspire] 10 out of 100 people to pick up a Baldwin book and teach it in their classes.

“Look how prophetic he is,” she continues. “We are experiencing what he talked about. There’s the crime; and then there’s the denial of the crime, which is the sickness. And that [sickness] is in the individual on a micro level and on the macro level of what we call the United States. That sickness will seethe inside you and become cancerous when you deny the past and don’t reconcile your betrayals, lies and missteps. With this record, I’m not trying to punish you; I’m trying to help you heal.”

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Cecil Taylor at the 2008 Portland Jazz Festival.





# CECIL TAYLOR: THE FINAL YEARS

*By Philip Freeman  
Photo by Daniel Sheehan*

**Editor's Note:** This article has been adapted from a new book, *In the Brewing Luminous: The Life & Music of Cecil Taylor*, available now from Wolke Verlag.

**The Kyoto Prize is not as well-known as the Guggenheim fellowship, or the MacArthur grant, both of which pianist, composer and musical seeker Cecil Taylor received during his lifetime. But it is more exclusive — only three, or, at most, four people in the fields of science, philosophy and the arts receive it each year.**

**I**n November 2013, Taylor was announced as one of the three Kyoto Prize laureates for that year. He traveled to Japan at the beginning of the month and performed at the Kyoto International Conference Center on Nov. 11, joined by longtime friend and collaborator Min Tanaka.

Taylor had been accompanied to Japan by Noel

Muir, a contractor who had befriended him while working on the building next door to Taylor's Fort Greene brownstone. But when they returned to New York, it became clear that Muir was no friend at all. He had informed the Inamori Foundation that the prize money — \$492,722.55 — should be deposited in an account that he claimed belonged to the Cecil Taylor Foundation.





Taylor accepting the 2013 Kyoto Prize.

However, it was actually the account belonging to Muir's company, MCAI Construction. Two weeks after Taylor's return from Japan, the money was sent via wire transfer, and Muir withdrew a sizable portion of it in cash, using the rest for his business.

The fraud was reported to authorities in the summer of 2014; Muir was arrested in August and charged with grand larceny. Brooklyn district attorney Kenneth Thompson said at a press conference announcing the charges, "The defendant befriended Mr. Taylor and won his trust, which later made it easier for him to allegedly swindle this vulnerable, elderly and great jazz musician."

Taylor, for his part, said, "What is painful in your heart is you have friends, that's what friends are for, and if they make a mistake, hopefully the law will take care of them."

As part of the court proceedings, Taylor was examined by an attorney named Adam Wilner in order to determine whether he was in need of a legal guardian. Wilner initially met Taylor in his role as court examiner, and then, with the pianist's consent, was appointed his legal guardian. He remained in that position until Taylor's death.

"Basically, as a guardian I [did] all kinds of social service things from making sure he's medically OK, making sure he's getting to doctor's appointments, he's getting the right kind of medication prescribed for him, making sure that his bills are paid and his finances are being managed, that whatever assets we're able to recover from any fraud prior to my involvement, we would recover," he said.

Noel Muir paid back \$200,000 of the money he'd stolen shortly after being arrested, but still owed Taylor the balance as the case passed through the justice system. From a cell on Rikers Island, he pleaded guilty in February 2016, though he filed a motion requesting new

counsel, claiming his lawyer had pressured him to take the plea. Ultimately, Muir was sentenced on April 4, 2016, to one-to-three years in prison. Brooklyn Supreme Court Judge Ruth Shillingford, who had vacated Muir's February motion, said, "The thing about this case is that the money was taken from someone who was almost 90 years old. There's a lot of damage done to someone at that age, when someone takes advantage of them — regardless of what the reasons are."

Taylor was not present.

Australian filmmaker Amiel Courtin-Wilson had arrived in New York in 2014, with the intention of making an impressionistic documentary portrait of Taylor. He borrowed a camera from a friend and began camping out on the pianist's doorstep from roughly noon to 10 p.m.

"On the seventh day, he opened the door at 7 p.m.," Courtin-Wilson recalled. "He said, 'I've been watching you. You seem very patient. Come inside.'"

Courtin-Wilson moved into Taylor's brownstone, where he lived off and on for the next two years.

Taylor wasn't playing much piano since returning from Japan, but he was mentally and physically active. "He always had, you know, four books spread out on his bed," Courtin-Wilson recalled. "He would practice, I would say, maybe like once a week, and then he might practice three or four hours."

The filmmaker cooked for Taylor, shopped for him and helped connect him with the wider world again. "It seemed like I'd arrived at a period where he was particularly reclusive. ... I mean, he definitely had his regular visitors. Don't get me wrong. There was, I would say, on average ... six or nine sort of regular visitors. And then, he would read, hold court, we would talk, five, six hours a day at least, listen to

music." Courtin-Wilson introduced Taylor to YouTube, showing him clips of Etta James and Stevie Wonder; the pianist referred to it as "the infernal library machine."

Courtin-Wilson describes Taylor as "a machine. ... I have so many photos of him being up until 8, 9, 10 o'clock in the morning and an array of people a third his age sleeping around him on couches and stuff — he would sometimes not sleep for close to two days."

Taylor's 87th birthday was a particularly long night in Courtin-Wilson's recollection.

"We were at KGB until like 8 a.m., and then everyone was fading, and he was really out-out. And then he wanted to go back [to Brooklyn] for breakfast, and we had pancakes and a big chocolate milkshake at the local diner. It was like 11 in the morning. And I was like, 'Cecil, I'm absolutely fucked. I need to sleep, man.' And we went home, and I slept. Woke up at like 4 and he hadn't gone to bed. He was awake until like 11 that night."

In 2015, the Whitney Museum had moved from its former location on Madison Avenue and 75th Street to a new building designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano at 99 Gansevoort St., just off the West Side Highway and marking the southern terminus of the High Line park. Jay Sanders, a curator of live performance events for the Whitney, had been planning a large-scale project with Taylor since mid-2014.

In December, Taylor came to the museum, still under construction, and Sanders gave him a tour of the fifth floor, a massive column-free space with gigantic windows overlooking the highway and the Hudson River on one side, and lower Manhattan on the other.

"The building hadn't opened," Sanders said, "and he came in this beautiful Pendleton-looking coat, and we gave him a hard hat ... and he saw that open floor and it was like, at that point, 'Would you like to do something here?' And he said yes. So that was the start of it."

*Open Plan: Cecil Taylor*, which ran April 15–24, 2016, was a multimedia art show, an academic conference and a concert series all in one. During its 10-day run, it included poetry readings, musical performances by Taylor's former sidemen, a panel discussion on the role of dance in his work featuring dancers who had performed with him, and much more. But most important of all was that Taylor himself played three times, twice at the beginning of the show and once at the end, with three different ensembles.

Taylor had barely touched the piano for months between his return from Japan and the time the show was first conceived. But as the hour drew closer, something in him reawakened.

"I still remember the night he first played, like, for real," Courtin-Wilson said. "It was raining and the basketball was on, and I was



downstairs making dinner, and I heard the piano go. And it was a familiar kind of sound. You could hear him shuffling across to his piano, but then instead of the usual scales, this most fucking beautiful, wistful, slow, almost like blues ... and it was the sound of the rain on the roof and this basketball match going and these notes, so much space between the notes, and that was the first moment I remember being so moved that he was inspired again, because at that point I'd been there on and off for almost 18 months. And then it really [was] like a dam broke. ... He played a lot, because he really wanted to get fit for it."

The first performance on April 14, 2016, was with Tony Oxley and Min Tanaka, who despite being a purely visual presence seemed to be a crucial component of the music from the pianist's perspective. Oxley was too ill to get behind a kit, but had prepared CDs of himself playing drums that he played through twin CD players with volume pedals, fading himself in and out; Sanders called it "beautiful and strange."

The second performance that night came as a surprise. After a break, Taylor played again with a group he called the New Unit, featuring Bobby Zankel on alto saxophone, Elliott Levin on tenor saxophone and flute, Harri Sjöström on soprano saxophone, Tristan Honsinger on cello, Albey Balgochian on bass and Jackson Krall on drums, with poetry by Jane Grenier Balgochian and Taylor himself.

Writer Hank Shteamer, who was present for the entire evening, wrote, "There was a sort of casual aspect to the proceedings. Much of the audience filed out, players made their way to the stage ... and what followed was a sort of loose, old-school free-jazz jam. Moments of inspiration, moments of tedium, but what was striking was the smile on Taylor's face."

The third and final performance, on April 24, featured another one-off ensemble: Harri Sjöström on soprano sax, Okkyung Lee on cello, Tony Oxley on electronics and Jackson Krall on drums. The music began slowly, but eventually rose to a towering height, with Taylor leaping and pounding his way across the keyboard and Krall driving him onward with what seemed like an unbroken series of explosions. After a little more than 35 minutes of music, though, he stopped playing, and everyone else stopped, too. Standing up at the keyboard, he began reading a poem, which turned into a discourse on issues of biology, human migration and the history of the artistic impulse in Man.

This was not poetry, it was a lecture, its theme a sustained counter to the traditional Western, phallogocentric narrative of (pre)history. He was arguing for Blackness, for matriarchy and for the primacy of art in the human spirit. In key ways, this was a direct articulation of theories that had flowed at the heart of his music for 60 years. And after a brief return



A promotional shot for Taylor's multi-arts exhibit *Open Plan* at the Whitney Museum in April 2016. This would be his last performance.

to the hyper-abstract, words-as-sounds poetic mode in which he'd begun, he stopped and said, "Thank you all, that's it," his voice full of life and joy.

He would never perform in public again.

In the months after the show, Taylor withdrew. Courtin-Wilson returned to Australia; the materials from the exhibit were crated up and returned to Taylor's home in Brooklyn; and Adam Wilner and his staff kept potentially untrustworthy people away.

"I totally understand, because he'd been totally ripped off and stolen from. I totally get the need for a lawyer to vet who came to see him," Courtin-Wilson said. "But what was really tragic to me was it seemed as though as less and less people were deemed trustworthy to see Cecil ... it seemed to accelerate his deterioration in my mind, which I thought was very sad."

Even if he was receding into dementia — which some claimed, and others denied — it was part of a larger shift. A kinder, gentler version of the infamously volatile Taylor emerged. "Certain things that had previously driven him had dissipated with age, maturity," said longtime friend Robert Levin. "I think he knew that he had achieved what he had set out to do, at least in some measure ... and that enabled him to relax, and to be more indulgent of other people's needs and characters."

Cecil Taylor died in his sleep, at home in Brooklyn, on April 5, 2018. The word had spread in the New York musical community that he was very ill, and he had been surrounded by friends and former collaborators for several days before his passing. A few days later, a memorial service was held at the Frank E. Campbell Memorial Chapel on Madison Avenue in Manhattan.

"I had nothing to say that I hadn't already said in a couple of things that I wrote, and it was too personal," Levin said. "You know, he didn't

need me to eulogize him. ... I didn't even go to the coffin. I didn't want to see him dead. I had already seen him die. I stayed away from the coffin and stayed out of anything I was hearing about what arrangements were being made. I mean, he wasn't there anymore. Wherever they put his body made no difference."

Taylor's body was cremated, but his ashes were interred at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, where many notable jazz musicians are buried, including Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and Max Roach.

Taylor died without a will, and as of this writing there are multiple competing factions trying to lay claim to his estate. Lawrence Kumpf of the nonprofit Blank Forms has been working to set up a foundation and preserve his work.

Kumpf quickly realized that he was going to have to take a very active role if he wanted to preserve any materials at all. "I was in touch with Adam Wilner initially because Cecil and I had been working on a book of [his] poetry together, and I wanted to complete that process. And then one day Adam was just like, 'I'm not involved in this anymore,' and he directed me to Kings County. So I went in and ... offered to advise them on some of the materials at the house and just sort of explained to them that he was an important figure and they shouldn't just, like, sell his stuff off at a flea market, which is normally what they do."

Hired as a consultant, he boxed up everything that remained in the house, documenting all of it and placing it in storage. One particular item was treated with special reverence: Taylor's Yamaha piano, which had lived in the house for decades.

"Right now it's at the Smithsonian in D.C.," Kumpf said, "It's in storage waiting for the estate to be settled and the paperwork to be filed so they can permanently integrate it into their collection."

DB



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# Reviews

Masterpiece ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★ Good ★★★ Fair ★★ Poor ★



COURTESY OF CONCORD

Milton Nascimento and esperanza spalding collaborate for the second time with *Milton + esperanza*.

## Milton Nascimento & esperanza spalding *Milton + esperanza*

CONCORD

★★★★

The first meeting of minds between bassist/singer esperanza spalding and Milton Nascimento was in 2010, when the Brazilian legend appeared on spalding's *Chamber Music Society*. On their shared track, "Apple Blossom," spalding and Nascimento sing in unison, across a distance in vocal range and quality: She's high and angelic; he's deep and earthy. Nascimento and spalding revisit their compelling pairing on *Milton + esperanza*, 16 tracks that spalding recorded in Brazil throughout 2023. The record gives special attention to some Nascimento classics, including the moody, synth-set "Outubro"; a charm-

ing orchestral version of "Morro Velho"; and the gently swaying "Um Vento Passou" (featuring a cameo by Paul Simon, singing in Portuguese).

Adding to the thrill, spalding's originals stretch the album's palette beyond the familiar: Listen to her extraordinary vocal doubling of the flute on "Wings For The Thought Bird," her fantastic melody writing on "Get It By Now" or the soulful interplay between vocal elements on the snippet "Late September." She also reconfigures some pop classics in intriguing ways: Lennon & McCartney's "A Day In The Life" as a slowly building duet with Nascimento, and Michael Jackson's grave "Earth Song," a moving plaint by singer Dianne Reeves and Nascimento with a choral/string backdrop.

In and among these full tracks, interpolations of off-air chats and musical sketches act as segues between the two artists' comple-

mentary visions. The strongest tie between them, however, lies in the final track, Wayne Shorter's "When You Dream," here in an extended version that frees up the time and melodic rendering of the original. Carolina Shorter guests, and spalding is at her interpretive best on this one. —Suzanne Lorge

**Milton + esperanza:** the music was there; Cais; Late September; Outubro; A Day In The Life; Interlude For Sac; Sac; Wings For The Thought Bird; The Way You Are; Earth Song; Morro Velho; Saudade Dos Aviação Da Panair (Conversando No Bar); Um Vento Passou; Get It By Now; outra planeta; When You Dream. (60:46)

**Personnel:** Milton Nascimento, vocals; esperanza spalding, bass, vocals; Matthew Stevens, guitar, backing vocals; Justin Tyson, drums, keyboards, vocals; Eric Doob, drums, percussion, backing vocals; Leo Genovese, piano, organ, backing vocals; Corey D. King, vocals, synths; Kainã Do Jê, percussion; Ronaldinho Silva, percussion; Lula Galvão, Guinga, guitar; Shabaka Hutchings, saxophone (3), flute (6, 12, 13); Elena Pinderhughes, flute (4, 8); Fernando Lodeiro, synth effects (5), backing vocals (5, 8); Guinga, vocals (6–8), guitar (7); Dianne Reeves (10), Lianne La Havas (12), Maria Gadú (12), Tim Bernardes (12), Paul Simon (13), Carolina Shorter (5, 16), vocals; Orquestra Ouro Preto (1, 2, 8, 10, 11, 13).

Ordering info: [concord.com](http://concord.com)



**ORRIN EVANS  
AND THE  
CAPTAIN  
BLACK  
BIG BAND**



walk a mile in my shoe

Imani Records

**Orrin Evans and the  
Captain Black Big Band  
Walk A Mile In My Shoe**

IMANI

★★★★½

As big bands go, Captain Black isn't exactly enormous: six horns (two each of trumpet, sax, and trombone) plus rhythm. But they make the most of what they've got, evoking an Ellingtonian palette behind Evans' skittering piano on "Hymn" and rendering "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" with the grace of a classical wind ensemble. Add in a pair of standout solos by guest trumpeter Nicholas Payton and there's plenty to delight horn fans.

**Wayne Shorter  
Celebration Volume 1**

BLUE NOTE

★★★★

Recorded in Stockholm in 2014, this live set is a gift, reportedly the first of more to come. It's not perfect, and, at 90-plus minutes, it's too long. But the late Shorter's quartet was rarely in a hurry. Its concerts often felt like long ropes of suspense punctuated by sudden knots of drama. It was usually worth the wait.

The program here features oblique takes on four familiar tunes — "Orbits," "Smilin' Through," "Lotus" and "She Moves Through The Fair" — as well as an unabashedly majestic ride on Artur Rubenstein's 1983 film theme "Edge Of The World" and five "Zero Gravity" group improvisations. Shorter's in fine fettle, his tenor a chuffing, raspy whisper, his soprano keening and screaming. He and his bandmates — Danilo Pérez (piano), John Patitucci (bass) and Brian Blade (drums) — radiate telepathic empathy.

Pinnacles of that simpatico occur in an early flurry on "Orbits" and a middle section of "She Moves Through The Fair," when Shorter, having finally gotten to the melody after about seven minutes, leads the band through a dramatic crescendo to an explosive climax. Wow. A series

Even so, most of the songs are centered around singers, not instrumentalists. Although this adds pop appeal to the proceedings, it doesn't diminish the jazz content; instead, it connects the music to the tradition of big band singers without forcing the sound into retro mode. Sure, Lisa Fischer's masterful delivery of "Blues In The Night" may trigger memories of Sarah Vaughan, but Mark Whitfield Jr.'s drumming puts the performance squarely in this century. Then there's Bilal's "All That I Am," which underscores how much common ground there is between current jazz and contemporary R&B, boasting a vocal that feels just as improvised as Payton's trumpet solo.

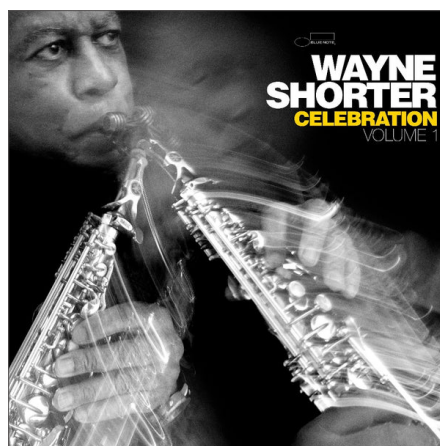
If, as some have suggested, the future of jazz will have less to do with extended improvisation than with communal groove and songs, *Walk A Mile In My Shoe* goes a long way toward illustrating how that can happen while keeping connected to the music's history.

—J.D. Considine

**Walk A Mile In My Shoe:** Dislocation Blues; Sunday In New York; All That I Am; Blues In The Night; Hymn; Save The Children; Overjoyed; Smoke Gets In Your Eyes; If. (46:31)

**Personnel:** Orrin Evans, piano; Nicholas Payton, trumpet (3, 7); Jesse Fischer, organ (1); Lisa Fischer (4, 7), Bilal (3, 6), Paul Jost (1, 9), Joanna Pascal (2), vocals; Marc Stasio, arranger (4, 6); John Raymond, arranger (5); Sean Jones, trumpet; Josh Lawrence, arranger (7), trumpet; Todd Bashore, arranger (9), alto saxophone, flute; Caleb Wheeler Curtis, tenor and soprano saxophone; David Gibson, arranger (1–3, 8), trombone; Reggie Watkins, trombone; Madison Rast (2, 5, 9), Vicente Archer (3, 4, 6, 7), bass; Anthony Tidd, electric bass (1); Anwar Marshall (2, 5, 6, 9), Mark Whitfield Jr. (3, 4, 7), drums.

**Ordering info:** [imanirecordsmusic.com](http://imanirecordsmusic.com)



of three short turns of "Zero Gravity" are also delightful. Later, "Zero Gravity To The 90th Dimension" shivers with highwire tension.

Elsewhere, the pace flags. The long opener, "15th Dimension," feels like a morose daydream with much portent and little content. "Lotus" drifts. But the action in this hyper-aware band was often microscopic; further listening may reveal more on these tracks.

—Paul de Barros

**Celebration Volume 1:** Zero Gravity To The 15th Dimension; Smilin' Through; Zero Gravity To The 11th Dimension; Zero Gravity To The 12th Dimension; Zero Gravity—Unbound; Orbits; Edge Of The World (End Title); Zero Gravity To The 90th Dimension; Lotus; She Moves Through The Fair. (94:26)

**Personnel:** Wayne Shorter, tenor and soprano saxophone; Danilo Pérez, piano; John Patitucci, bass; Brian Blade, drums.

**Ordering info:** [store.bluenote.com](http://store.bluenote.com)



**Michael Dease  
Grove's Groove**

LE COQ

★★★★½

Michael Dease has a sly look on the cover of *Grove's Groove*. Call it a mix of "Fret not, I got this" and "C'mon y'all, time for some fun." Music can live or die on attitude alone, and the trombonist has no lack of swag when he puts horn to mouth: He's one of those naturally effervescent dudes. But this album is an anomaly of sorts, ditching the sliding brass and testing out his baritone saxophone skills across the board. And guess what? Effervescence spills out of that cantankerous piece of plumbing, too.

Dease, who has earned the top slot in the Trombonist category of this magazine's annual Critics Poll for the last three years, began his musical life as a reed player — first alto saxophone, then tenor and soprano, now bari. Tackling the latter came with encouragement from Roy Hargrove, whose impact informs this new album. The bulk of Dease's squad, which stretches from pianist Bill Cunliffe to bassist Rodney Whitaker, has been part of the late trumpeter's orbit. The bold aura of these performances harks to the sound of early Hargrove victories such as *Public Eye*.

That bari turns out to be as authoritative as his 'bone. Whether it's the measured serenade of "Decisions" or the buzzy bop of "Minor Funk," Dease brings an unabashed verve to these pieces. But he's also a wise leader, sharing solo time with each of his accomplished mates. That decision gives *Grove's Groove* a more spacious feel, and from two vocal standards to the title track's Blakey-esque bounce, the elbow room each player receives is taken full advantage of.

—Jim Macnie

**Grove's Groove:** Grove's Groove; Tea For Two; Seiko Time; Minor Funk; Never Let Me Go; The Viper; Decisions; Father Figure; Broadway. (61:22)

**Personnel:** Michael Dease, baritone saxophone; Steve Davis, trombone; Rodney Whitaker, bass; Jocelyn Gould, guitar, vocals (2, 5); Ulysses Owens Jr, drums; Bill Cunliffe, piano; Terrell Davis, trumpet (6, 7); Jim Alfredson, Hammond B-3 organ (6); Eli Howell, trombone (6); Alex Acuña, percussion (6).

**Ordering info:** [lecoqrecords.com](http://lecoqrecords.com)



# The Hot Box

Critics	Suzanne Lorge	J.D. Considine	Paul de Barros	Jim Macnie
<b>Milton Nascimento &amp; esperanza spalding</b> <i>Milton + esperanza</i>	★★★★	★★★★	★★★	★★★★½
<b>Orrin Evans/Captain Black Big Band</b> <i>Walk A Mile In My Shoe</i>	★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
<b>Wayne Shorter</b> <i>Celebration Volume 1</i>	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
<b>Michael Dease</b> <i>Grove's Groove</i>	★★★½	★★★	★★★★	★★★★½

## Critics' Comments

### Milton Nascimento & esperanza spalding, *Milton + esperanza*

It's amazing how vividly spalding evokes the aural extravagance of Nascimento's mid-'70s albums, and how closely her band approximates their deep grooves. That also she manages to better Nascimento's own version of "Cais" is frankly dumbfounding. —J.D. Considine

Oh, that this multi-generational meeting had not become a Grand Project with a star-studded cast, but remained instead an intimate meeting of kindred spirits. —Paul de Barros

Its willful eclecticism threw me at first, but because each artist is such an experienced creator of worlds, their go-anywhere expanse winds up presenting its focus in unusual ways. —Jim Macnie

### Orrin Evans and the Captain Black Big Band, *Walk A Mile In My Shoe*

Evans distinguishes himself not only as a phenomenal soloist but as a leader who engenders the same excellence in his fellow musicians. Even as triumph over hardship motivates his music-making, his irrepressible gift infuses it with joy. —Suzanne Lorge

Hip urban mix, this, with plenty of soulful vocals and a loose-around-the-edges feel that calls Mingus to mind but sometimes just feels crowded. —Paul de Barros

It works well because the song choice is insightful. It works well because the musicianship serves the performances. It works well because program-wise, there's little like it. —Jim Macnie

### Wayne Shorter, *Celebration Volume 1*

Some musical souls are so generous that they continue to give, even after they're gone. —Suzanne Lorge

There's no better proof this band was ahead of its time than the utter freshness of this decade-old live recording. Familiar material played in unexpected ways is always a delight, but the interplay captured here is simply transcendent. A celebration, indeed. —J.D. Considine


Enchanting is the word I'd use to describe this rambling live date. Even if the search for gold occasionally stymies Shorter's squad, their commitment to adventure is unmistakable. —Jim Macnie

### Michael Dease, *Grove's Groove*

Dease champions uncompromising rhythmicity, no matter what his instrument. How fitting that he offers this talent in tribute to Hargrove, who shared a similar penchant for creative adaptability. —Suzanne Lorge

Props for finding, in Steve Davis, a trombonist who ensures that we don't miss Dease's own work on that horn, and kudos for making such excellent use of Jocelyn Gould's singing. If only the tunes fit together as compellingly as the players. —J.D. Considine

The perfect summer album. A finger-popping tribute to Roy Hargrove, with four voices up front, including Dease on bari (wow!), not his usual trombone, and the wonderful Jocelyn Gould on clean guitar and fresh vocals. —Paul de Barros



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## Matthew Shipp Trio *New Concepts In Piano Trio Jazz* ESP-DISK'

★★★★★

Matthew Shipp has been a very prolific recording artist, leading at least 75 albums since 1987 and appearing around 150 as a sideman (so far). His trio with bassist Michael Bisio and drummer Newman Taylor Baker had recorded five previous albums since 2015. With all that, it is not surprising that when they performed the eight free improvisations that constitute their new release, some of the pieces sound through-composed. Bisio and Baker listen

closely to Shipp's spontaneous ideas, sometimes following his directions and other times offering differing musical strategies of their own.

On *New Concepts In Piano Trio Jazz*, the more thoughtful performances are often the most memorable. The opener, "Primal Poem," is based on a three-note pattern and often sounds wistful. A repeated figure played by Shipp and Bisio on "Sea Song" continues the relatively laidback mood. "The Function" is a throwback to late-1950s Cecil Taylor: Bisio walks his bass throughout a free-bop blues while Shipp comments in a fascinating and unpredictable manner.

Other highlights include Bisio's bowed bass on "Brain System" and the lengthy, high-energy interplay on the closing "Coherent System." There are times when the music becomes a bit repetitive, particularly during its more intense moments, but such moments generally evolve into other ideas before overstaying its welcome. *New Concepts In Piano Trio Jazz* may not be as innovative as its title states but, even with his large output, it is filled with some of Matthew Shipp's most rewarding recent playing.

—Scott Yanow

**New Concepts In Piano Trio Jazz:** Primal Poem; Sea Song; The Function; Non Circle; Tone IQ; Brian System; Brain Work; Coherent System. (46:21)

**Personnel:** Matthew Shipp, piano; Michael Bisio, bass; Newman Taylor Baker, drums.

**Ordering info:** [espdisk.com](http://espdisk.com)

## Bria Skonberg *What It Means*

CELLAR MUSIC

★★★★★

On her latest release, Canadian-born trumpeter-vocalist Bria Skonberg pays tribute to the city and musical flavors of New Orleans in a program of standards and imaginative covers. The title track, "Do You Know What It Means To Miss New Orleans," starts with an intimate trumpet-guitar duet with guitarist Don Vappie. "Comes Love" starts as a stomp, then segues to a catchy mambo; "Sweet Pea" features insouciant scat vocals. Sidney Bechet's "Petite Fleur" has an attractive bass clarinet solo by Rex Gregory and some beautiful muted trumpet phrasing by the leader.

Van Morrison's "Days Like This" features a clave beat on snare drum and a call-and-response with fellow singers. John Lennon's "Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)" gets a tender reading with legato phrasing while Harold Battiste's "The Beat Goes On" borrows a riff from Lee Morgan's "The Sidewinder" and has a feature for drummer Herlin Riley, who does an admirable job pounding rhythm to the brain. Riley also kicks off Louis Armstrong's Hot Five classic "Cornet Chop Suey" with a brief second-line flourish, eventually making



way for Skonberg's exciting stop-time solos.

The closing "Lullaby (Good Night My Angel)," in a medley with Sir Roland Hanna's "A Child Is Born," is a fitting close to this personal poem of love for The Big Easy, Bria's family and her fellow musicians. She wistfully calls it a "lullaby for parents."

—Larry Appelbaum

**What It Means:** Comes Love; Sweet Pea; Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans; The Beat Goes On; Cornet Chop Suey; Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy); Days Like This; Petite Fleur; Elbow Bump; Lullabye (Goodnight My Angel) A Child Is Born. (56:23)

**Personnel:** Bria Skonberg, trumpet, vocals; Rex Gregory, saxophone, bass clarinet; Ben Jaffe, sousaphone; Gabrielle Cavassa, vocals; Ethan Santos, trombone; Don Vappie, guitar, banjo; Chris Pattishall, piano; Grayson Brokamp, bass; Aurora Nealand, soprano saxophone.

**Ordering info:** [cellarlive.com](http://cellarlive.com)



## Hamilton de Holanda/ Gonzalo Rubalcaba *Collab*

SONY MUSIC BRAZIL

★★★½

Mandolinist Hamilton de Holanda and pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba speak the language of joy on *Collab*, their album of big sound and bigger heart. Its 11 tracks include originals such as de Holanda's explosive "Flying Chicken" and Rubalcaba's calming "Yolanda Anas." Standout covers include a limpid take on Charlie Haden's "Silence" and a dazzling update of Stevie Wonder's "Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing" featuring Gabriel Grossi's quicksilver harmonica.

This beautifully paced recording blends Rubalcaba's aggressive Afro-Cuban influences with de Holanda's softer, no less intricate Brazilian strains, freeing both masters to craft their own unique styles. Two versions of "Incompatibilidade de Gênios," the latter featuring composer Joao Bosco, attest to this duo's curiosity, empathy and flexibility. Bosco's rubbery, percussive vocals give this version a playfulness missing from the more languid instrumental that launches the album.

Other earworms include de Holanda's "Mandalagh," Rubalcaba's "Yolanda Anas" and "Choro Fado," a de Holanda tone poem that weaves Rubalcaba's dusky lines through de Holanda's tense, surging rhythms. "Choro Fado" is medium-tempo, this duo's sweet spot.

De Holanda's 10-string mandolin is both rhythmic and melodic, and it frequently sounds like a bass. Rubalcaba is an intensely physical pianist whose tone glows even brighter when he and de Holanda double their lines.

"Saudade, Saudade," a Portuguese pop tune that made waves at Eurovision two years ago, caps an album that not only defies easy categorization, but also begs for a sequel. —Carlo Wolff

**Collab:** Incompatibilidade de Gênios (instrumental); Blues Lundvall; Mandalagh; Yolanda Anas; Flying Chicken; Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing; Silence; Choro Fado; Incompatibilidade de Gênios (vocal version); Transparence; Saudade, Saudade. (62:58)

**Personnel:** Hamilton de Holanda, mandolin; Gonzalo Rubalcaba, piano; Gabriel Grossi, harmonica (6); Joao Bosco, vocals (9).

**Ordering info:** [sonymusic.com.br](http://sonymusic.com.br)





Happy Apple "New York CD" Happy Apple is in alphabetical order Erik Fratzke electric bass Dave King drums Michael Lewis saxophones and keyboard recorded and mixed in Minnesota and Wisconsin and mastered in Minnesota

## Happy Apple "New York CD"

SUNNYSIDE

★★★★

The renegade Minneapolis-based trio has cultivated a following over 25 years with its unique blending of progressive jazz, avant-garde improv and alt-rock sensibilities. Their latest is full of experimental daring, rhythmic muscle and uncanny groupthink.

The sluggish opener, drummer Dave King's "Just A Little Splash For The Senator," finally does take off thanks to the free-range tenor work of Michael Lewis, who straddles an inside-outside aesthetic. King's "Vermillion Nocturne" is energized from jump, with electric bassist Erik Fratzke chording emphatically as the drummer circumnavigates his odd-metered, churning groove with some busy brushwork around the kit.

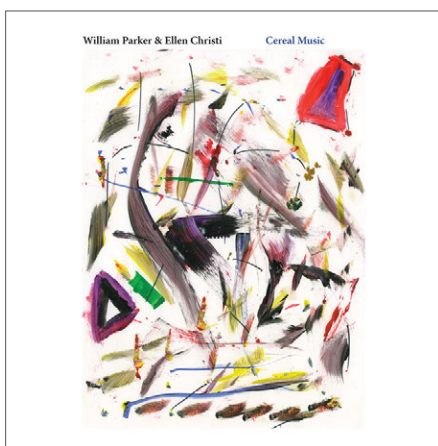
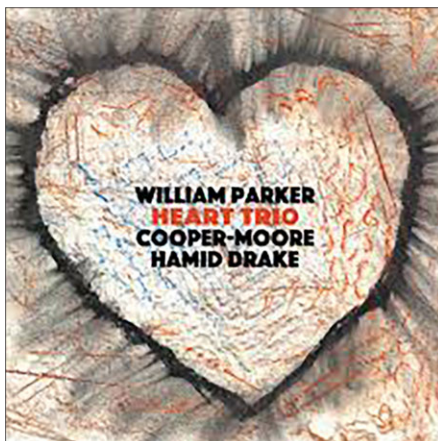
King's lovely rubato ballad "Black And Blue Magic" shows his spacious, coloristic approach to the kit while also highlighting Lewis' gorgeous tenor tone and penchant for melodicism alongside Fratzke's sensitive chordal accompaniment. King's rock-fueled "1976 Aquatennial Parade," paced by the drummer's solid backbeat against Fratzke's insistent chording, provides a launching pad for Lewis' brawny, probing tenor work. Lewis switches to soprano on the whimsically entrancing "Turquoise Jewelry," underscored by King's conversational approach, while on Lewis' "Antonym Requiem," the drummer wails with abandon while Fratzke holds down the fort with hypnotic, minimalist chording.

The lone swinger here, Fratzke's "Computer Aided Drafting," finds the bassist walking furiously against King's steady ride-cymbal pulse as Lewis takes off into Joe Lovano territory. The funky "Vanity Plate" is tailor-made for the jam band circuit, while "White Belt Rock" is unapologetically angular and slamming. —*Bill Milkowski*

**"New York CD":** Just A Little Splash For The Senator; Vermillion Nocturne; Black And Blue Magic; 1976 Aquatennial Parade; Turquoise Jewelry; Antonym Requiem; Computer Aided Drafting; Vanity Plate; White Belt Rock; The Broad Side Of The Silent Barn. (66:43)

**Personnel:** Michael Lewis, tenor and soprano saxophone (5, 9), keyboards; Erik Fratzke, electric bass; Dave King, drums.

**Ordering info:** [sunnysiderecords.com](http://sunnysiderecords.com)



## William Parker/Cooper-Moore/Hamid Drake Heart Trio

AUM FIDELITY

★★★

## William Parker & Ellen Christi Cereal Music

AUM FIDELITY

★★½

These two albums were released to coincide with New York's 29th Vision Festival, which honored William Parker with its prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award. Primarily known as a bassist, Parker moves sideways to his collection of blown and stringed folk instruments. *Heart Trio* teams him with fellow longtime explorers Hamid Drake and Cooper-Moore, the latter going a step further and fashioning his own self-designed instruments. Parker refuses to play bass on these sessions, instead choosing the doson ngonni for his deeper lines and an array of wooden flutes for his higher trilling. Drake sometimes sticks to a small jazz drum set, but also plays a large frame drum.

Rather than stemming from free-jazz abstraction, these instant compositions are closer to a jam session in nature, favoring rhythm,

repetition and strong melodies. The resultant music is totally indebted to the pan-ethnic global folk explorations of Don Cherry.

Open space and deep calm prevail, with Cooper-Moore's marimba-like ashimba rippling on one piece, his hoe-handle harp picked up for the next. The trio makes no attempt to reproduce existing traditional styles, but works hard to build original soundscapes, employing tools from old traditions (and tools born inside Cooper-Moore's cranium). North or West Africa end up sounding like a primary source, even if only due to the instrumentation, but Parker also has flutes from Serbia, Turkey and Japan. The trio's soft chanting further recalls Cherryville. A genuine healing quality emerges, as the harp strings also suggest a koto or qanun in sonic nature. This threesome enjoys the privileges of nonspecific ethno-foragers. Parker finds a rich and reedy vibrato on what he calls the bass dudek (presumably an Armenian duduk). Some of Cooper-Moore's insistent patterns suggest a liking for minimalist systems music, with this session probing almost the opposite concerns of a free-jazz agenda.

In partnership with Ellen Christi on *Cereal Music*, Parker pens texts, maybe poems, but certainly more like capsule storytelling. He plays bass and flutes, but other musical sounds are captured, shaped by Christi's distinctive electroacoustic sound design techniques. Mostly lower in the mix, the musical sketches mingle with environmental snatches, all well-balanced, with Parker's voice clearly limned. Christi sometimes sings. He is Moondog; she is Amina Claudine Myers. Parker has a resigned, fatalistic, philosophical tone, his verbal rhythms and tones setting him apart from most in the free-beatnik genre, avoiding spoken word conventions.

Parker sounds natural in his conviction, casualness magnifying meaning. Some of the shorter works particularly impress: Parker creates memories rather than actually recalling his time as a premature infant in an incubator, shaping an oddness to the imagery; "Death" is full of sideways word-pairings and offset thoughtlines, while "Uninvited Guest" is potent, finding new ways to express old notions. The CD has three extra tracks, adding 15 minutes to the download's duration. The only snag with *Cereal* is that spoken word albums don't tend to court repeated listening, while *Heart* will be a much more frequent spinner on open-minded decks. —*Martin Longley*

**Heart Trio:** Atman; Five Angels By The Stream; Mud Dance; Serbia; Kondo; For Rafael Garrett; Processional. (52:00)

**Personnel:** William Parker, doson ngonni, flutes; Cooper-Moore, ashimba, hoe-handle harp; Hamid Drake, drums.

**Cereal Music:** Ode To Kidd Jordan; Baseball; Birth; Death; Do Dreams Sleep?; Ellen And Leaves Floating; Plea; Into My Heart; Touring; Sonny; Uninvited Guest; We Were Very Civilized; Batala; Windshield Wipers; Prayer. (52:33)

**Personnel:** William Parker, recitation, texts, flutes, bass; Ellen Christi, voice, sound design.

**Ordering info:** [williamparker.bandcamp.com](http://williamparker.bandcamp.com)



# 1 Moody and 2 Louises

**The Moody Story: James Moody Septet 1951–1955 (Fresh Sound; 177:20 ★★★★★)** This reissue showcased a fresh talent emerging from the shadow of his putative mentor Dizzy Gillespie. **James Moody**, playing both alto and tenor saxophones, is heard in the context of an extended ensemble — one that included trumpet, trombone, baritone saxophone and rhythm section as well as the occasional vocal. The deft talents of Quincy Jones (on most cuts), Benny Golson and Johnny Acea were called into service as arrangers.

Moody was resuming a recording career as a leader (prematurely started in 1948) in 1951 for Mercury, then for EmArcy and Prestige, resulting in eight titles by 1955. The recordings, which were made in New York City and Hackensack, N.J., include two alternates of “My Ideal” and “It Might As Well Be Spring” in a package that contains 48 selections overall. A 24-page booklet accompanies.

Just a few years after Miles Davis’ *Birth Of The Cool* recordings, stretches of these septet sessions carry a similar chamber-swing feel. The style is primarily medium-tempo jazz, with the occasional ballad. Given that this music was recorded during bop’s heyday, and Moody’s connections with Gillespie, it’s surprising to hear how measured it all sounds. That said, Moody was capable of unleashing rapid-fire flourishes here and there (e.g., “The Strut” on tenor, “Wail Moody, Wail,” alto). Along with appealing slow-dance renditions of standards like “The Nearness Of You,” “Poor Butterfly” and “Over The Rainbow,” there are bluesy, sometimes slightly funky swinging originals by Moody, Jones and Golson, among others. The other chief soloist is trumpeter Dave Burns, the two facing off on Moody’s spirited “Wail Moody, Wail,” which closes out the “story” here. Other regulars included Numa “Pee Wee” Moore on baritone, trombonist William Shepherd, pianist Jimmy Boyd, bassist John Latham and drummer Clarence Johnston. The singers included Eddie Jefferson (three cuts), Babs Gonzales (two) and Iona Wade.

**Ordering info:** [freshsoundrecordings.com](http://freshsoundrecordings.com)

From the finely orchestrated music of 1950s American jazz we venture forth with **Louis Moholo Moholo’s Viva La Black (Caddillac; 49:27 ★★★★★)**. Recorded in London in 1988, *Viva La Black* was South African drummer/vocalist Moholo’s second album as a leader. The eponymously named band was a sextet made up of saxophonists Sean Bergin and Steve Williamson, trumpeter/flugelhornist Claude Deppa, bassist Roberto Bellatalla and fellow drummer/



percussionist Thebe Lipere. Gone are the constructs of a European song in favor of a more boisterous frontal assault in varying modal guises. Moholo’s Blakey-esque drumming drives this ensemble with roaring thematic lines that feel like anthemic declarations of liberation. Dialogs between Bergin and Williamson ignite rapid-fire exchanges that spill out with the rest of the band as they all join in repeated choruses.

Bewildering numbers include Chris McGregor’s slightly hypnotic, swinging “Joyful Noises”; Keith Tippett’s playground free-for-all “Mongezi–Frames” comes in two parts, the arrangement loose but full of surprises as the band surrounds the soloists as they repeat a full-throated start-and-stop that spells “it ain’t over till it’s over.” Harry Miller’s solemn “Lost Opportunities” is the one breather, while Moholo’s “Woza” features chants amidst a thriving, insistent pulse. A piece of history that’s far from sounding dated.

**Ordering info:** [ogun3.bandcamp.com](http://ogun3.bandcamp.com)

Another Louis — **Armstrong** — headlines **Louis In London (Verve; 47:00 ★★★★★½)**, the only regret therein being that all the tunes play like a greatest-hits bill instead of something you might hear at Newport or in Harlem. Oh, how I wanted to hear this band stretch out on “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South,” “Rockin’ Chair” and “Indiana”! This program for the BBC in 1968 sounds so swinging when they’re allowed to play. But it was live television; we get clipped, though still great, work from Louis, backed up by trombonist Tyree Glenn, clarinetist Joe Muranyi, pianist Marty Napoleon, bassist Buddy Catlett and drummer Danny Barcelona in fine form. And, yes, “Hello Dolly!” and “What A Wonderful World” get their due.

**Ordering info:** [shop.louisarmstrongfoundation.org](http://shop.louisarmstrongfoundation.org)



## Nicole Mitchell and Ballaké Sissoko *Bamako\*Chicago Sound System*

FPE

★★★★★

*Bamako\*Chicago Sound System* brings together the visionary artistry of Chicago-based flutist Nicole Mitchell and Malian kora maestro Ballaké Sissoko in a transcendent meeting of minds and traditions. The nine-track journey celebrates the deep soul connection between West African folk music, the call-and-response griot tradition and Black American jazz and blues.

On the opening track, “Bamako Chicago,” Sissoko plays a grounding melody that complements Fassery Diabaté’s resonant balafon, a type of West African xylophone, and Fatim Kouyaté’s lush vocals. Mitchell’s flute pulses with frenetic energy, while Jeff Parker’s guitar injects a languorous swagger. The octet of Malian and American musicians becomes more meditative and methodical on “Doname,” the kora and balafon providing a calming rhythm against Mitchell’s earthy, propulsive lines.

Mitchell is understated yet playful on “Spicy Jambalaya,” going toe to toe with Sissoko in an improvised call-and-response. “This Moment” is an ambitious, multi-movement piece where balafon and kora are front and center. The song oscillates between folk lines and jazz improvisation, culminating in a celebratory and harmonic crescendo as Kouyaté asks, “Can we find alignment? Can music be our bridge?” The album, as a whole, answers with a resounding yes.

Mitchell and Sissoko join their ancient musical lineages and contemporary instruments to create a record that is a testament to the profound connections that can be forged through sound.

—Ivana Ng

**Bamako\*Chicago Sound System:** Bamako Chicago; Doname (Trustworthy); Kanu (Love); Tolotai (Games Are Not); Spicy Jambalaya; Tara (They Go); This Moment; Se Wa Kole (This Is Happiness); Vulnerable. (62:34)

**Personnel:** Nicole Mitchell, flute; Ballaké Sissoko, kora; Fatim Kouyaté, Mankwe Ndosi, voice; Jeff Parker, guitar; Fassery Diabaté, balafon; Joshua Abrams, bass; JoVla Armstrong, percussion.

**Ordering info:** [nicolemitchell.bandcamp.com](http://nicolemitchell.bandcamp.com)





## Phillip Golub *Abiding Memory*

ENDECTOMORPH

★★★★

New York jazz and creative music mainstay Phillip Golub, known particularly for his work on the opera ... (*Iphigenia*) with Wayne Shorter and esperanza spalding, calls his new record “the most ambitious music he’s made to date.” Sure enough, *Abiding Memory* showcases the seemingly boundless creativity of keyboardist Golub and his band, including Alec Goldfarb (electric guitar), Daniel Hass (cello), Sam Minaie (bass) and Vicente Atria (drums).

Beginning and end have no meaning on *Abiding Memory*. Like stepping into the flow of nature, the album — particularly tracks like the gestural “In A Secret Corner,” the uncanny “Threads Gather” and the emotive title track — urgently returns our attention to what was there all along. Formed through dense layering of ostinatos, improvisations, composed melodies and creative sound-making, *Abiding Memory* draws on an extensive palette as it creates, explodes and transfigures countless soundscapes over 10 tracks.

*Abiding Memory* echoes with familiarity — the intimacy and emotion of Romantic-era solo piano; the lyrical, forward-looking ensemble music Wayne Shorter crafted in the 1980s and 1990s; the sprightly, surefooted piano flourishes of Duke Ellington’s orchestra, all dear influences of Golub’s — as well as wholly new insights into texture, timbre, melody and improvisation realized through the performers’ unique approaches to their instruments and bizarre audio snippets added in post-production.

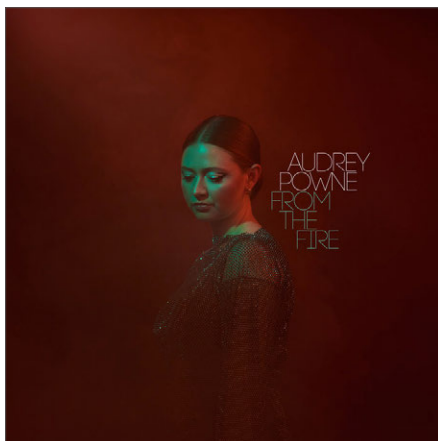
The muchness of notes, ideas, moods and sounds could easily become empty maximalism, but, skillfully shaped by Golub and company, *Abiding Memory* possesses a grounding, mesmeric magic.

—Alexa Peters

**Abiding Memory:** Catching A Thread; Threads Gather; The Group To Hear; A Regrouping; Unspooled (Waiting Quietly); In A Secret Corner; Where Lapses Elapse; At The 11th Hour; A Moment Becomes; Abiding Memory. (58:13)

**Personnel:** Phillip Golub, piano; Rhodes, harpsichord; Alec Goldfarb, electric guitar; Daniel Hass, cello; Sam Minaie, bass; Vicente Atria, drums.

**Ordering info:** [endectomorph.com](http://endectomorph.com)



## Audrey Powne *From The Fire*

BBE

★★★★

If there is one phrase emblematic of Audrey Powne’s *From the Fire*, it occurs on “Survive,” where she sings, “I won’t be defined.” Putting a label on such a multifaceted artist — composer, performer, lyricist and arranger — is indeed daunting, and the track “Feed The Fire” showcases much of her brilliant versatility.

Both in name and relentless drive, the song evokes the memory of the late Geri Allen, but Powne’s extended trumpet solo sets it

apart with a sequence of furious passages. Her masterful control of the instrument would be enough to earn it a galaxy of stars. She composed all the songs, and they belong almost exclusively to her, except for Myka Wallace’s breakbeats and Matthew Keegan’s full-throated baritone saxophone touches, which he delivers with a Harry Carney panache.

Powne’s facility on the keyboards is an extension of her poetic voice, and this is most apparent during the two interludes. Her fans will relish those inevitable moments when *Bed I Made*, her 2020 EP, has now evolved to a full-length LP and vinyl, too.

The string instruments provide a lavish gloss of sound that Powne and the ensemble use to great advantage, most delightfully during “Overture,” which in several ways signals the arrival of an array of sizzling motifs. This, too, has Powne’s genius stamped on it, and it raises the question of when will she write her opera or oratorio. And should this ever occur, she won’t need anyone to do the lyrics or libretto. She’s just that talented.

—Herb Boyd

**From The Fire:** Overture; Feed The Fire; Sleep; Interlude 1; Indigo; Survive; Interlude 2; From The Fire; Souled Out. (33:15)

**Personnel:** Audrey Powne-Boyle, trumpet, vocals, piano (2, 6); Myka Wallace, drums; Samuel Anning, bass; James Bowers, piano; Rhodes; Timothy Curnick, electric bass, (2, 8); Matthew Keegan, baritone saxophone; Madeleine Jevons, violin 1; Phoebe Masel, violin 2; Anthony Chataway, viola; James Morley, cello.

**Ordering info:** [bbemusic.com](http://bbemusic.com)

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# Old and New Crossroads

**Giles Robson: *Seven Blues Classics* (Independent Release; 40:19 ★★★★★)** It's a fool's errand when a modern-day musician handles a set of venerable blues songs that are owned lock, stock and barrel by dignitaries Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Son House, Big Bill Broonzy and Junior Wells. But London-based harmonica player Giles Robson isn't a copyist. Performing last year to a café audience for this album, he doesn't huff and puff mossy licks onto "Crossroads," "Death Letter Blues" or "Nine Below Zero." Instead, after years of studying seven gems and internalizing how the great men used space, rhythm, dynamics and note-bending, Robson stands between inventive revision and ironclad reverence. His spontaneous displays of ideas unspool without signs of showy technique or faked emotion. Robson also sings well, an improvement on his past efforts, and he constructs an alchemical bond with reserved guitarist Manny Fizzotti.

**Ordering info:** [gilesrobson.com](http://gilesrobson.com)

**Eden Brent: *Getaway Blues* (Yellow Dog; 36:49 ★★★★★)** Mississippian Eden Brent and her British bassist-husband Bob Dowell recently went to London and recorded Brent's first studio album in six years, helped out by talented guitarist Rob Updegraff and drummer Pat Levett. Over time, she's become a supple and rewarding singer, newly confident in the upper register. At her best, on the love ballad "You On My Mind," Brent emboldens her steely composure with fraught memories. Composers of all nine tunes, the couple has given real thought to the melodies, grooves and lyrics.

**Ordering info:** [yellowdogrecords.com](http://yellowdogrecords.com)

**The Keef Hartley Band: *Live At Essen Pop & Blues Festival 1969/1970* (MIG; 105:28 ★★★★★)** After being gut-punched by a manager who crazily rejected the recording and filming of his Woodstock set, ex-John Mayall's Bluesbreakers drummer Keef Hartley perked up and kept his band active in U.K. studios and on the road in Europe. At shows in Germany, he got a creative lift from like-minded colleagues who fused blues, rock and jazz with a persuasive power. They included singer-guitarist Miller Anderson, bassist Gary Thain and first-rate U.K. jazz players Henry Lowther (on trumpet) and Barbara Thompson (on saxophone). The sets consisted of blues-drenched, hook-laden Anderson tunes and rousing covers of B.B. King and Sleepy John Estes staples.

**Ordering info:** [MVDshop.com](http://MVDshop.com)

**Various Artists: *True Blues Brother—The Legacy Of Matt "Guitar" Murphy* (Nola Blue; 82:50 ★★½)** Once of great service to James Cotton, Howlin' Wolf, the Blues Brothers and more, Matt Murphy was recording a rare fea-



Giles Robson reimagines the classics.

ture album with drummer Bobby Christina when the 88-year-old died in 2018. For a tribute album, Christina contacted more than 70 musicians around the country and had them recast 21 songs (on two discs) associated with their late friend or acquaintance. Senior statesmen Joe Beard and Billy Boy Arnold channel a deep sense of history in their Chicago blues. Tracy Nelson, Toni Lynn Washington and Christine Ohlman sing from womanly experience. But others fizzle, making about 10 songs expendable. Three others, just passable, are from Murphy's last session.

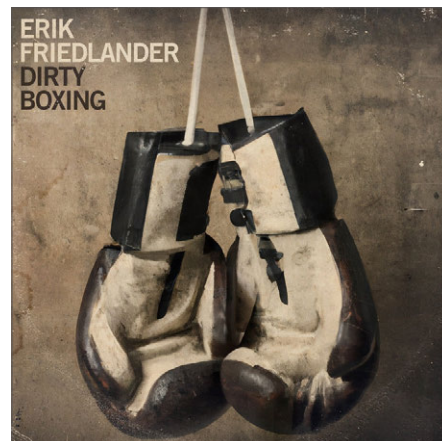
**Ordering info:** [nola-blue.com](http://nola-blue.com)

**John Lee Hooker: *Burning Hell* (Craft; 42:17 ★★½)** Around 1960, the Riverside label turned John Lee Hooker away from his Black R&B audience and repositioned him as a solo acoustic performer of appeal to the burgeoning white traditional folk-and-blues crowd. *Burning Hell*, first out only in Europe in 1964 and eventually America in the early '90s, is a middling entry in his voluminous discography. Performing originals and stock material, the boogie champ takes only a few short steps into any of the Dante circles. Not so sulfurous, he barely gets worked up about conflicted romance and the usual tribulations.

**Ordering info:** [craftrecordings.com](http://craftrecordings.com)

**Lightnin' Hopkins: *Live From The Ash Grove ... Plus!* (Liberation Hall; 40:40 ★★½)** Like Hooker, Hopkins will always be remembered as one of the giants who walked the earth. The Texas singer-guitarist played up pleasures and pains in his music in stunning fashion on many albums in his nearly 40-year career, none better than *The Gold Star Sessions, Vols. 1 & 2*. However, *Ash Grove*, with its hitherto unissued 1965 and '71 acoustic solo performances at the famous Los Angeles club, along with four awkward '71 plugged-in band tracks, is unexceptionable. Hopkins rarely dispenses the magic of his expressiveness. **DB**

**Ordering info:** [liberationhall.com](http://liberationhall.com)



## Erik Friedlander *Dirty Boxing*

SKIPSTONE

★★★★★

*Dirty Boxing's* title evokes rugged, visceral imagery and charged energy; its music delivers just that and more. Erik Friedlander's latest is an active musical metaphor, with his cello providing graceful agility or punctuated movement to tell different stories.

Friedlander's bandmates from The Throw add familiarity and trust to each tune, solidifying the musical execution throughout. Even Friedlander's embrace of modular writing for "Shrimping (Mod 9)," "Ground And Pound (Mod 1)" and "D'Arce (Mod 2)" doesn't leave the group sounding uncertain. Much like an Olympic team built around an individual sport, these four uphold their solo identities and shared goal for the album with unwavering intention.

The record teems with melodic and rhythmic interplay that's colorful, complex, precise and full of personality. Though not a soundtrack score, "Sprawl" drops the "viewer" into the audience of an MMA fight, opponents fiercely interlocked but neither yet forced to concede. "Foot Stomp" features prominent drumming, but Smith doesn't lean into hard snare hits or a barrage of kick beats so much as he complements Friedlander's (and subsequently Uri Caine's) lively melodies with nimble stick taps and cymbal rhythms.

Conceptual and musical alignments are sometimes a little too on-the-nose, as with "Submission," which abruptly slows and quiets things down rather than subverting expectations. "Kimura" ends the album on a note and chord full of victorious optimism. Collectively, *Dirty Boxing* is a largely applaudable foray into concept-driven composition.

—Kira Grunenberg

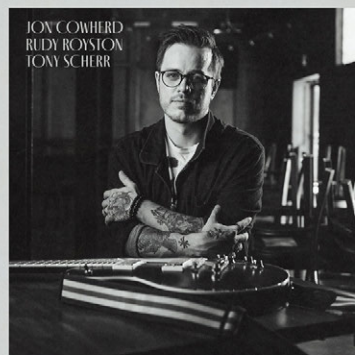
**Dirty Boxing:** Sprawl; Foot Stomp; Shrimping (Mod 9); Ground And Pound (Mod 1); D'Arce (Mod 2); Contender; Submission; Kimura. (34:52)

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

**Ordering info:** [erikfriedlander.com](http://erikfriedlander.com)



## CHARLIE BALLANTINE



LOVE LETTERS & GRAFFITI

## Charlie Ballantine *Love Letters & Graffiti*

INDEPENDENT RELEASE

★★★½

Charlie Ballantine continues making his way into the ranks of young jazz guitarists rising above the densely populated pack, keeping things real versus relying on empty virtuosity or borrowed persona. He has something to say and says it in a personal voice.

The Indianapolis-born, New York-based Ballantine comes equipped with fluid taste, just the right amount of grit and controlled heat: qualities that shine through on the compact

## *Love Letters & Graffiti*.

He is boldly abetted by formidable and interactive bandmates. Pianist Jon Cowherd supplies intelligence and subtlety to order. Bassist Tony Scherr and drummer Rudy Royston offer character shown in their work with guitarist Bill Frisell, underscoring certain common traits in Ballantine's playing, tone and instantly likeable tunesmithing.

True to the album's title, Ballantine's emotional turf ranges from lyrical romantic to blues-tinged street-ish impulses, opening with the yearning urging of "Blues For Baltimore" and segueing into the gospelized "Love Letter."

"Strange Idea," with its angular motivic riff, ups the energy ante, while "Silhouette" dips into swing time. "When The Hero Comes Home" has a loose time-feel and returns in a pared-down guitar/piano reprise to end the EP/album in a reflective temper.

Through it all, Ballantine finds his own brand of sweet spots between clean and warm distorted tone with sprinklings of tremolo and delay, and between technical finesse and from-the-heart genuineness.

—Josef Woodard

**Love Letters & Graffiti:** Blues For Baltimore; Love Letter; Strange Idea; When The Hero Comes Back; Silhouette; Rosebud; Graffiti; When The Hero Comes Back (reprise). (38:45)

**Personnel:** Charlie Ballantine, guitar; Jon Cowherd, piano, Fender Rhodes; Tony Scherr, bass; Rudy Royston, drums.

**Ordering info:** [charlieballantine.com](http://charlieballantine.com)

## Miles Okazaki *Miniature America*

CYGNUS

★★★½

Every artist worth their salt eventually finds a point where they're too familiar with their well-trod paths and look to shake up how they create. At a certain point, Miles Okazaki felt he needed to change how he composed. His meticulous nature in musical structure is well noted; it's clear he thinks about this stuff deeply.

*Miniature America* is not an easy album to listen to. Composed of "slabs" of ideas, honed and polished by this group of musicians into the forms before us, the music itself feels unfinished, albeit intentionally. This doesn't change the fact that it doesn't sound ready for prime-time. These fragments aren't really meant to be songs, and to meet an artist where they are, Okazaki has accomplished this with aplomb, but a listener still wants for songs in an album.

Tunes from time to time feel like an engine sputtering to start, like it could turn into something if the rest of the song could show up. "Wheel Of Cloud" nearly gets there, almost finding a melody through the thicket of whispers. "Open Road," with Jon Irabagon's wailing mezzo-soprano saxophone, tears your heart out over Jacob Garchik's spare trombone.

Okazaki is a fantastic guitarist, a brilliant



arranger and a fascinating composer. One could be almost certain his next album will hit it out of the park, now that he got these ideas out of his system. Next time, these porous slabs may come together to construct something more solid.

—Anthony Dean-Harris

**Miniature America:** The Cocktail Party; The Funambulist; The Funicular; Lookout Below; Wheel Of Cloud; And The Deep River; Follow That Car; Open Road; Whack A Mole; Promise Me; The Cavern; Chutes And Ladders; The Haze; The Hive; Venus Calling; Zodiacal Cloud; Only Outer Space; The Firmament; The Furniture; Pulsation Station; In The Fullness Of Time; A Clean Slate. (49:34)

**Personnel:** Miles Okazaki, guitars; Patricia Brennan, vibraphone; Matt Mitchell, piano; Caroline Davis, alto saxophone; Anna Webber, tenor saxophone and flute; Jon Irabagon, mezzo soprano, soprano and slide saxophones; Jacob Garchik, trombone, bass trombone; Ganavya, Jen Shyu, Fay Victor, voice.

**Ordering info:** [miniatureamerica.bandcamp.com](http://miniatureamerica.bandcamp.com)



## Sarah Hanahan *Among Giants*

BLUE ENGINE

★★★★★

Alto saxophonist Sarah Hanahan is paying her debt to the ancestors in every note she plays on her glorious debut recording, *Among Giants*. Hanahan started sharpening her chops at the University of Hartford and touring with jazz luminaries like Dee Dee Bridgewater and Steve Davis. She's here backed by drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, pianist Marc Carey and bassist Nat Reeves, who aid in making her first outing a bulletproof mission statement.

As a first-time session leader, Hanahan plays with pure fierceness and lyrical conviction that makes you believe she could at will access the spirits of greats like Jackie McLean and John Coltrane. Her seriousness about the music and ferocious blowing is right up there. There's a healthy dose of originals that showcase Hanahan's compositional acumen and standards to show she understands how to navigate the great American songbook. She bears McLean and Coltrane's influences on the opener, "Welcome," a Coltrane original. Hanahan's vigorous blowing behind Watts' rhythmic forcefulness is nothing short of a spiritual awakening.

"We Bop!" is a colorfully striking, melodic tune that focuses on Cary's rich, multilayered chord progressions and Watt's tenacity. The rhythm section of Cary, Reeves and Watts lights up each track, particularly gems like "NATO," a bebop-driven tune written for Reeves that again showcases another of Hanahan's spit-fire solos, ending with invigorating percussive work by Watts and special guest percussionist Bobby Allende. There's plenty of dynamic music on *Among Giants* to demonstrate that Hanahan is a prolific new voice in jazz.

—Veronica Johnson

**Among Giants:** Welcome; Resonance; A House Is Not A Home; NATO; Honey; Stardust; On The Trail; We Bop! (52:35)

**Personnel:** Sarah Hanahan, alto saxophone; Marc Cary, piano; Nat Reeves, bass; Jeff "Tain" Watts, drums; Bobby Allende, percussion (1, 4, 5, 8).

**Ordering info:** [sarahhanahan.com](http://sarahhanahan.com)





## Tarbaby *You Think This America*

GIANT STEP ARTS

★★★★★

Pianist Orrin Evans, bassist Eric Revis and drummer Nasheet Waits have collaborated as Tarbaby for some 25 years. In live performances like the one captured here, and on five studio albums, they've demonstrated broad, shared reference points and kindred focus on interaction, disdaining pretention or flashy display. As in the now-classic modernist piano trios of Monk, Nichols, Evans and Corea, among others, Tarbaby's members are intuitively responsive, mutually supportive and push each other on.

## Wayne Escoffery *Alone*

SMOKE SESSIONS

★★★★★

Developed at a particularly difficult time in his life, tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery's *Alone* delivers an intense statement on the meaning of solitude. It is appropriately titled, not simply because of the context through which the album comes to us, but through the ways each tune is approached. That minimalist intentionality is refracted through a sonic register that is equally adept at provoking and settling us. It is a mood.

Joining Escoffery on this latest effort are a veritable all-star cast of past collaborators. On piano, Gerald Clayton offers a rich palette of accompaniment and soloing that takes us deeper into a somber but inviting place, an expression perhaps richest on "The Ice Queen." Bassist Ron Carter provides what Carter always provides. And rounding out the group is the drummer Carl Allen, who together with Carter and Clayton manages to erect a strong platform for the emotional path tread by Escoffery's tenor.

Once we recover from their interpretation of the Johnny Mandel tune "The Shadow Of Your Smile," we are taken through inspired

The three dig happily into compositions by Ornette Coleman, David Murray, Andrew Hill and Sunny Murray, having long ago signed on to their noble mission of engaged but unforced, unfettered exploration; they also extend that approach lovingly to the 1970s Philly soul hit "Betcha By Golly Wow." Evans' signature composition "Red Door" gets a decisive reading and his blues is propulsive, thanks in part to the pocket Revis and Waits establish. The drummer's "Kush" has contrasting sections, concluding with tenderness; the Depression Era anthem "Nobody Knows You" adds a bit of soft-shoe.

On the ivories, Evans is selective, inquisitive and incisive. He seems equally interested in quirky, gnomic figures like those of Hill's "Reconciliation" and ear-worm themes like "Betcha," which he intones simply, with feeling. Waits' brushes on snares fitting the slow-dance affect. Elsewhere, Evans stretches out with nimble single-note runs, crosses bar-lines no-never-mind, breaks into easy swing and underscores the others' solos. Revis is solid throughout. Trio aficionados will find it easy to stick with Tarbaby.

—Howard Mandel

**You Think This America:** Dee Dee; Mirror Of Youth; Blues (When It Comes); Reconciliation; Betcha By Golly Wow; Kush; Nobody Knows You When You're Down; Comme Il Faut; Tree Tops. (56:22)

**Personnel:** Orrin Evans, piano; Eric Revis, bass; Nasheet Waits, drums.

**Ordering info:** [giantsteparts.org](http://giantsteparts.org)



renditions of classics like Carter's "Blues For D.P." and the Victor Young standard "Stella By Starlight," such that when we reach the conclusion of the album with Buddy Johnson's "Since I Fell For You," performed as a duo with Clayton, we are reminded that even when as we are alone we are not always bereft. There is sound. And there is memory. If we listen, we can imagine reunion, and even repair.

—Joshua Myers

**Alone:** Moments With You; Alone; Rapture; The Ice Queen; The Shadow Of Your Smile; Blues For D.P.; Stella By Starlight; Since I Fell For You. (56:22)

**Personnel:** Wayne Escoffery, tenor saxophone; Gerald Clayton, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Carl Allen, drums.

**Ordering info:** [smokesessionsrecords.com](http://smokesessionsrecords.com)



## John Christensen *Soft Rock*

SHIFTING PARADIGM

★★★★★

Bassist John Christensen says the songs on his sophomore album "embrace their roots in '90s classic adult contemporary," providing nostalgic comfort to many from the lost Generation X (including this writer). Christensen's compositions are a case study on how to write simply enough to work within rock-driven groove vehicles yet incorporate enough intricacy and individualism to allow such vehicles to venture away from over-travelled back-beaten paths. Take the opening track, "Loudest Whisper," just a rock blues à la Led Zeppelin, only reharmonized and recast in 13/8 overlaid with a melody somehow smashed into kind of a 16-tuplet. "Impossible Happy" could be a prog-rock homage to Pharrell Williams' ebullient 2013 hit, allowing for some celebratory blowing by tenor saxophonist Tony Barba and guitarist Matt Gold.

The low-key groove of "Raised Box" sets the mood for Christensen's earthy, ambling bass ruminations, followed by Gold's deliciously folksy acoustic guitar solo. The album peaks with "Pulsar," a heavy waltz that allows Barba to let loose with an adventurous, wailing solo, followed by a classic arcing guitar exposition by Gold.

Throughout, drummer Neil Hemphill maintains a yogi balance between playing the set drum patterns the songs dictate and responding extemporaneously to the energy of the moment, an example mirrored by the band as a whole. In the end, the album's title is somewhat of a misnomer; it hits harder and will leave more of an impression than what you were accustomed to while sitting in the orthodontist's chair.

—Gary Fukushima

**Soft Rock:** The Loudest Whisper; Impossible Happy; Raised Box; A Tall Glass Of Bob; I Am Free; Minute Majesty; Pulsar; Happy Jacks. (38:51)

**Personnel:** John Christensen, bass; Tony Barba, tenor saxophone; Matt Gold, electric and acoustic guitars, organ, mellotron; Joshua Catania, piano, Fender Rhodes, Wurlitzer; Neil Hemphill, drums.

**Ordering info:** [shiftingparadigmrecords.com](http://shiftingparadigmrecords.com)





## John Escreet Trio + Mark Turner *The Epicenter Of Your Dreams*

BLUE ROOM

★★★★

Formed in Los Angeles in 2020, English pianist John Escreet's trio quickly established itself with its 2022 debut, *Seismic Shift*. Adding saxophonist Mark Turner to the nascent band might seem like an unusual move, but the result significantly expands the unit's tonal range and ignites fireworks from drummer Damion Reid.

"Call It What It Is" sets the table by sliding

from medium-tempo swing to something much more manic: the time breaking up with Escreet's hyperactive solo. As the album's title suggests, this is a quartet that knows a thing or two about earthquakes; it shatters expectations, and tempo, on pieces like "Trouble And Activity" and "Lifeline." The collectively composed "Meltdown" eschews melody in favor of a skittery arco and piano hookup and sax through a funhouse mirror. On a cover of Stanley Cowell's "Departure No. 1," Escreet's scrappy piano and Turner's eel-slippery tenor run counter to the bright tempo, while the band's other cover — Andrew Hill's "Erato" — sounds as straight as a die by comparison, with some exceptional playing by the leader. Likewise, the balladic title track provides rich contrast to the shifting sands of those other pieces.

None of that would work half as well without the constantly shifting contributions of Reid. Best known for his work with Robert Glasper and Steve Lehman, the drummer is an ongoing standout.

Bigger and better? *The Epicenter Of Your Dreams* presents intriguing calculus:  $3 + 1 = \infty$ . Wayne Shorter would approve. —James Hale

**The Epicenter Of Your Dreams:** Call It What It Is; The Epicenter Of Your Dreams; Departure No. 1; Meltdown; Trouble And Activity; Erato; Lifeline; Other Side. (45:58)

**Personnel:** John Escreet, piano; Mark Turner, tenor saxophone; Eric Revis, bass; Damion Reid, drums.

**Ordering info:** [theblueroommusic.com](http://theblueroommusic.com)

## Kim Cass *Levs*

PI

★★★★½

You're not gonna get this album the first time you listen to it. There's just too much to absorb. Too many notes. Too many rhythmic twists and turns. Too many sudden dynamic shifts. Too many subtle little sounds buried in the mix that will resist identification (is that a voice? a synthesizer? a saxophone? a palm rubbing a drumhead? and what about that hiss?).

Cass is a bassist who's worked with saxophonist Noah Preminger, pianist Matt Mitchell (who's on this record) and drummer Kate Gentile. The latter two specialize in hyper-intricate, rigorously composed music that doesn't belong to any known genre, and Cass is operating in similar territory here, on his second album under his own name (but the first of his releases to involve other people). His compositions are complex, dark and eerie, played with great force and intensity, and they start, mutate and stop with a logic that will not reveal itself unless and until you're paying close attention.

Each player is a master of their instrument, and sound is as important as note choice



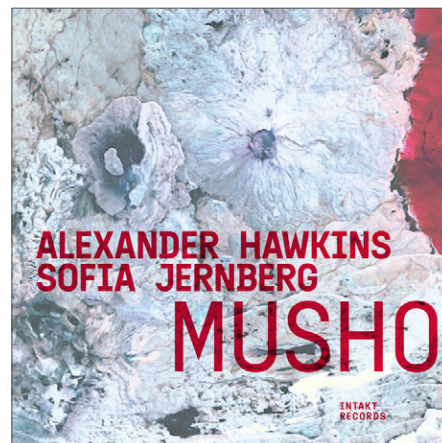
here. Cass' approach to the bass is nearly hostile at times, making it do things that seem impossible, while Mitchell's playing rolls and tumbles like an overdriven player piano and Sorey's drumming is a dry, boxy thump, more reminiscent of 1970s rock bands like the James Gang or ZZ Top than jazz. Let this music flow past you, again and again. Eventually, it'll blossom like a vast garden of flowers.

—Phil Freeman

**Levs:** Slag; Fog Face; Gs; Levs; Time; Ripley; Jungle; Body; Tentacle; Sea Vine; Minor; Trench. (41:32)

**Personnel:** Kim Cass, bass, sampling; Laura Cocks, flutes; Adam Dotson, euphonium; Matt Mitchell, piano, Prophet-6; Tyshawn Sorey, drums.

**Ordering info:** [pirecordings.com](http://pirecordings.com)



## Alexander Hawkins/ Sofia Jernberg *Musho*

INTAKT

★★★★½

Neither Alexander Hawkins nor Sofia Jernberg is the kind of artist that one can pin down. The English keyboardist's CV includes the free-improvising organ combo Decoy, composing for the London Symphony Orchestra, exploring the AACM legacy with Tomeka Reid and accompanying Ethio-jazz man Mulatu Astatke. The Ethiopian-born, Swedish-raised singer has played chamber jazz with Fred Longberg-Holm, sung Schönberg with the ensemble Norbotten NEO, dueted with pianist Hailu Mergia and kicked out the jams with Mats Gustafsson's Fire! Orchestra.

Their shared experiences with Ethiopian eminences serve as a starting point, and they've named their project after a style of dirge that is performed at Ethiopian funerals. But Jernberg and Hawkins also perform English, Armenian and Swedish folk songs; the enactment and transcendence of grief, not the reproduction of a particular national repertoire, is the point of this profoundly moving album.

To that end, each has placed restrictions upon their contributions. Jernberg keeps the extravagant potential of her extended technique on a tight leash, and while Hawkins does not similarly limit himself technically, he sticks to grand piano. His work under the lid turns the instrument into a harp and percussion ensemble on "Mannelig," sympathetically framing the singer's gentle expression of a courtship lyric fraught with interfaith and interspecies fault lines. They strip the words from the exile's lament "Groung," distilling it to an inconsolable melody. But not all is tragedy; when two musicians finally let loose on "Muziqawi Silt," they refashion the Afrobeat anthem into a deeply personal expression of freedom.

—Bill Meyer

**Musho:** Adwa; Mannelig; Gigi's Lament; Groung; Y'shebellu; Correcte Behavior; Willow, Willow; Muziqawi Silt. (50:50)

**Personnel:** Alexander Hawkins, piano; Sofia Jernberg, voice.

**Ordering info:** [alexanderhawkinsintakt.bandcamp.com](http://alexanderhawkinsintakt.bandcamp.com)



## Marching to Their Own Beat

Despite a career that spans three decades, **New York Love Letter (Bitter Sweet)** (Giant Step Arts; 50:25 ★★★★★) is just Nasheet Waits' third album as a bandleader. A sonic autobiography, the live recording's cast includes vibraphonist Steve Nelson, who engages Waits in a vibrant give-and-take on Andrew Hill's "Snake Hip Waltz." "The Hard Way AW," a Waits composition, is the album's mood- and timbre-shifting centerpiece, showcasing the entire band and the characteristically introspective playing of saxophonist Mark Turner, in particular. Waits' playing is inventive and impeccable throughout the recording, providing support and space where needed with help from Rashaan Carter on bass. His approach is emblematic of the straightahead drummers of his generation whose style is rooted in tradition while embracing all the influences that come with being part of the hip-hop generation.

Ordering info: [nasheetwaits.bandcamp.com](http://nasheetwaits.bandcamp.com)

That **WAW! (Hobby Horse; 40:59 ★★★★★)** uses the cliché of its band members' last initials should not detract from the music contained therein. Jeff "Tain" Watts, a mainstay of jazz drumming for more than 40 years, teams up with Dutch musicians Carl Winther (piano) and Richard Andersson (bass). Winther is the chief composer here, contributing four of the album's five songs. The effort largely falls in the piano-trio lineage, opening with swingers "Planet P" and "Manhattan," followed by the Arthur Johnston ballad "My Old Flame," in which Watts' tasteful brushwork is elegantly showcased. "Deconstructing Mr. X" shifts the frame with a less melodic, more rhythmically centered piece that lets Tain drop a deep groove. Closer "Requiem For JW" significantly departs from the American jazz tradition and has a feel reminiscent of an ECM recording. The change is welcome.

Ordering info: [richardandersson.bandcamp.com](http://richardandersson.bandcamp.com)

Like many musicians, **Robby Ameen** had to get creative to manifest performance opportunities during the pandemic. A vintage poster store in Manhattan offered Ameen space to conduct online lessons and present a weekly concert, the last of which was recorded to produce **Live At The Poster Museum (Origin; 60:05 ★★★★★)**. Ameen is at the forefront of Afro-Cuban drumming, as this outing reinforces. (Sonny Rollins' "Oleo" adds straightahead jazz into the mix for good measure.) Trombonist Conrad Herwig stands out, quite an accomplishment given the first-rate band that includes the likes of saxophonist Bob Franceschini and bassist Lincoln Goines.

Ordering info: [originarts.com](http://originarts.com)



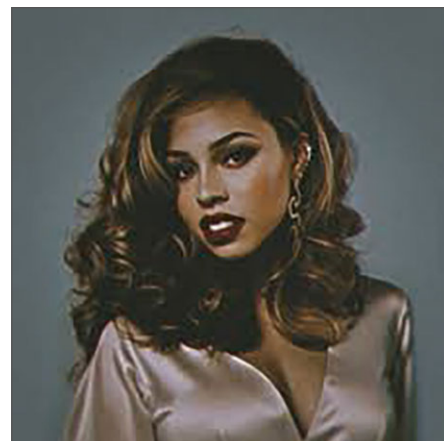
Nasheet Waits

**Bob Holz** comes out of the fusion scene of the 1980s and '90s; on **Night Watch (MVD Audio; 56:27 ★★★★★)**, he wears those influences on his sleeve. The sonic palette is reminiscent of GRP releases of that period; if that sound is your bag, with the addition of a strong R&B presence, there is plenty in this album to dig through. Recorded live at Catalina Jazz Club in Hollywood, the set is full of precise ensemble moments and slick improvisation, beginning with the opening cover of the funk standard "The Chicken." Keyboardist Billy Steinway collaborated with Holz to compose "Silverthorne," another standout track. Celebrated bassist Ralphe Armstrong holds it down throughout and is a perfect complement to Holz, whose own playing is technically proficient and steadily grooving. Saxophonist Brandon Fields and guitarist Alex Machacek similarly share a strong harmonic and melodic simpatico.

Ordering info: [mvdshop.com](http://mvdshop.com)

As a listener, one has to appreciate it when an artist takes a big swing, but the swing makes even a close miss all the more apparent. Conceptually, **Wolfgang Haffner's Life Rhythm (ACT; 47:12 ★★½)** is the most intriguing of this set of albums. On a number of tracks, such as the opener "Life Rhythm" and later on "Open Land," Haffner uses highly repetitive drum patterns, citing Phil Collins' 1980s hits as an inspiration, to create a hypnotic rhythmic bed over which the other instruments are layered. These tracks are *Life Rhythm's* most effective. The remainder do not have the same impact. Despite A-list guests like saxophonist Bill Evans and guitarist Dominic Miller, the performances, which are well-executed but overproduced, leave the listener cold.

Ordering info: [customers.mvdb2b.com](http://customers.mvdb2b.com)



## Lauren Henderson *Sombras*

BRONTOSAURUS

★★★★★

Henderson sings in a mellow, midrange tone that welcomes you into the compelling worlds she creates with her songs. Her intention here is to explore the many cultural influences of her background, nodding to her roots in Panama, Montserrat and the Caribbean, as well as the greater African Diaspora. With her longtime band backing her, she sways through the shadows and light of the music that inspired her.

*Sombras* opens with "Fuego (Fire)," a serene ode to the inner flame that warms our lives. The rhythm section — drummer/percussionist Joe Dyson and bass player Jonathan Michel — holds back to let Sean Mason's sparkling piano and Henderson's glowing vocal convey the song's tranquil message.

"Walking" is a waltz, with the tempo broken into unexpected slivers of rhythm by Michel's bass, Mason's trills on the high keys of the piano and Dyson's snapping snare and shimmering vibes. Henderson sings this lament to lost love with a doleful delivery, intensified by the wordless lamentations she delivers as the music slowly fades into silence.

There's a hint of flamenco in the fills the band plays to open "Sombras," backing Henderson's soft, wordless vamps. She delivers the Spanish lyrics in a whispered tone, expressing the slow journey one takes moving from self-imposed limitations to freedom. The tune is reprised at the end of the album as "Shadows," with Henderson singing the verses in English with dramatic phrasing, as Michel's piano and Joel Ross' vibes weave in and around the melody.

—j. poet

**Sombras:** Fuego; Seasons; Venas; Sombras; Illumination; Tormento; Walking; Dignidad; Shadows. (32:01)

**Personnel:** Lauren Henderson, voice; Joel Ross, vibraphone; Sean Mason, piano; Jonathan Michel, bass; Joe Dyson, drums, percussion.

Ordering info: [brontosaurusrecords.com](http://brontosaurusrecords.com)



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Eckemoff at Digitube Studio in Mantua, Italy, where she recorded her 20th and most recent album, *Romance Of The Moon*.

# Pianist Yelena Eckemoff on Her Approach to [Jazz] Composition

**Y**ou don't have to be a composer to play jazz. But what is a composition if not an improvisation in slow motion? Maybe it'd also be appropriate to describe jazz as "composition in real time." If so, doesn't this suggest that all jazz musicians are composers?

In our usual understanding of Western classical music, a composition, unlike an

improvisation, is a written piece, typically replayed in exactly the same way. But, in fact, some classical composers performed their compositions differently each time they played them and made use of improvisation as a compositional technique: They would transcribe their extemporaneous playing and then structure their ideas in written compositions.

Once committed to paper, these compositions became canonical, and we don't look to change them from their written form.

A traditional jazz composition comprises mainly the head (tune) and a number of choruses (improvisations), with the jazz composer given as the one who comes up with the tune. But with the proliferation in musical styles



and advances in technology over the past century, some jazz composers have adopted the practices of classical music, and many classical music composers have welcomed jazz idioms into their composing methods.

For a jazz composer, there are advantages to borrowing from the classical music perspective, which allows for the introduction of various musical forms, along with editing, clarifying and refining the composition after putting forth the initial concept. At the same time, a jazz composer understands that this process is only completed when the music comes to life in performance, infused with the spontaneity of improvisation. And since improvisations change with each performance, the composition will also change.

However, if to be considered a composition a piece needs to be “fixed” in some way — either written down or captured in a studio session — the jazz composer’s role also includes directing the development of the piece beyond its documentation, whether written or recorded.

This is the approach to jazz composition that I have followed throughout my music career, resulting in the 20 jazz releases since 2010 that I have written, recorded, and produced through my L&H Production label. Drummer Billy Hart, who played on three of my records, affirmed this process (when we recorded my 2014 trio album, *Lions*) with an interesting insight. “Classical music has become more interpretive,” he said in our album EPK. “And I think we’re at the point in American music where more through-composed pieces will be considered jazz. That’s what I mean by ‘prophetic’ [in describing Yelena’s approach].”

For me, composing was always a way of navigating life, of processing what was happening around (and inside) me — and all of these thoughts and feelings make their way into my compositions. (I still have the notebook that my mother, a professional pianist, kept of my early pieces, with titles like “Fishes In The Pond” and “Birds In The Woods.”) Even as a young piano student, I was penciling down my own works. To this day, I keep a growing stack of notated tunes and written-out pieces, stored in folders. This is my melodic library, from which I supplement the new material I compose specifically for a current project. And even though each release has its own sound and character — I like to vary the musicians, instrumentation and even the stylistic angle from project to project — they are all related through my work as a composer.

What does not vary in my work are what I consider the foundational elements of a good composition: melody and structure. In my view, a musical composition without melod-



H. ECKEMOFF

ic material is meaningless, and every composition needs both interesting melodic material and a thoughtfully unfolding structure. With this foundation established, the development of the melodic material (as in classical music) provides the substance, and improvisation (as in jazz) provides the embellishment.

As music history shows us, it is artistic merit that counts and not one’s success in jumping on a trend. Likewise, the serious composers — the ones whose work lasts — are those who best represent a certain musical style. I realize that this notion is practically heretical nowadays. It could be, however, that true innovation in music derives not from overruling convention, but from expressing unique creativity through musical forms and

practices that touch people’s hearts. The world is always seeking meaningful music — and it’s the composer’s responsibility to lend it. **DB**

Conservatory-trained pianist and composer Yelena Eckemoff has carved out a singular niche with an expansive body of programmatic compositions shaped by European classical music and jazz’s expressive interplay. She has produced at least one new recording every year since she released her breakout concept album *Cold Sun* in 2010. Long based in rural North Carolina, Eckemoff is known for choosing some of the finest improvisers in the U.S. and Europe to interpret and record her music. Her latest project, *Romance Of The Moon* (L&H Production), features Sardinian trumpet player Paolo Fresu as the primary voice for her instrumental interpretations of 13 poems by the Spanish writer Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936), with a Rome-based rhythm section of bassist Luca Bulgarelli and drummer Stefano Bagnoli providing sensitive support. The album was selected as a DownBeat Editors Pick, with a review posted on [downbeat.com](https://www.downbeat.com). Visit Eckemoff online at [yelenamusic.com](https://yelenamusic.com).

Suzanne Lorge is a regular contributor to DownBeat.

## YELENA’S COMPOSITIONAL TIPS

Here is some simple compositional guidance — not just for jazz players, but musicians of all stripes:

- If you have trouble finding a melody, try looking for it in the voicing of your harmonic progression. Also, note how poetic words can suggest a melody or how an unexpected harmonic progression can enhance one.
- Carry writing or recording materials with you to grab your ideas as they occur. Transfer your hand-written notes or scratch recordings into music notation software and edit them down. Remember that skillful editing can transform a mediocre piece into a superior composition.
- Build your composition in sections (such as intro, tune, structured/free improvisations, transition(s), contrasting theme(s), coda, ending, etc.) and experiment with various elements like order, instrumentation, chord/keys substitutions, etc.
- Pay attention to counterpoint/polyphonic development to bring some interesting melodic interplay between the instruments within the written parts.
- Avoid both unreasonably complex structural/melodic development and unimaginative, minimal development. Alternate complex sections with easier material so that the listener is both challenged and engaged.
- For recording sessions, make sure that your lead sheets and charts are properly formatted and easy to follow. Be flexible in the studio, just in case your piece doesn’t unfold as you expect.
- Remember that your bandmates are co-creators who help you to shape and finish your composition. Choose them wisely.
- Do not copy any musician — no matter how iconic they are. Instead, let their inspiration guide your own unique expression.
- Please yourself first and foremost — not everyone is going to like your music. At the same time, welcome constructive criticism.
- Let creative inspiration — rather than ambition — be your muse. Attention-grabbing and crowd-pandering may amuse an audience for an evening, but a good melody can last forever.



RACHEL HADJASHAR



Politzer notes that Phineas Newborn Jr.'s left hand was as important to the melody as his right hand.

# The Left-Hand Techniques of Phineas Newborn Jr.

In his excellent book *The Giants of Jazz Piano*, Robert Doerschuk laments a lack of awareness about Phineas Newborn Jr., saying that the pianist left behind “a compelling but abbreviated discography and the inevitable speculations of what might have been.”

Author Richard Cook says in his *Jazz Encyclopedia* that Newborn’s career “went spectacularly wrong,” and that he is a “case history of a fine talent largely ruined by circumstance.” It is true that Newborn suffered

many personal tragedies during his life. But this incredible pianist, who has been called “the father of the Memphis jazz piano tradition,” may be ignored simply because the city of Memphis is not always considered a part of the jazz tradition. It is known for many other styles of music including blues, R&B, classical, country and gospel, all of which Newborn was proficient in.

But not everyone ignored Newborn. In 1967, jazz critic Leonard Feather pronounced him to be the greatest living jazz

pianist. And according to *The Boston Globe*, Newborn’s dexterity and speed reportedly made him the only man Oscar Peterson feared.

So how would one describe the playing of Phineas Newborn?

Doerschuk puts Newborn in a separate category from fellow virtuosos Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson, saying that, unlike these other “high-velocity pianist icons,” who descended more or less from stride piano, Newborn was disinclined to use his



left hand as a rhythm generator. But neither could he be connected to a bebop lineage; his fidelity to written themes, and the upbeat feel that permeated almost all of his playing, place him closer to Ahmad Jamal and other pianists for whom swing and melodic integrity are defining elements.”

Some of Newborn’s principal influences were Art Tatum, Nat “King” Cole, Fats Waller, Franz Liszt and Bud Powell. *The History of Jazz* author Ted Gioia terms him a “post-Tatum pianist” who “channeled the techniques of the concert hall into a mainstream piano sound.” But in some ways, Newborn is almost an afterthought in the annals of jazz history. His contributions are totally omitted in many otherwise comprehensive books by jazz historians.

The late Harold Mabern, a protégé of Newborn’s, says of the master, “His ideas were flawless. He overwhelmed me. His right hand would be going one way, and the left hand the other. Everything was so orchestrated as if he were accompanying himself. ... He had all the elements, the skill of Bud Powell, the chording of Count Basie, the orchestral sweep of Erroll Garner and the classical sense of Ravel and Chopin.”

Jazz pianist and professor Lee Evans, who had the opportunity to spend time with Newborn, reminisces about Newborn’s brilliance. “I remember his piano playing vividly,” he says. “He sounded like a reincarnation of Art Tatum, with unending jazz musical ideas and the piano technique of a jazz equivalent to the concert pianist Vladimir Horowitz. I also will never forget Newborn’s keyboard touch at that time, which was as light as a feather. You know how some people among the general public sometimes say corny things about pianists, such as, ‘He really tickles the ivories’? Well, Newborn was most definitely the embodiment of that expression — especially in those earlier days before his rapidly growing emotional problems were to cut his musical career short. He barely touched the keys yet produced firm but gentle jazz of the most incredibly impressive inventiveness and virtuosity. To be sure, the critical consensus was that had he not succumbed to emotional instability, he would eventually be recognized as the next Tatum.”

Robert Gordon, author of *It Came from Memphis*, remarks that Newborn sounded like “more than one person playing.” His left hand was as important to the melody as his right.

Interestingly, Newborn happened to be left-handed. He once performed a virtuosic blues on the television program *Jazz Scene USA* using only his left hand.

## TECHNIQUES

Newborn was a master arranger of jazz standards, and the innovative ways in which he used his left hand were integral to both these arrangements and to his improvisations.

One technique he often used was the left-hand ostinato. He also favored fast runs where the left hand would double the right in a lower octave, and contrary motion, in which the left hand would descend while the right hand ascended.

Enamored of the virtuosic piano music of Hungarian composer Franz Liszt, Newborn also incorporated double octaves, such as the ones in the Sonata in B Minor, into his own linear melodies. And while the writer Doerschuk seems to discount Newborn’s stride influence, the pianist definitely utilized the left-hand techniques of that style.

## “SOLITAIRE”

1959 saw the release of *We Three*, a wonderful Newborn album in which he collaborated with Paul Chambers and Roy Haynes. The following excerpts from the album track “Solitaire” demonstrate some of the techniques described above: doubled single-note lines, contrary motion and stride timekeeping. (Note: rhythms are approximate, as Newborn makes extensive use of rubato in his solo intro.)

## CONTRARY MOTION

In Example 1, we see how Newborn outlines an A7b9 chord with a fast run in contrary motion. Note how he uses the full range of the piano.

### Examples 1–2

### Example 3

## PARALLEL MOTION

Example 2, shown next to our first example, demonstrates how Newborn often mirrored his right-hand lines with the left hand.

## MIXED TECHNIQUES

Example 3 is an excerpt that demonstrates how Newborn would alternate using wide, stride-like intervals in the left hand with single-note lines in contrary motion.

## “OUT OF THIS WORLD”

In 1974, on his Grammy-nominated album *Phineas Newborn Jr. Solo Piano*, Newborn recorded one of the fastest songs in his repertoire, Cole Porter’s “Out Of This World.” Newborn’s brother Calvin called this a “triple-speed left-hand tour de force.” In Example 4 (shown on page 58), note the blisteringly fast ostinato in the bass through measure 10, after which Newborn alternates between low octaves and chords in the middle register.

While Newborn only lived to be 57, he left a legacy of unmatched musicality and astonishing piano technique. Hopefully these excerpts will help to shed some light on the inner workings of his jazz improvisations and arrangements.

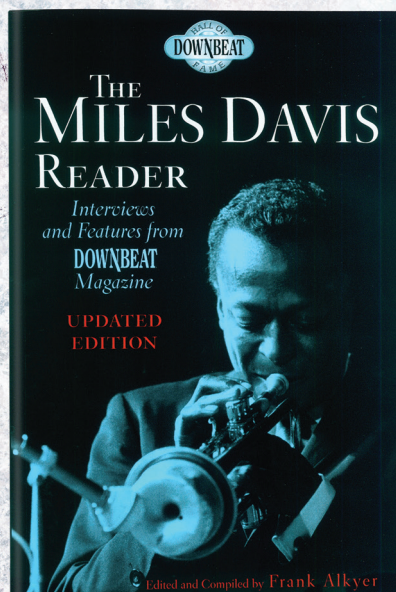
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Kerry Politzer is a Portland-based jazz pianist, composer and educator. She is on the music faculty of Portland State University and has also taught at Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Swing University, the University of Portland and the Oregon Jazz Workshop. Politzer received a bachelor’s degree in jazz piano from New England Conservatory and a master’s degree in jazz studies from Rowan University. An active clinician, she has given workshops and master classes at the Reno Jazz Festival, the University of Kansas and others. Politzer has released eight jazz CDs as a leader, including *Blue In Blue*, which featured saxophonist Donny McCaslin. Her newest album, *Ruminations* (PJCE), was released in May. Politzer has also been a featured sideman on albums by George Colligan,



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Laura Dreyer and the Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble, and she was featured on the 2004 collection *Sax And The City: Musical Contributions From New York's Best Women Jazz Instrumentalists* (Apria Records). In 2019, Politzer was awarded a Regional Arts and Culture Council Artistic Focus grant to explore the music of Brazilian composer Durval Ferreira. The project culminated in the release of *Diagonal: The Music Of Durval Ferreira*. In 2020, she received another RACC grant to produce the first edition of *Music Of Brazilian Piano Masters*. In 2021, Politzer received grants from MusicPortland and the RACC for her Driveway Jazz Series

project, which provided an outdoor venue for musicians during the pandemic. She currently leads Bossa PDX, a samba-jazz and bossa nova group for which she has transcribed classic arrangements from the original recordings. With this music, Politzer has performed around the country at venues such as Jazz Forum Arts, the Black Dolphin, the Oregon Coast Jazz Party, Ellenburg's Jazz in the Valley and the Florence Wine & Jazz Festival, among other venues. In addition to DIVA No Man's Band, she has also performed with the Chuck Israels Jazz Orchestra and the Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble. Visit her online at [kerrypolitzer.com](http://kerrypolitzer.com).

## Example 4

$\text{♩} = 280$



# 90

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COURTESY OF WARREN WOLF



Wolf employs a question-and-answer approach to his solo.

# Warren Wolf's Vibraphone Improvisation on 'For Ma'

Multi-instrumentalist Warren Wolf's song "For Ma" (from 2020's *Reincarnation* on Mack Avenue) is a solid groove tune, the kind of feel-good jazz one can dance to. For his vibraphone solo on the recording, Wolf plays over a simple three-chord vamp, and does so in a manner that adds to the "smile factor" of the song. It's also wonderful how his rhythm section starts out sparse and then increases the energy throughout, building alongside the soloist.

Wolf mostly sticks to the Bb minor pentatonic scale (that's why I used a Bb minor key signature, even though the tonic is played as a major chord: just makes for easier reading). He adds a number of flat fifths (the blue note), major thirds (nice touch to bring out the

major quality of the tonic) and the major sixth (which is the third of the IV chord). All that adds up to eight notes. A total of eight notes to create a 56-bar solo. And a good one, at that.

One thing Wolf does throughout this improvisation is to use a question-and-answer approach, where each phrase is answered by a correlating phrase that mirrors the first in some way. And he does this right from the start. His first two licks both start out with the same tritone (G natural to Db, sixth to minor third) and then descend from a Bb. The first one kind of descends to Eb (though with a Bb on top of it), but the second phrase drops all the way to a low Bb and does it over a longer period of time. This, along with it ending on the tonic, makes it sound more final, or

"answer like," than the first phrase (the "questioning" part). I think it's also a wonderful twist that the first lick's tritone is on the second bar of the two-bar phrase but for the next phrase he displaces it to the first. This subtle change also makes the second phrase sound less like a repeat of the first.

The next two ideas both ruin my thesis and support it. We hear a short idea in measure 9, and then an answer to it in bar 11. But in measure 13, Wolf starts a third phrase similarly to these two, but this phrase extends for three bars, creating more of a sense of answer. So is this question-answer-answer, or question-question-answer? I would say neither. "Question and answer" is just an analogy we use to describe a musical effect, and shouldn't



be treated literally. (Another term for this musical effect is “call and response,” which may be more appropriate since a response can also be responded to.)

Wolf’s next phrase receives the same treatment: Bars 17–18 are responded to in 19–20, though in this case not so much responded to as repeated almost verbatim. So Wolf plays it again with the only difference between these phrases being the pickup licks used before them (which is incredibly hip considering that previously he was varying the endings). The main idea extends from beat 1 of bar 17 to beat 3 of bar 18. The previous two beats are the part that Wolf is varying. It’s only in measures 22–23 that Wolf plays something not incorporating this idea, producing an actual response, or answer, to what came previously.

We hear something similar in measures 24–29: Wolf brings in a motif of repeated Eb’s, and plays three phrases incorporating this before providing something different to complete the statement. I could go on, but how about taking a look (and more importantly, a listen) and noticing not just Wolf answering his own phrases, but the myriad ways he does it throughout the remainder of his solo.

Notice also that starting around this point (measure 24), something important occurs: 16th notes are introduced. Except for a decoration in bar 4, everything previous to bar 24 had been eighth-note based. Sixteenth notes increase the momentum, but Wolf introduces them first by using mostly repeated notes, so rhythmically it’s 16ths but melodically it’s still mostly eighths and larger. He slowly brings in more actual 16th-note lines, so on one hand measure 24 (almost the halfway point in the solo, by the way) is the spot where he instantly changes the energy, but on the other hand he is also still subtly raising it (and dig how the rhythm section responds to these changes).

And it’s not a straight line. Wolf back-pedals into triplets for bars 28–29, and to eighth notes and even quarter notes in bars 40–41 as well as bar 48 (and, of course, he ends his statement by bringing us back to eighth notes in bar 55). He even pushes us up into 16th-note triplets for a moment (bar 45), so we hear the rhythm intensifying, but in a back-and-forth manner. He even brings back the repeated-note idea in bar 49, and when he does bring it back, it’s to use as a motif in a final call-and-response lick. Wolf plays this idea of E natural to repeated F’s three times, but each has a contrasting conclusion. The last one adds an extra bar, which drops back to eighth notes to produce a strong ending.

**DB**

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](http://jimidurso.bandcamp.com). Jimi can often be witnessed performing, rehearsing, teaching and pontificating online at [twitch.tv/CoincidenceMachine](https://www.twitch.tv/CoincidenceMachine).



# Kawai CA901

## Acoustic Grand Piano Feel & Sound in a Digital Instrument

Kawai's innovations in the digital piano realm are more evolutionary than revolutionary. With each generation of instruments, new technology becomes available and existing technology becomes more affordable. The entire playing experience has gradually become more real-sounding and real-feeling over the years, and this trend includes the company's Concert Artist series — premium instruments that capture the essence of playing a magnificent concert grand piano.

When I sat down to play-test the new Kawai CA901 upright digital piano at Cordogan's Pianoland in Geneva, Illinois, a rush of long-established associations with an acoustic piano came to life, many of them inspired by the instrument's Grand Feel III wooden key action. Kawai has consistently done a great job of combining realistic-feeling materials, motions and mechanisms in its CA Series digitals to recreate the satisfying touch and response of a true-to-life concert grand, and this new flagship model is no exception.

All of the CA901's 88 full-length keys (black and white) are made from cuts of wood with finely textured ivory- and ebony-like surfaces applied to absorb moisture and reduce slipping of the fingers. Each key pivots on a balance pin, with the ends rising and falling to replicate the seesaw-like motion of a piano action. When you press a key, a grade-weighted hammer strikes a pressure switch under the hood that triggers the corresponding note to sound at the appropriate volume and with authentic tonal character. The entire mechanism of the keyboard felt incredibly genuine, not surprising considering its meticulously detailed, just-like-the-real-thing construction.

Once I started tuning in to the super-high-quality sounds onboard the CA901, my playing experience became even more real — by leaps and bounds. Kawai has relied on new and better piano sampling techniques to update the CA line over the course of its evolution, and the CA901 represents the epitome of their quest for tonal realism. It has highly distinct versions of the Shigeru Kawai range of luxury grand pianos, including an early model of the company's flagship SK-EX Concert Grand, which produces a warm, enveloping tone and has exceptional dynamic range, and the brand-new SK-EX Competition Grand, which captures the sound of Kawai's latest-generation SK-EX-L instruments recorded from the pianist's position. I enjoyed experimenting with the contrasting qualities of both SK-EX sounds and imagining the possibilities and implications of each voice. Additional piano samples onboard the CA901 include Kawai's SK-EX-L, SK-EX, SK-5, EX and K-60 models.

As Kawai North America's Allen Palmer told me during a conversation at this year's NAMM Show, "You have sound options that are more than just edited variations of one original sample set. The electronics are upgraded for more focus on the real piano sound. Everything is more focused toward the piano sound — not an earth-shattering difference, but everything just feels more *right*."

The CA901's Harmonic Imaging XL sound engine offers a selection of instrument voices that can be played individually, layered or combined with the piano sounds. A nice variety of organs, strings and synths and a robust effects section only increase the performance possibilities.

It takes more than just a great set of audio speakers to disperse the CA901's full, brilliant sound through the room properly. So, they gave it a dual DAC system that uses high-specification power amps to reproduce



the SK-EX sounds with absolute fullness and sparkling clarity. A hybrid speaker configuration combines premium driver units with the latest version of Kawai's soundboard speaker technology, which uses transducers to channel sound energy onto a large wooden soundboard — delivering clear treble frequencies and warm, resonant bass that you can really feel. Premium speaker drivers were selected for their flat frequency response and ultra-low distortion characteristics. Long wooden ribs securely attached to the soundboard further broaden the frequency range and volume of the resonating sound.

Lose yourself in a sonata, and you might forget you're playing a digital instrument with 256-note polyphony. But those digital features are there for a reason, and you'll probably enjoy playing the instrument even more if you take full advantage of the CA901's wide range of instrument sounds, 100 patterns of built-in rhythms, Full Bluetooth V5 connectivity, USB and MIDI audio connections, record/playback function and integrated lessons. The keyboard can be operated in split, dual or four-hands mode. Add to that the ability to make personalized adjustments like tweaking the resonance, velocity curves and tuning of the onboard pianos using the CA901's sophisticated virtual piano artisan controls. All functions are accessible from the CA901's 5-inch anti-glare touchscreen display, which can be set to fade out and turn off automatically while playing so it's not a distraction.

The latest Kawai Concert Artist instruments are housed within furniture-grade wooden cabinets with tapered legs and rounded edge details. The CA901's cabinet adopts a contemporary upright-inspired design, with a broad, simulated-leather-lined music rest and a Soft Fall key cover. The instrument is available in Premium Rosewood, Premium Satin Black, Premium Satin White, Ebony Polish and Natural Walnut (pictured) finishes. It comes with Kawai's Grand Feel Pedal System, which includes damper (with half-pedal support), soft (with half-pedal support) and sostenuto functionality.

—Ed Enright

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More info: [usa.yamaha.com](http://usa.yamaha.com)

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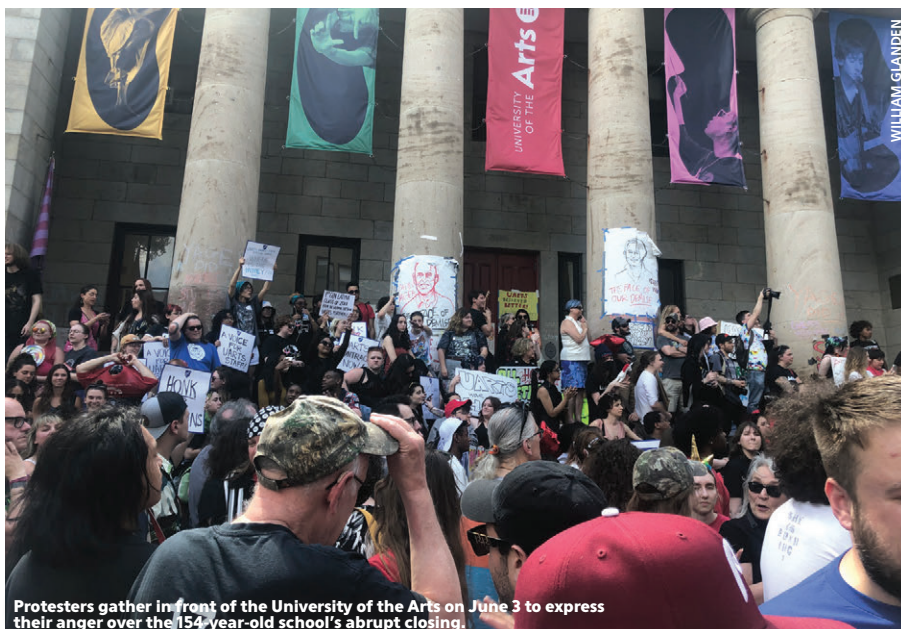


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Protesters gather in front of the University of the Arts on June 3 to express their anger over the 154-year-old school's abrupt closing.

# The Sad, Abrupt Closing of UArts

**KERRY WALK, PRESIDENT OF UNIVERSITY** of the Arts, announced via e-mail on May 3 that the 154-year-old, Philadelphia-based institution would be closing permanently the following week. The announcement was so sudden and unexpected that Don Glanden, director of Jazz Studies at UArts since 1997, didn't find out about it until he received a phone call from one of his students.

"One of my piano students called me to ask if it was true that UArts was closing permanently," recalled Glanden during a recent conversation. "I was really skeptical at first, thinking this was some kind of student prank. But he said his mom had seen an online article in the Philadelphia Inquirer that afternoon about UArts closing. I immediately began calling my colleagues and later we all received President Walk's e-mail about the closure. I found out later that the deans were only notified about UArts closing 10 minutes before that email was sent out. It was unbelievable."

Sherrie Maricle, adjunct professor at UArts, jazz drummer and founder of the Diva Jazz Orchestra, was also stunned when she received the e-mail about the abrupt closing.

"That e-mail was shocking, but at least it contained a promise to address some reasons for the decision to close UArts," she said. "The e-mail stated: 'On Monday, June 3, 2024, we will host separate town hall meetings for students, faculty and staff; we will send times and details for those town halls over the coming weekend. We are committed to providing a space for your questions and concerns.' The meetings were

scheduled for June 3, but they called them off 10 minutes before they were supposed to start. The next day, President Walk resigned. It's been crazy. In the meantime, like the rest of the Jazz Studies faculty, I've been trying to help our students find a path to continue their education."

That initial message from Walk noted UArts' "fragile financial state, with many years of declining enrollments." But according to Glanden, enrollment had increased at UArts after the school shut down for COVID in 2020.

"COVID was definitely a blow," explained Glanden, "but we've been able to come back as far as enrollment. In the Fall 2022 semester, we had 190 new students coming into UArts. And in Fall 2023, that number was 360. And looking forward to Fall 2024, we were on target for 500 new students."

At the time the UArts closure was announced, undergraduate and graduate school enrollment totaled almost 1,300. In addition, nearly 700 faculty and staff were on the UArts payroll. The abrupt closure has forced students to scramble to find other colleges and universities to transfer to, faculty positions have been eliminated and Glanden and the entire UArts faculty face an even more difficult path to finding available teaching positions.

The UArts Jazz Studies program is small in terms of enrollment and only serves graduate students. The program has an enrollment of about 20 to 22 students in most academic years, with approximately seven students receiving master's degrees each year. Glanden emphasized that the program's small size is by design.

"The Jazz Studies graduate program is formatted for a small student population," he said. "With a grad program, you have to decide whether you're going for larger numbers of students or a focus on raising the quality of teaching for individual students. For example, in the class I teach — Advanced Transcription and Analysis — we may be studying Scriabin one week and Coltrane the next. There's a tremendous amount of creative work involved, with deep analysis in class and a focus on students writing their own original compositions."

Jazz vibraphonist Chien Chien Lu, recently named one of the "25 for the Future" jazz stars in the July issue of *DownBeat*, received her master's from UArts in 2017. In a recent interview, she attested to the benefits of spending two years at UArts as a strong factor in her growth as a musician.

"UArts was such a good school for me because of the total environment," she said. "I had the best of both worlds — a great vibes teacher, Tony Miceli, and I was able to get a residency at Chris' Jazz Club, which was close to the school. I came from a classical background in Taiwan, so when I first started at UArts, my repertoire was very limited. It was a great two years for me there, and I was excited to come back to do a workshop last fall."

Trombonist Robin Eubanks, a 1978 cum laude graduate of UArts, also came back last fall to do a workshop. "Don told me he wanted to bring in top musicians to teach in the program — especially UArts alums," he said. "It was a good experience working with students in arranging and improv sessions. Looking back on it now, it's a shame that the faculty and students got blindsided with the school closing."

Although UArts is now officially closed, Glanden, Maricle and other jazz studies faculty continue to assist students in finding other programs. The Jazz Studies program at nearby Temple University has been especially receptive to UArts jazz students, according to Glanden.

"Temple has reached out to help and proposed a potential merger with UArts," said Glanden. "They have been very welcoming to potential UArts transfers — even setting up two orientation sessions for them. I have confidence recommending Temple to students if it's the right fit."

As UArts Jazz Studies students search for a path forward in the face of the school's closure, Glanden and his fellow faculty members continue to assist them — while searching for new paths for themselves.

"There are all kinds of paths that can be taken," Glanden concluded. "You just have to find the correct one for you." —*Terry Perkins*



## John Clayton & Rufus Reid, Part II

We ran Part I of this fantastic double Blindfold Test in the July issue. The live test was administered at the International Society of Jazz Arrangers & Composers Symposium held in Nashville back in May, with an interesting twist: Instead of bassist-composers Rufus Reid and John Clayton being “tested” by a journalist, they chose songs for each other — both quite enjoying the opportunity to tease, trick and bend each other’s minds. Before heading into the second half of the “test,” which picks up right where we left off at the end of Part I, Reid told the audience about his work as a mentor for the Bridges Composition Competition at Ravinia, which, as an incubator for jazz-classical fusion, gives young composers an opportunity to write for jazz trio and string quartet.

### Cecil McBee

“Tight Squeeze” (*Unspoken*, Palmetto, 1997) McBee, composer, bass; Randall Connors, alto saxophone; James Zollar, trumpet; David Berkman, piano; Matt Wilson, drums.

**John:** I heard this smart ensemble and stylistically it was hard for me to get a grasp of who it was. I guess I wasn’t hearing enough of the composer’s, the arranger’s voice, to get a hold. So it was full-on, beautiful sounds and everything. Modern. But the bass player ... [Clayton looks at Reid, who cracks a sly smile as the audience chuckles] You’re so mean! The bass player was taking it out, too, so I was trying to narrow it down to figure out who it is.

**Rufus:** Old.

**John:** Old? Richard [Davis].

**Rufus:** Not that old.

**John:** You got me!

**Rufus:** Cecil McBee. And this is Cecil’s composition.

### Quincy Jones

“Hummin’” (*Gula Matari*, A&M, 1970) Jones, arranger; Nat Adderley, composer; Major Holley, bass and voice solo.

**Rufus:** Mule.

**John:** That was a soft pitch, too ... to show you that I love you!

**Rufus:** Mule is the nickname for Major Holley. Wow. Was that Quincy’s? I hadn’t heard that in a long time. I had to wait until it opened up. Major Holley. What a sound, and he played tuba as well.

**John:** I love that not only did he swing in his playing, but he could take out his bow and he would sing the octave he was playing on the bass. So, it’s that sound that goes *really low*.

### Dwike Mitchell/Willie Ruff

“Gypsy In My Soul” (*Strayhorn: A Mitchell-Ruff Interpretation*, Mainstream; 50th anniversary reissue/Kepler, 1969) Mitchell, piano; Ruff, bass.

**John:** Is that George Shearing?

**Rufus:** No. [smiles]

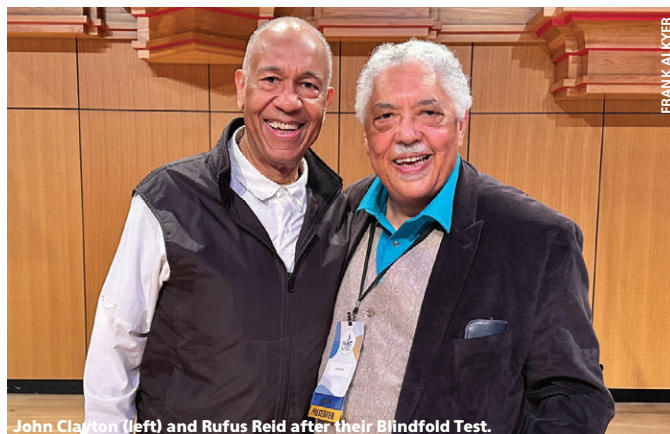
**John:** Whew! This, man, that’s amazing! It’s so close to Oscar Peterson, but it’s not! So close to Ray Brown, but it’s not! OK, I thought Phineas Newborn, but I never heard Phineas play that close to Oscar. Then for a minute I thought it was O.P. with Sam Jones, but that didn’t happen until late. This sounds like it was done in the ’50s, early ’60s.

**Rufus:** Can I give you a clue? He also plays French horn.

**John:** Willie Ruff? That’s Willie Ruff?

**Rufus:** With Dwike Mitchell.

**John:** Ugh! [audience laughs] Mind blown, right here!



John Clayton (left) and Rufus Reid after their Blindfold Test.

**Rufus:** When I heard it, I thought, “Ah!” This really surprised me, too, because you don’t really hear him play like that.

### Hubert Laws

“Morning Star” (*Morning Star*, CTI, 1972) Don Sebesky, arranger.

**Rufus:** [almost immediately] Hubert Laws! Beautiful song, too. I forget the name of the song.

**John:** “Morning Star.”

**Rufus:** “Morning Star,” yeah. Who’s the arranger?

**John:** It will come to you.

**Rufus:** Yeah, I’ve got his book. I can see it in front of me.

**John:** Yes! [long pause as Reid tries to figure it out]

**Frank Alkyer:** If you want to phone a friend, we’ll allow it. [laughter]

**John:** East Coast.

**Rufus:** His book is about that thick. [holds up his fingers] And I refer to it all the time.

**Alkyer:** I think it’s time to throw it out to the crowd.

**Audience:** [in unison] Don Sebesky.

### Oliver Jones

“I Love You” (*Northern Summit*, Justin Time, 1990) Jones, piano, composer; Herb Ellis, guitar; Red Mitchell, bass.

**John:** I didn’t get the piano player. I heard Herb Ellis’ vocabulary and sound. And the thing that gave Red Mitchell away was he did some leap on the bass and you can’t cover that much real estate the way he went “Wheeeet.” [makes a sound of sliding on the fretboard] He tuned his bass in fifths instead of fourths so he could draw up stuff that normal bass players can’t do or are challenged to do.

### Maria Schneider

“Don’t Be Evil” (*Data Lords*, ArtistShare 2020) Schneider, composer.

**Rufus:** [looking puzzled] No idea. Is it a European composer?

**John:** Nope. This person pretty much represents the gold standard. And I thing the reason why it’s a challenge for us older dudes to pinpoint is because so many people are influenced by this person nowadays, writing-wise.

**Rufus:** I have no idea.

**John:** Who is it, everybody?

**Audience:** [in unison] Maria Schneider.

**Rufus:** [throws up his hands in disgust at not getting it] Is it *Data Lords*?

**John:** Yes. [audience laughs as Rufus shakes his head]

**Rufus:** I’m surprised that I didn’t think of her, but I know on that album. She stretched herself because she was so disenchanted with big data and people who are not doing things on our behalf. Wow! I need to pull that back out. [laughter all around]

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.

A man with short brown hair, wearing a dark jacket over a light blue shirt, is playing a gold-colored saxophone. The saxophone is the central focus, with its bell pointing towards the right. The background is dark and out of focus.

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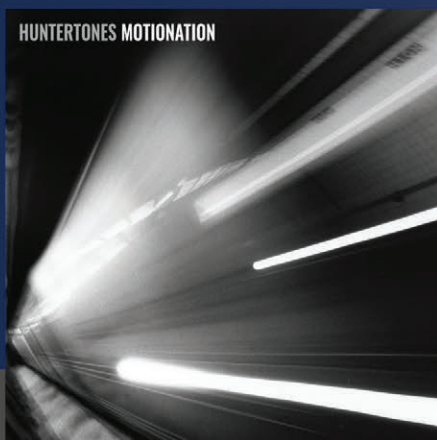


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