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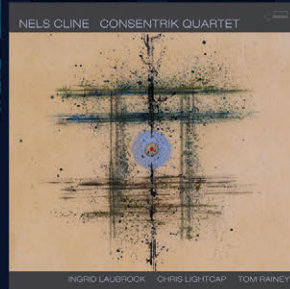


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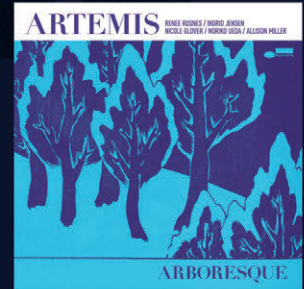
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BY MICHAEL JACKSON

Last December, 27-year-old saxophonist, composer and instigator Isaiah Collier sat down for a live interview with DownBeat at the Midwest Clinic, the world's largest gathering for music education. Young, but smart, talented and determined, Collier served admirably as both interviewee and wise professor.



Sofia Jernberg, a key component of the tapestry of European jazz making its way around the globe. Cover photo by Michael Jackson

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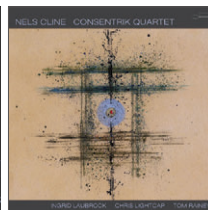
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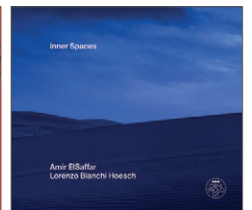
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First Take > BY FRANK ALKYER



Kennedy Center Dishonor

FOR THE ENTIRETY OF MY ADULT LIFE there have been a handful of televised events I considered must-watch viewing year-in and year-out: The Oscars, The Grammys, The Tonys, Ohio State vs. Michigan football (you can't take Ohio out of the boy), The Super Bowl ... and the Kennedy Center Honors.

And of these, the Kennedy Center Honors would most often bring this writer to tears. I've always found the event to be so beautiful in the way it told the stories of artists, who through tremendous ups and downs persisted to be recognized as important, not just by fans of their art, but by the entire nation.

The performances and presentations stir the soul. Last year, the 47th annual rightfully honored beloved jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval along with Bonnie Raitt, filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, The Grateful Dead and The Apollo Theater. To see the love the honorees have for the performers, and the performers for the honorees, melts the heart.

It was awe-inspiring to witness an all-star cast, including Chucho Valdés, Sandoval's one-time band mate in the groundbreaking band Irakere, perform Sandoval's music, as was watching Wynton Marsalis narrate Sandoval's life story in a beautiful, pre-recorded reel.

The Honors, as well as the Kennedy Center itself, has been a gathering place for *all* of the arts and *all* people from *all* walks of life in Washington, D.C., and the world — not to mention *every* corner of the political spectrum.

The art presented throughout the year at The Kennedy Center represents high ideals and goals — the best the arts world has to offer.

I pray that can continue.

Why? Because President Donald J. Trump fired the Center's president, purged its board of President Joe Biden's appointees and made himself chairman, all in the name of *revenge*.

I found it sad that President Trump never attended The Kennedy Center Honors during his first term in office. Yes, he had detractors who received honors, some very vocal. But as president, you've gotta have a spine, don't you? There were detractors for many other presidents, too, and they still attended.

In fact, prior to that, the President of the United States only missed the event three times. Jimmy Carter didn't go in 1979 due to the Iran hostage crisis. First Lady Rosalynn Carter did, though. George H.W. Bush had to miss in 1989 because he was on a trip to Brussels. First Lady Barbara Bush went in his place. And, Bill Clinton was on a trip to Budapest in 1994. But Hillary Clinton still attended.

The Kennedy Center, bipartisan from its birth, began in earnest in 1958 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation to create a National Cultural Center. Four years later, President John F. Kennedy launched a fundraising campaign to make that legislation reality. Following Kennedy's assassination, Congress passed bipartisan legislation, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, to make that center a living memorial to Kennedy's devotion to the performing arts.

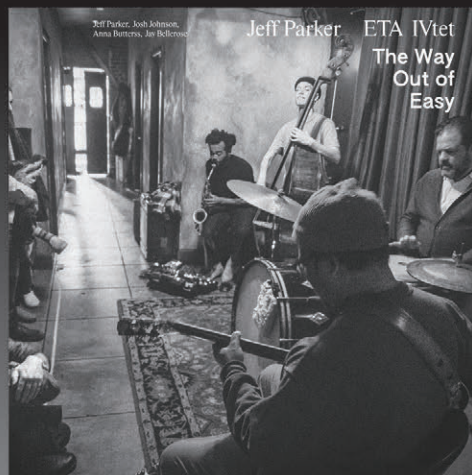
President Trump said he wants to make the Center "hot," whatever that means. The vast majority of Kennedy Center fans and donors would prefer that it stays cool ... and bipartisan. **DB**



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honey from a winter stone

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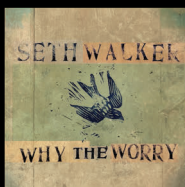
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For the Love of Caffè Vivace!

I receive the annual Jazz Venue Guide, and I admit that after 30 years of subscribing to DownBeat, and more years reading DownBeat, I'm still unclear the criteria for a jazz club's inclusion in the Guide. We have a very nice intimate jazz club in Cincinnati named Caffè Vivace, owned and operated by Brent Gallaher, a local practicing jazz musician.

Sullivan Fortner, your cover artist in the same issue, will shortly make his debut appearance. You've published Mark Sheldon's



photographs from Caffè Vivace.

Caffè Vivace features live jazz almost every night of the week. Caffè Vivace seems to check every box necessary for inclusion in the annual jazz guide. Therefore, I'm left wondering what is missing from Caffè Vivace's resume. Perhaps you could clue me in.

JAMES GARVIN
VIA EMAIL

Editor's Note: James, you make a compelling case. We'll give Caffè Vivace strong consideration for next year's guide. Thanks for pointing the way!

What About Oregon?

I just received the February 2025 issue, which has the 2025 Jazz Venue Guide. In the West Coast region, you completely left out Oregon, especially Portland, which has The 1905. In your 2020 issue, The 1905 was recognized as one of the "World's Greatest Jazz Clubs." What's up, DownBeat?

ED BENNETT
VIA EMAIL

Editor's Note: Duly noted. The 1905 will be in the running again for next year.

Regarding Missing Colorado

I was surprised to read Richard's email printed in the March issue. Since I'm lucky enough to have an 11,000-issue digital magazine archive, I thought I'd check the veracity of his claim.

This was especially interesting for me as I live in Louisville, Colorado, and heard about the UNC Jazz program via DownBeat back in 2019. I have attended the annual festival every year since.

UNC was first mentioned in the June 11, 1970, issue as part of the Jazz On Campus write-up on page 36. It has subsequently been mentioned in at least 70 other issues, most recently the October 2024 issue.

It's worth reminding readers that everything has to start somewhere, and I'm sure DownBeat would welcome contributions!

MARK
VIA EMAIL

Editor's Note: Mark, I love it, but you scare me a little with all that research!

Greetings from T.K.

Bonne Année, 2025! Many thanks for printing the wonderful interview with Gary Fukushima for your February issue. I ap-

preciate tremendously his research and homework before our interview. However, there are some typos which often happen when transcribing from a verbal, not written, interview.

Please extend photo credit to Adam Z and Art Photo; Abdul Qadir or Qadr, and this name represents the "night" of power when the revelation of the holy Koran was revealed to the holy prophet; Kibwe means blessed in the Nigerian Yoruba dialect; Gnawa master musician Abdellah El Gour, who by the way was honored at the recent International Jazz Day concert in Tangier, Morocco last April 30.

God bless DownBeat for its hard work and efforts in the support and preservation of America's gift to the world: JAZZ.

T.K. BLUE
JERSEY CITY, NEW JERSEY

Editor's Note: It is our honor to receive a letter from Mr. T.K. Blue. Thank you for the corrections.

Corrections & Clarifications

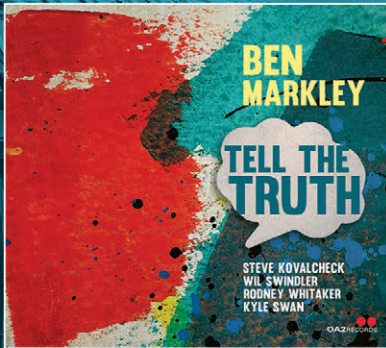
The editorial staff regrets each and every error that sneaks into DownBeat. Here are two other recent ones:

- In a 4-star review of bassist Billy Mohler's *Contagious* (March issue), he was misidentified as a saxophonist. It will be tough to live that one down.
- In the article "Ben Kono's Homage to Family" (The Beat, March issue), Kono's tune "Paradise In Manzanar" was misidentified. Manzanar was the name of a Japanese internment camp during World War II. Also, the correct spelling of Kono's grandfather's name is Juhei.

DOWNBEAT REGRETS THE ERRORS.

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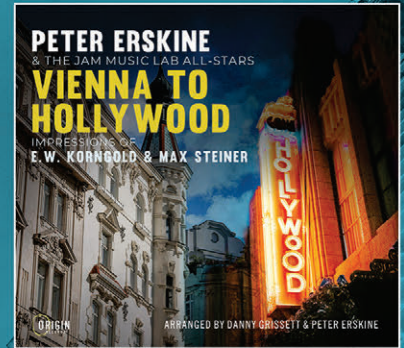
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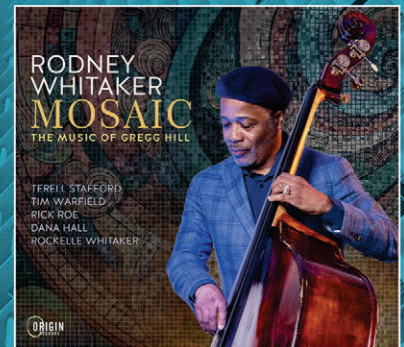
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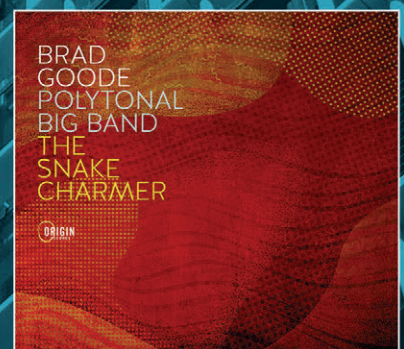
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"The music had a seamlessness," Keith Jarrett said of his 1992 run at The Deer Head Inn.

Keith Jarrett Greenlights Release of *More From The Deer Head Inn*

Last November, Keith Jarrett, who has not played publicly since suffering two strokes in 2018, greenlighted ECM to drop *The Old Country: More From The Deer Head Inn*. It arrives 30 years after ECM issued *At The Deer Head Inn*, documenting eight tracks from a memorable 1992 gig at the four-story, mansard-roofed, porch-wrapped mid-19th century hotel that has presented high-level jazz in Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania, population 666, since 1951. Recorded direct to two-track on DAT, both

albums feature Jarrett on the house Steinway with his regular bassist Gary Peacock and (filling in for Jack DeJohnette) Paul Motian, swinging hard, as he'd done in the 1950s with Oscar Pettiford and Lennie Tristano.

"Not many people knew about the Deer Head then," said drummer Bill Goodwin, who produced both albums. A Los Angeles native, Goodwin moved his family to the Poconos in 1970, the year he and Jarrett — a friend since 1966 — toured and recorded with Gary Burton. Goodwin recalled a picnic at

Jarrett's nearby home in western New Jersey, where Chris Solliday (Jarrett's piano tuner) and his wife, Dona (the daughter of original Deer Head proprietors Bob and Fay Lehr, and Jarrett's friend since both were young), revealed that they'd purchased the business from her parents. Soon thereafter, Jarrett told Goodwin his plan to perform a benefit for the Deer Head, and asked if Motian could use his drums. Goodwin agreed, and asked Jarrett to allow him and Kent Heckman, owner of nearby Red Rock Studios, to document the



COURTESY POCONO.COM

evening. “As long as you don’t get in our way,” Jarrett said.

On an early December phone call, Jarrett corroborated Goodwin’s account. “The music had a seamlessness,” was all he’d say of his initial decision to release the proceedings, noting that the first CD contains his favorite version of “Bye Bye Blackbird.”

Jarrett grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, 45 miles west of Delaware Water Gap, where his mother worked across the street from the Deer Head in the headquarters of Fred Waring, who brought Jarrett on tour with his Young Pennsylvanians in 1962, a year after Jarrett, at 16, played his first Deer Head gig as a sub for pianist Johnny Coates. Coates was also 16 when he debuted at the Deer Head in 1954. In 1962, Coates began a 50-year run as de facto house pianist with a distinctive Americana-tinged concept, while working days for Waring’s Shawnee Press as an editor and choral arranger. Jarrett continued to frequent the club on trips home during the ’60s; in 1969, he convened a trio with local musicians Gus Nemeth on bass and Bob

Ventrello on drums for an attenuated European tour.

Goodwin discovered Coates on his maiden voyage to the Poconos with pianist-composer-vocalist Bob Dorough. “Bob said there was a bar nearby that had a piano player,” he reminisced. “At 10 p.m., John comes out, sits down and starts playing. Within 32 bars, I thought, “This guy’s a genius.” After I moved to the Poconos, Keith and I would bring our drum sets and sit in.”

“John was writing new songs every few weeks,” current co-owner Bob Mancuso recalled. “He caught everybody’s attention. The place was packed.”

Jarrett cosigned, “I’d see the cars coming down the highway and think, ‘I know where they’re going.’”

The room became a magnet for musicians looking to unwind from gigs in one of the area’s resorts, among them the Mount Airy Casino, where Goodwin — again via Dorough — spent a year playing alongside bassist Steve Gilmore in a dance band. When the eminent alto saxophonist Phil Woods (a resident of nearby New Hope from 1957 to 1968) moved to the Gap in late 1973 with Goodwin’s sister, Jill, after four years in Europe and California, Goodwin helped him form the band that launched the efflorescent second stage of Woods’ career, recruiting Gilmore, pianist Mike Melillo and guitarist Harry Leahey. Chris Solliday found Woods a good Yamaha piano and regularly tuned it, perhaps spurring Woods, who died in 2015, to bequeath it to the Deer Head, where he performed frequently, generating an album with his last quintet and two free-wheeling duo albums with Coates.

Mancuso, his son Jay, his college classmate Dennis Carrig and Carrig’s sister, Mary Carrig, purchased the Deer Head from the Sollidays in 2005, 35 years after Dennis Carrig — who died last Nov. 15 — introduced Mancuso to the club. “The place was in bad shape,” said Mancuso, who had a construction business. “Over time, we fixed the porches, which were rotted out, replaced the roofs, rewired and replumbed each floor, put private baths in each room and worked on the kitchen. After that, we were doing pretty well, but many of our big-name players either passed or moved away, and it took a few years to find a new pool of musicians. The crowds started to build up again, but COVID knocked us back awhile, though a few permanent apartments covered our basic expenses. With insurance, taxes and overhead, it’s not easy. Nobody’s getting rich. But we’re lucky because musicians like the place and want to come back.”

Among them is vocalist-songwriter Tessa Souter, whose third 2024 appearance at the Deer Head transpired Thanksgiving Saturday before a full house. The patrons paid rapt attention as Souter sang her lyrics to Erik Satie compositions that constitute a forthcoming album, accompanied masterfully by Billy Drummond on drums and Poconos-adjacent residents Jim Ridl and Evan Gregor on piano and bass, respectively. “My policy is to play only in places I feel comfortable inviting people to,” Souter said. “The Deer Head is definitely one of them. The owners and patrons respect the music, the food is good, and so are the sightlines and the sound.”

“Our overall philosophy is to try to treat people right,” said Mary Carrig, who operated the soundboard that night. “That means trying to treat them as you’d like to be treated if you were coming into a place to work.”

Gone are the bibulous days when, Mancuso recalled, “Bob Lehr would pull the shutters down — next thing you knew, it was sunrise.” But the blend of high standards and relaxed atmosphere remains at the Thursday night jam sessions, led by guitarist Bill Washer and propelled by Goodwin. So does the admixture of musicians, artists, artisans and other nonconformists who’ve formed the room’s core audience since 1951. “We’ve developed a reputation that the music is good, and you enjoy yourself,” Mancuso said. “We don’t get a lot of complainers.”

—Ted Panken

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The Greyboy Allstars; 'Vibe Over Virtuosity'

AS JAZZ GROUPS WITH HISTORY AND internal legacies go, the San Diego, California-based band The Greyboy Allstars can't be accused of excessive self-importance or cerebralism. Instead, the band, formed casually in the early '90s, has become well-known for as a torch-bearing machine for party jazz with groove-fueled music touching on boogaloo, funk, soul-jazz and the style formerly known as "acid jazz." As keyboardist Robert Walter explains, as a kind of in-house mantra, "We value vibe over virtuosity."

That said, the band has created a distinctive ensemble sound comprised of its component parts/players, including saxophonist/flutist Karl Denson — a bandleader in his own right — guitarist Elgin Park (aka Michael Andrews), bassist Chris Stillwell and drummer Aaron Redfield.

Roots and sideline/outtake chutes of the Greyboy sound are the subject of the newly released compendium *Grab Bag: 2007–2023* (Knowledge Room/Elgin Park). Of the new archival release, Walters notes, "It was interesting to go back into the archive and look at these pieces which were like connective tissue from different periods of the band. Listening back to them all, I realize these pieces embrace the edges of our influences, whether it be jazz, progressive rock, more synth-oriented things. At this point, all of these flavors are part of what we regularly do, but at the time they were all a little outside of our normal thing."

Taking a closer look at the Greyboy evolution, Walter recalls, "We really started out by bonding because of our shared love for a pretty specific era of records. We were mainly trying to, on the one hand, emulate, and the other,

fit in with the tradition of late-1960s funk and jazz. It was almost a tribute, but with original tunes, too. We were really into all those funky Prestige and Blue Note records, Grant Green, Lou Donaldson, John Patton and Rusty Bryant as well as James Brown, Curtis Mayfield and stuff from the R&B and soul music world.

"As time went on, we became less imitative and also started to bring in more influences from our experience in the modern world. We still hold that classic music in very high regard and tend to judge our own things against it, but the palette has become much wider and truer to who we are as individuals and a group. I think it's been really organic. We never really gave a thought to keeping up with trends or consciously trying to modernize but it just sorta happened to us."

Individually, the Greyboy musicians have lent their talents to high-profile pop artists. Denson has been a horn player with the Rolling Stones, Walter played with Roger Waters (Pink Floyd) and Mike Gordon (Phish), and the rhythm section of Stillwell and Redfield boast a resume that includes Elton John and Charli XCX. Andrews' musical stamp is on many film and television settings.

As to the influence of outside pop work on the Greyboy mothership, Walter asserts that "everyone's various gigs help in a couple ways. We are always learning new things to bring to the group so it doesn't get stale. When we come together it's with a specific purpose and has some stylistic boundaries, which I think helps it keep its unique identity. In addition to all the rock stars, we have gotten to spend some time with the inventors of the genre we play: Fred

Wesley, Melvin Sparks, Gary Bartz, George Porter Jr. Those experiences really helped us get it together when we were younger."

Among the new album's nine tracks pulled from the vaults, the main focus is on funk-linked riffs and grooves, from the opening "Slip The Grip" to the pocket-hugging "Watch Out Gail" and the self-descriptive "San Diegogo."

Things take a fusion-eering turn on the tenser "Speed Freak," and the track list includes a rare cover-version detour with a juiced-up take on Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel."

Variety sneaks into the program, as well, attesting to the diverse interests of the players. Walter's "Boxes," for example, taps a more discernibly jazz harmony palette. He says that the tune "owes a lot to Wayne Shorter. I went through a phase a few years ago where I was learning a bunch of his tunes. They are all so inventive, unique and non-standard, even early on.

"Most of our music is variations on blues forms. This is more of a long string of modal ideas. It's been part of our sets over the years and is a fun way to stretch and use some different muscles musically."

By contrast, the closing "Pixie Sticks" is a playful quirk, a campy confection suitable for tiki torch backyard parties circa the mid-1960s. Walter explains that the songwriter, Stillwell, "is a great composer and our resident musical historian. He collects rare records and loves a lot of soundtracks, easy listening and exotica. This is a nod to the kitschier part of our musical tastes. It's also a reminder to not take things too seriously. When he brought to tune to the band, he said, 'I have sort of a Lawrence Welk thing.' That's not something an average funk band would go for, but we love it."

Viewed historically, the Greyboy sound and aesthetic predates the rise of certain elements in jazz with R&B and groove consciousness in its DNA, an open approach with popular resonance, as practiced by such currently prominent figures as Snarky Puppy and Robert Glasper. Walter acknowledges that "a lot of the ideas that we embraced are very much in the mainstream by now. If you look at the lineups of jazz festivals now, there is much more love given to groups with a backbeat, fusion, etc. I just hope there is still a place for more historical-minded stuff, too, though. It's all important.

"I think what we had going for us is our music came out of authentic nightlife, not academia. We played in clubs for dancers, and it inspired us. Nobody cared if we gracefully negotiated a tricky chord progression. It was about rhythm and emotion. It wasn't a conceptual formula. Jazz at its worst can be both nerdy and snobby, at its best liberating and life affirming. I prefer music that makes me feel cool."

—Josef Woodard

SUN
6
7PM

Terence Blanchard

Champion and Fire Shut Up In My Bones

Featuring The E-Collective and Turtle Island Quartet

Visuals by Andrew F. Scott

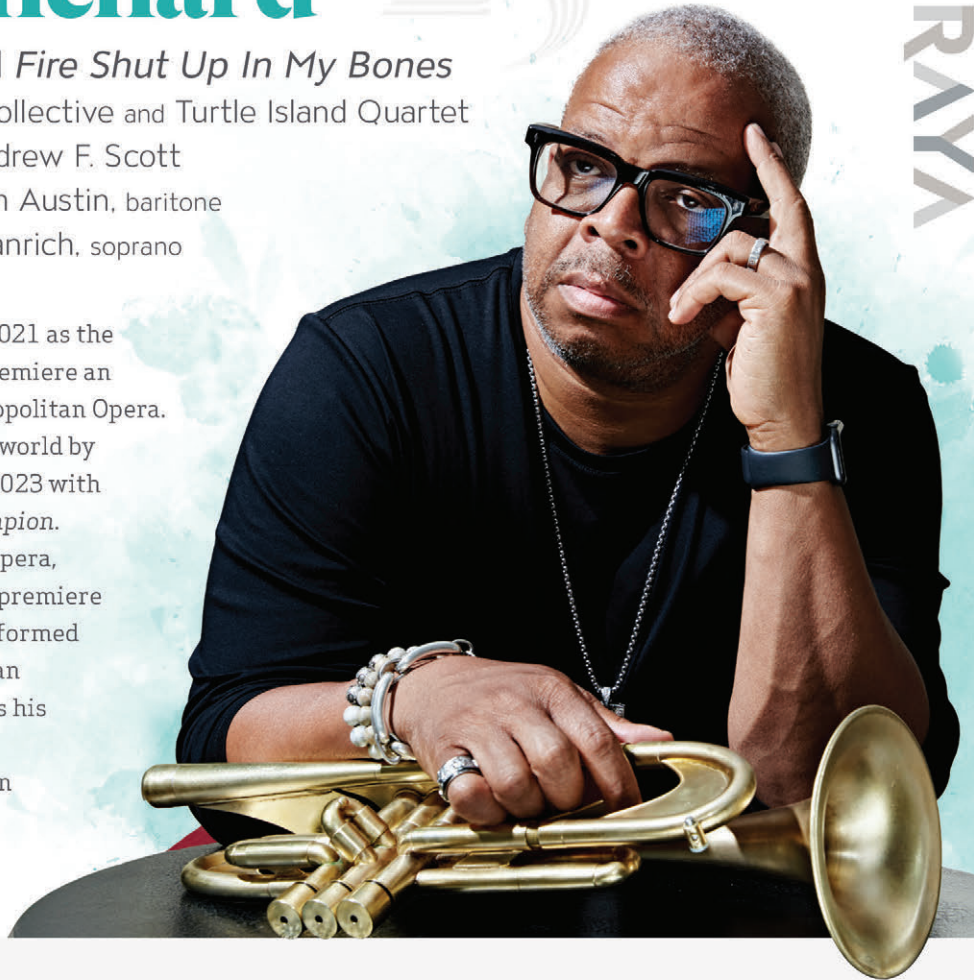
Justin Austin, baritone

Adrienne Danrich, soprano

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Blanchard made history in 2021 as the first Black composer to premiere an original opera at the Metropolitan Opera. *Fire Shut up in My Bones* took the world by storm, and then he did it again in 2023 with another groundbreaking hit, *Champion*. A collaboration with Los Angeles Opera, The Soraya commissioned a world premiere of selections from both operas performed by Blanchard himself. The American trumpeter and film composer leads his own E-Collective and Turtle Island Quartet with baritone Justin Austin and soprano Adrienne Danrich.



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17
8PM

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"As we navigate this growing sense of alienation, it's my hope that this song cycle brings about a sense of connection and shared experience," says Rondi Charleston about her new project with Fred Hersch.

Charleston, Hersch & a Shared Song Cycle

PROJECTS PRODUCED DURING THE pandemic are hardly in short supply. But few are as pointed, or as poignant, as *Suspended In Time – A Song Cycle*, a sequence of seven songs with words by Rondi Charleston and music by Fred Hersch.

The songs, documented on Resilience Music Alliance, were produced from spring 2020 to spring 2023, the period of the pandemic as declared by the World Health Organization. They report on that perilous period with remarkable specificity.

In their reportage, the songs find expression in emotions that Charleston believes are as universal in the emerging post-pandemic world as they were during the pandemic. And, in expressing those emotions, the songs seek to have a kind of therapeutic effect through their particular synthesis of words and music.

"I see so many folks continuing to experience deep, deep isolation and anxiety as we move into 2025," Charleston said from her wildfire-spared winter home in Malibu. "As we navigate this growing sense of alienation, it's my hope that this song cycle brings about a sense of connection and shared experience."

The project began as poems that Charleston, a former journalist, was writing for herself as a lockdown survival tool. She started sending them to Hersch in the hope, if not the expectation, that he would agree to set them to music. To her delight, Hersch, an old friend, did so.

Holed up in his second home amid the Pennsylvania woods, with a return to live gigging in question, Hersch, too, was seeking lifelines. From his first reading of her words, he realized that he could take on the commission with ease.

"I heard music pretty much immediately," he said via Zoom, noting that most of the songs

dwelled in the world of diatonic harmony and were completed in a day or two.

The first four songs were written before the COVID vaccine became available, and their tone reflects it. The opener, "Suspended In Time," mines T.S. Eliot's disorienting explorations of liminality. Charleston, drawing on her jazz side — she switched to performing jazz after a stint as a Juilliard-trained opera singer — expands on Eliot's ideas and makes them her own.

In her lyrics, she details the experience of "living somewhere between never and always" — words of disorientation, to be sure, made only more so set against the disarming charm of Hersch's guileless waltz. Rendered in singer Kate McGarry's mellifluous lilt atop the lush harmonies of the Crosby String Quartet, the piece becomes a deft evocation of the complex feelings engendered by the lockdown.

The tone turns decidedly melancholy with "Sea Of Eyes." Inspired by Charleston's observations of people peering over masks with "eyes that question, eyes that plead," her words are an invitation to the melodramatic. But Hersch's sensibility hardly allows it; his spare setting commands a sort of self-possession. And singer Gabrielle Stravelli — who, like Charleston, is a trained actor as well as vocalist — obliges.

"You want to find an interpretation that honors that sadness, that reflects the weirdness we experienced in the pandemic and the disconnection and the walls we had to put up in various ways," she said in a phone interview. "You walk the tightrope of not glazing over it and not going too far so that it becomes overdramatic and not believable."

The third and fourth songs both deviate somewhat from the prevailing patterns. Unlike

the other songs in the cycle, "Lullaby (For Elsa)," written for Charleston's ailing mother residing in a care facility, is not directly related to the pandemic. Nonetheless, the feelings of isolation McGarry captures in her wistful interpretation of Hersch's simple waltz mirror what many people felt during the lockdown.

"Fever Dreams," for its part, is the only track on which Charleston's voice appears, albeit in spoken word. Supported by Hersch's graceful piano, Charleston, suffering from long COVID and unable to muster the airflow necessary to sing up to her standard — thus the need to recruit McGarry and Stravelli — fantasizes about "the sheer pleasure of a full imbibe/greedy lungs opening wide." Breathily and brilliantly delivered, her words unfold with a quality of free association that hints at feelings of liberation despite being trapped at home with little more than your imagination to engage you.

The final three post-vaccine songs flow just as freely, if in more precisely structured form. "Awakenings (An Ode To Science)" dances to the samba-like cadences of tunes like Antonio Carlos Jobim's joyous "Waters Of March." While Hersch likened his writing for this song cycle more to that of musical theater than jazz, he takes the opportunity here to conjure a buoyant bit of improvisatory magic that fits neatly between McGarry's ebullient choruses.

"It's a feeling of wonder," McGarry said, describing the hopeful time in which the tune was written and, perhaps, her state of mind in singing it. "You don't know what's going to happen, but you're ready for something new. That was an easy one to connect with."

The exuberance of "Awakenings" gives way to the more complicated reality of "Patience." An exercise in purposeful restraint, the song, written as the first COVID variant hit, returns to the realm of the liminal, its theme encapsulated in what Charleston's lyrics term "the paradox of patience — it entices and it stalls/and still you're trapped inside these walls."

The circumstances of the song's execution imbue that paradox with a fortuitous irony. Stravelli, who was assigned the piece, happens, by her own account, to be "the least patient person in the world." The tension between her tendency toward impatience and the painfully slow tempo at which the song must flow lends the performance a sense of urgency that might otherwise not be there.

Stravelli returns for the closing tune, "Here We Are," which itself returns to the music of the opening tune, a step lower and maybe a bit wiser. Charleston explained that rather than McGarry, who sang the opener, Stravelli drew the closing assignment because the "darker" hue of her voice more readily conveyed the sober truth of the post-pandemic world.

We are, she writes, "still living somewhere between never and always." —Phillip Lutz

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MICHAEL JACKSON

Cyrille Aimee performs at SPACE in Evanston, Illinois.

Chicago's Venue Kings

“DO YOU HAVE THE MIDAS TOUCH?”

DownBeat asked Craig Golden, partner with Bruce Finkelman of the remarkably successful 16” On Center enterprise, a group that oversees such venerable Chicago venues as SPACE in near-by Evanston as well as Thalia Hall, The Salt Shed, The Promontory and The Empty Bottle.

“I haven’t heard that one before,” responded Golden over the phone, with the type of self-effacing humor that brought Finkelman and him together in the early ’90s. Finkelman, proprietor of the grungy but invincible Empty Bottle in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood, had then sought cross-pollination between his eclectic music booking and Golden’s comedy club interests.

Golden had gigged as a guitarist, but the lackadaisical, inattentive dives he’d played offered little beyond the band beer comp, if there was one. (His subsequent venues all have green rooms — some even with shower and laundry service — plus an upfront booking policy.) Disenchanted, he took advantage of his wood-refinishing skills and pivoted to general contractor work, then real estate.

Finkelman floundered as a fledgling guitarist himself, performing a single live show he describes as “the scariest experience of my life, and I was so drunk. The world told me it wasn’t to be.” Regardless, both remain music lovers and much of their care in building and curating comes from ground zero. “My first job was at a joint in Missouri, the Blue Note,” recalled Finkelman. “From sweeping floors I worked my way sideways. The place was a playground

of sight, sound and senses. Witnessing artists and community sharing ideas, that created my blueprint.” He took that ideal to the unprepossessing Empty Bottle in 1993, which had been bumped two blocks up from its first location on Western Avenue, since Finkelman had dared host a music night to the landlord’s summary affirmative: “No more!”

“The Friendly Inn was the original name,” recalled Finkelman, though it was affectionately known as The Bucket O’Blood. “For years Ken Vandermark and John Corbett ran festivals of improvised music, and Bottle-centric artists run through the 16”OC landscape.” Count Rob Mazurek, Jeff Parker, the late Peter Brötzmann and Dutch improvisers Available Jelly as Bottle alumni.

Golden’s legacy project is SPACE in Evanston, a state-of-the-art venue initially launched as a studio (hence extensive sound dampening, the live room built on a separate pad that doesn’t vibrate with the rest of the concrete floor, doors designed not to leak sound). Telescoping back to teenage days experiencing artists at Amazing Grace, a legendary long-gone Evanston venue a few blocks south, Golden wanted an intimate space.

“I remember being in the music there, really feeling Les McCann, or whoever, emote, so I wanted a thrust stage, not just bandstand-as-fourth-wall scenario,” commented Golden, “so it’s not a loud nightclub. The quiet resonates. You can hear what’s between the notes.”

With that said, one of Golden’s partners at the venue is blues guitarist Dave Specter, who, though he shares the ethos “shredding is for cab-

ages,” knows audiences expect their Chicago blues loud-and-proud. “We upgraded our sound system during the pandemic and recently our front-of-house console. We’re also very proud of our house backline, which ranks among the best in the country,” claimed Specter.

SPACE’s Davis Inman is part of a highly effective team that includes 16”OC director of music Jake Samuels, Brent Heyl and fellow talent buyers Jake Austen at The Promontory and Bobby Ramirez at Thalia Hall. “We’re all in regular communication about shows, the various teams congregate weekly or bi-weekly to strategize,” Inman said. The fact that SPACE and The Promontory are 19 miles apart means that exclusivity clauses aren’t a big deal. “We once had Kermit Ruffins with his Rebirth Brass Band at SPACE and Promontory; Maceo Parker and Ramsey Lewis, too, and hope to book Sun Ra Orchestra at both locations in the future.” Some of Inman’s favorite 2024 bookings included Christian McBride’s Ursa Major, Julian Lage and Don Was’ Pan-Detroit Ensemble. Samuels has also booked 20-plus gigs this year at Northwestern University’s Cahn Auditorium under the canopy of “Space Presents.”

The 900-plus capacity Thalia Hall, a Chicago Landmark in the historic Pilsen neighborhood, is a prime example of the firm’s adaptive re-use policy. A Romanesque Revival theater from 1892, it had fallen into neglect until 16”OC took over. Now firmly established as one of the premier music rooms in Chicago, Thalia recently hosted a rare visit from Hermeto Pascoal and co-ordinated a vast orchestra conducted by Arthur Verocai. “A big advantage with Thalia Hall is that we’ve accumulated a diverse audience across genres, so we’re a bridge of sorts between different musical communities,” said Ramirez. “We love helping newer jazz acts expand their reach to folk that may not have found them as quickly, and we’re honored when a legacy act plays with us and connects with a new community.”

One of 16”OC’s joys is “farm teaming” talent across venues — watching a band that might kick off their career at the Bottle progress through their 150-, 250-, 1,000-plus-volume spaces (The Flaming Lips, a case in point). The newest of these venues is the 100,000-square-foot entertainment supercenter — a collaboration between 16”OC, Blue Star Properties, R2 and Skydeck — called The Salt Shed, a West Town concert venue that can accommodate up to 5,500 outside and 3,500 under its iconic white roof.

Enhancements are underway for the Shed, and SPACE will soon double in size.

“We’re adding a swanky new lobby,” said Golden, “and an outdoor event space for another 250 people with a 40-seat restaurant patio. The hope is to revive evenings out shortened by pandemic days and the dissipation of after-show crowds, and book jazz trios, 10:30 p.m. to 1 a.m., for nighthawks like us.” —Michael Jackson



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THE ZEITGEIST OF ISAIAH COL

Article and photo by Michael Jackson





LIER



Collier and his band The Chosen Few performing at Constellation in Chicago. Previous page, Collier performing *The Story of 400 Years*.



MICHAEL JACKSON

DownBeat has a long association with the Midwest Clinic International Band and Orchestra Conference, the premiere global gathering for instrumental music educators and students for the past eight decades.

Attracting approximately 17,000 attendees annually from 50 states and 40 countries, the Chicago-based conference has a history of presenting some of the world's most accomplished instrumental artists at its Midwest Jazz Interview sessions. These live interviews have featured the likes of Ramsey Lewis, Kirk Whalum, Arturo Sandoval and legendary Cuban conguero Candido, among numerous others, over the years. Many of those always-vibrant conversations have been hosted by DownBeat writers and editors, and have subsequently appeared in the pages of this magazine.

Last December, 27-year-old saxophonist, composer and instigator Isaiah Collier held forth, disseminating beyond-his-years wisdom.

A remarkable talent, Collier surged into the rankings when still at high school in Chicago. There's equilibrium to his persona despite a dizzying work ethic.

Collier's longform responses during this interview, introduced by Midwest board member Dick Dunscomb and held at Chicago's historic McCormick Place convention center, have been edited for continuity and space.

Michael Jackson: *Your latest album, The World Is On Fire, was recently released on Division 81 Records, chasing up The Almighty, which*

was recorded the same week, with guests Dee Alexander and Ari Brown. You presented your ambitious music and dance dramatization The Story of 400 Years at Chicago's DuSable Black History Museum, with assistance from the Steve Jobs Foundation, and you've just returned from Paris after guesting on TSF Radio.

I remember when, still a student at ChiArts High School, you played the Chicago Jazz Festival in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. Stretching out on a calypso, you were clearly aware that you had something cooking. How was it that you knew, so early, you were one of the so-called "Chosen Few" [the name of one of Collier's bands]? Does that come from pushy parents, God-given talent or just diligent study?

Isaiah Collier: A mix of all three, but I think, specifically with the last few projects, what has been imminent for me is "purpose." I had the chance to hang with a kora musician in London in September who was very diligent with his practice. "You have to understand I came from 79 generations of kora musicians," he told me. Despite a host of other aspirations, he'd decided, "This is what I am supposed to do."

Funnily enough, I was the last in my family to get into music. My brother Jeremiah [who currently plays with Stanley Clarke] was playing a whole drum set at age 2. My older brother used to play music, too. I thought, "That's

cool, but just because they're doing it doesn't mean I have to." But no matter how far I tried to get away from music, it kept showing back up. Going to church, watching concerts and paying attention to all aspects of performance. You go to Orchestra Hall, see musicians doing their thing but then how's it this one guy, the conductor, keeping all the pieces together. You start thinking, "What would my participation in the music look like? If it's only reading this part, then what's the point of all of this?"

Jackson: *Circular breathing allows you to sustain long, relentless lines. Sonny Rollins learned the technique from a saxophonist nicknamed "One-Note Scotty." How did you develop seamless skills there? Did it take long?*

Collier: It's a funny story. My father would talk about a saxophonist on the scene called Art Porter Jr. He came from Arkansas, a protégé of Pharoah Sanders.

Jackson: *Yes, famous for his arrest for performing in nightclubs as a teenager, which led to [then Arkansas Attorney General] Bill Clinton introducing the "Art Porter Bill," after which minors accompanied by legal guardians in clubs in the state were cool.*

Collier: Exactly, he was also Bill Clinton's godson. Before I discovered Rahsaan Roland Kirk, I saw videos of this guy playing two horns at once. Also, he was able to streamline the airflow, and I thought, "What is that?" My dad said, "That's circular breathing, it may take you awhile," and bet me that I could figure it out in my freshman year. Somebody said, "Get a straw, and a glass of water, keep blowing and keep the bubbles going." I took it to the horn but couldn't sus-

tain it. Just like any technique, especially long tones, you have to practice. Four-bar phrase, double to eight, then 16. Work with the metronome, how fast, how slow? You're adding a new set of muscle groups. Then I met James Carter who knew how to cycle breathe, and that was a whole other thing. Then I started working with Vincent Davis and through Vincent finally got to study with Roscoe Mitchell. Our first lesson was just one note, for 13 minutes straight! I was thinking, "How's this guy still going?!" Then, about five minutes in, he started shaking a little. He took out his teeth [laughs] and I thought, "that's not fair, I gotta keep going!" [laughter]

Jackson: Your deployment of mini-percussion owes a debt to the arch minimalist procedures of Mitchell's Art Ensemble of Chicago, too, and the AACM, it's fair to suggest?

Collier: 100%! When I first worked with Vincent, who trained many of the most capable musicians coming out of Chicago — Junius Paul, Justin Dillard, Corey Wilkes, Isaiah Spencer, Emma Dayhuff, Jeremiah Hunt, Marquis Hill, Maurice Brown, it was teaching us how to be in the now.

After your solo, you think you're done but the music is still going. Bringing the little instruments in, you are always participating, bringing in the micro aspect, shifting the atomic matter. With tempered bells you can capture intervals that can set things up in another key. When I go to the saxophone now — when you've got to a mastery of an instrument — you try figure out something else or it whispers, "Boring!" Now I'm no longer hearing "saxophone" on the saxophone. I think, "Man, how does this sound as a talking drum or a flute?"

Jackson: Surprisingly, "Amerikka The Ugly" from *The World Is On Fire*, which dwells on events from the nation's founding to the evident white supremacist underbelly of the Jan. 6th uprising, features lilting flutes and swinging bass. Is the mellowness an attempt to quell the hate?

Collier: It's ironic, right, satirical? As you're listening, you're expecting this crazy thing. The nation's capitol is a beautiful building and you're seeing this influx of people running rampant, yet when I was at the White House in 2016, it took two hours for my background check, while they went straight through the front door, so to speak.

Those of us who travel the world, whether we are aware or not, are inherently ambassadors and have to be on our best, not best behavior, but best presentation. These matters can affect things globally. One slight oversight can cause a whole business plan to fall off the roof and affect millions of people.

Jackson: Women, notably Beryl Briane Ford,

Jordan Stewart-Curet, Mayshell Morris, Kiara Jade, Kennedy Banks-Battle, Dana Kennedy, Rebecca Walker and publicist Leah Concialdi were crucial to your ambitious presentation *The Story of 400 Years*. An earlier iteration at Hyde Park Jazz Festival included Angel Bat Dawid, not to forget bassist Dr. Emma Dayhuff this time around. How about mom, Cynthia Yvette Lewis-Collier's role in your development? I recall she'd complain when you played Pharoah Sanders all day when you still lived at home.

Collier: I think when we look at anything we see its dualistic nature. The male sphere or the female side of things, together make up this totality. We think about the transatlantic slave trade and what happened in the treatment of different sexes, presented through totally different side-effects.

Having [female] energy around showed me how to nurture my idea. Working with other male artists was snap!snap!snap! [clicks fingers] we gotta get it done. Having counterparts there gave pause, "Yes we have to get it done, but process, process!" You can't just cultivate something without nurture. They teach us how to really create, ask thought-provoking questions, things I wouldn't have thought of, I'm so used to just moving. They keep us intentional when we're sidetracked, caught up in the goal.

Jackson: The necessary incubation period.

Collier: Exactly, which requires us to be present. Every little building block has purpose. Without those pieces the structure falls apart. It's all very well saying, "I just want to make the biggest structure ever." Women have been very instrumental in reminding me of that, dealing with details.

Jackson: *The Story of 400 Years* has progressed to a 13-part suite and has become increasingly accessible with its funky rhythms and melodies, yet the DuSable Museum's permanent exhibit reminds of slave torture, containment implements, branding irons. It's not a giant leap to the shootings of Ralph Yarl and Ahmaud Arbery, is it, where Black lives are cheapened?

Collier: An old phrase exists, even in dogma throughout the world, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When we don't acknowledge that we create templates which become active campaigns of colorism and other "isms." One group of isolated people that are lighter skinned, perceived as more intelligent than a darker counterpart.

This was utilized and weaponized to divide and conquer, make people not want to work together, creating different social avatars under slavery, whether it was the field and the workers versus the house, other institutional dichotomies and systems of oppression.

At the end of the day, once you've run out of differences, we're left with similarities. In

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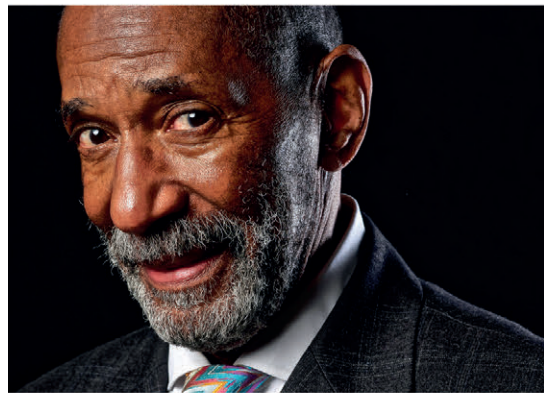
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Collier and Jackson in conversation at the 78th Midwest Clinic.

ALTHE JACKSON

Jakarta, back in May at the Java Jazz Festival, I wondered why they were hip to this music from back home. We weren't performing anything Indonesian people created. Finally I talked with someone about it: "Well y'know, we too have a 400-year history of oppression." I'm like "Huh?" Yeah, theirs involved the Dutch, among others. I unearthed connections. These other areas that separate us, whether it's linguistic or whatever — cultural differences are mitigated through 12 notes.

Jackson: *The stop-time on "The Time Is Now" that opens The World Is On Fire recalls John Coltrane's thrilling breaks on "Liberia" from 1960. Though Coltrane is an influence, you initially thought he was a disciple of Pharoah Sanders and the feel-good, healing aspects of Sanders' later recordings seem to be resurfacing in recent grooves you've plied. Is Albert Ayler, the Holy Ghost of the tenor trinity, an influence, too?*

Collier: Oh, absolutely, James Perkins was one of the first mentors who emphasized the importance of Ayler, and Archie Shepp, but I was really invested with the other two. As I age, I'm listening and hearing the silent influences.

The more I've got into Trane, the less I've been into his music [laughter], which is funny because we are all the byproducts of our environment, the social, political, emotional and financial. All these things personify our sonic experience. These people were always searching and hanging out. Recordings like [Rollins'] *East Broadway Rundown*, where Coltrane's rhythm section had a different thing put on them. When matters are in chronological perspective — a-ha!

Jackson: *When I first heard that one I didn't know what to make of it — Rollins, the Brutalist, even the cover looked like concrete. It's an edgy edifice for sure. Quite surprisingly, given prior carps, DownBeat gave it five stars at the time.*

As well as being an outlier and firebrand,

you've embraced community and how important that is to disseminating musical power. Did Coltrane's Ascension and Africa Brass with augmented ensembles of younger musicians strike home?

Collier: Definitely. *Africa Brass* spoke to the beginning for Coltrane, unless we see it as a place he just adventured to. When we get into this music we often don't start with small ensembles, but big bands, thinking, "There's too many brass," or whatever.

But hearing certain compositions like "Song Of The Underground Railroad," I learned about bandleading there because Coltrane had those musicians participate in parts that highlighted their strengths.

That's hard because you really have to take a thorough look at your players and assess their musical IQ — where they show their highest good. I didn't know Eric Dolphy was arranging a significant amount of music on those dates. Dolphy's the guy playing bass clarinet, alto, flute, then you realize, "Oh, wow, he also had a different relationship with the pen."

Jackson: *Sadly, Dolphy was gone by the time of Ascension, but who would have heard of Marion Brown and John Tchicai were it not for that recording?*

Collier: In general, we didn't know who any of these guys were. Nobody knew who John Coltrane was, nobody knew Miles Davis! That's reminding us it's forever the continuum, but also more importantly, part of the foundation. If you have all the secondary colors, how do we get the tertiary colors?

We take these different things, blend them to find the different possibilities. Iron sharpens iron. You don't take two pieces of the same type of iron. You take an older piece and a younger piece to create the exchange.

Jackson: *You studied at Chicago State. What did you learn there? How did it differ from what you gleaned in the ranks of Ernest Dawkins' Live*

the Spirit Residency Big Band, or on the road with Kahil El'Zabar?

Collier: One of my takeaways from Chicago State was the back-and-forth with theory teacher Dr. Jason Raynovich. It was like a daily game of badminton. He'd say, "OK, Mr. Collier, I've got something for you." And I'd be, "Oh, God, here we go." I was a semi-professional musician at the time, not a regular student, but traveling while getting this form of logistics.

It was important spending time with him, learning how to create a relationship with information. Learning and comprehension are two different things. It's not about being a walking encyclopedia. Once you understand something, it's important to be able to effectively communicate that.

Jason's Russian and he really gave it to me — "I want you to explain it exactly like this, da-da-da," and I'd say, "Could you say it like this, da-da-da, because it makes a little more sense?" He'd tell me, "I'm trying to train the skill, so you understand the context and how to adapt to who you are conversing with."

Jackson: *Your music on vinyl can be uncompromising. Your duo with Michael Ode, I Am Beyond, begins with a platter side of poet/sound healer Jimmy Chang's gongs, Tibetan singing bowls and crystal didgeridoo. How much has your manager/producer Sonny Daze impacted sonic aspects of your approach?*

Collier: We didn't know who Jimmy was or that he was coming to the studio that day, Sonny just said, "I have a surprise for you." We get to CRC [recording studio], I see the set-up and think, "He got gongs for me, nice," and then Jimmy comes in ... I just said, "Press start," because there's something about letting a session roll, letting the mind get into flow state, allowing strains of consciousness — conscious and unconscious — to filtrate. There was a lot of trust. We didn't know what he was going to do. I didn't even know what I was going to do, but we trust [the music] to do what's it's supposed to and whatever it's going to be is up to us, too.

Jackson: *Sonny told me about a duo project with Michael Ode, using Devon Turnbull's custom made Ojas speakers. It was captured to quarter-inch tape at the Lisson Gallery. He's putting it out as a multi-vinyl document.*

I hear there was air guitar and looped wah-wah involved.

Collier: Ha-ha, the air guitar. Yes, we started this series two years ago. Devon was a fan of the project I did with Kahil, *A Time for Healing*, and then we started talking about his speakers. I didn't know he was friends with Virgil Abloh.

Jackson: *The legendary fashion designer and DJ who worked with Kanye, right?*

Collier: Yeah, he died a few years ago [in 2021],

but he did the first performance with us at the Lisson Gallery in Chelsea, NYC, and then we performed at his Figures of Speech exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, inside this structure Virgil had built, then at the Lisson in London. Each experience was fascinating, seeing how it continued to shift.

Jackson: Sonny described how your proximity to the reel-to-reel was magnetizing the space, creating quite a vibe. He's also putting out an album of your live jam at New York's Blue Note with U.K. tuba player Theon Cross.

Collier: The texture of the tuba was new to me, outside of Dixieland or marching band correspondence. Theon incorporates aspects of the bass role, referring back to the natural timbre and resonance of the instrument, but has this certain melodicism in his approach. Oh, man, I was spoiled. He had a great guitar player and James Russell Sims on drums, who's worked on several projects with me. I enjoy experimentation, man, making timbres, making good music, that's it.

Jackson: *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "the total work of art" ideal seems part and parcel of who you are, uniting dance with visual spectacle and orchestration. Dressed spectacularly in Nick Cave-designed baggy pants and William Parker's

multi-hued jacket at the release show at *Constellation* in Chicago, you were a freestanding work of art without blowing the horn. And then you have your paramilitary, pantheresque monochrome garb. Did you absorb sartorial sensibilities from El'Zabar? Or, going back to that cowboy hat, were you always a fashionista? Like singer Dee Alexander, you seem to wear something different every time I see you.

Collier: We usually have a good sunglasses hang when it's me and Dee. When it's Kahil, I have to worry about getting stuck at his house because he's like, "Man, I have another jacket that'd look good on you!"

Jackson: *Handmade for him by Jean Paul Gaultier, no doubt, and you two are about the same height.*

Collier: Yes, I'm 6' 2", so he's definitely given me some clothes. But for my entire life my mother has always said to me, "They see you before they hear you." Clothing has a role in personifying that essence. It's about taking pride in what you do, to usher in my job, presentation needs to be there. You know something's gonna be good if it's hot, right? Present me cold food, I don't think I'm gonna eat it.

Jackson: Zachery Carter, who I sat next to at the DuSable Museum performance, character-

ized you as a Bodhisattva, a selfless one on the road to Buddhahood. How does this resonate with you and your belief in a singular creative force? How does it square with secular career ambitions and the relentless push of the ego?

Collier: First and foremost, that's one hell of a comparison! But Buddha was born a warrior prince. He had to see war, bloodshed, all the dark aspects of what is supposed to be the high-life of the Indian caste system ... that's not the fulfillment, and I say this to all aspiring artists in the room, it's still work. A fortunate kind of work to constantly cultivate and chip at, the chasing of a sound.

Some days you go to work, it's completely calm. On others, the pressure is on. Whether it's the musicians you've got to deal with, personal life stuff, random financial or emotional circumstances. We don't get the rule book on how to get through. Success is an ever extending mountain; it may not look that successful. If the monetary success is there, where's the emotional success, the mental, the physical?

Every song I've written on these past few projects has been active goal of my humanity. It's not that you master it, there's levels ... you have to clean up shop and house, man. Count Basie said something to Quincy Jones back in the day, "Learn to deal with the valleys. The hills will take care of themselves." DB

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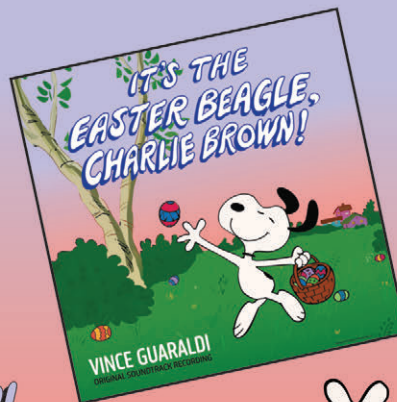
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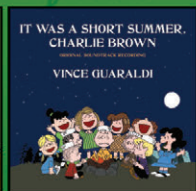
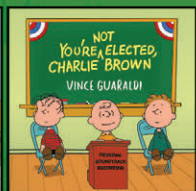
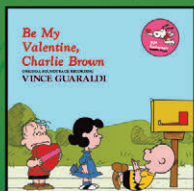
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"I have not met anyone who is like me, who's seen three continents before they were 10, adopted and raised by a single mother," says Jernberg.



Sofia Jernberg

NAVIGATING CULTURES

BY PETER MARGASAK PHOTO BY JON EDERGREN

On *Musho* (Intakt), her recent duo album with pianist Alexander Hawkins, singer Sofia Jernberg interprets traditional songs from Ethiopia, the nation where she was born, and Sweden, the nation where she grew up, along with tunes from Armenia and England, to say nothing of the piece she wrote herself.

The recording stands as one of the most arresting albums of 2024, in part because despite drawing on disparate folk traditions from around the globe, it elides any specific culture. While Hawkins and Jernberg deeply respect those traditions, they're no more confined by them than they are by the jazz practices for which they're both well known.

Jernberg, 41, has spent her entire life navigating disparate cultures not only in her work, but in her very existence. She was born in Ethiopia but was adopted and raised by a Swedish diplomat. Before Jernberg moved to Stockholm at age 10, she spent years also living in Hanoi, Vietnam. "I'm a bit split in my identity because I'm adopted and raised in

a majority white culture, but I look like I was raised in something else," she says. "I've always been treated like that by everybody." Until she arrived in Sweden, Jernberg had virtually no contact with Western music. She had always sung informally, picking up sounds from the folk music she encountered as a young child, so once in Stockholm she was enrolled in a strict choir school where she was immersed in Western classical tradition, singing standard repertoire as well as the contemporary classical works composed by some of her teachers. Eventually one of the teachers played a song by Stevie Wonder in one of her classes and her curiosity was piqued. "I started to ask questions," she says.

She began exploring record shops and

immersed in any new sound she could find. She had already been experimenting with different techniques inherent in various traditional musics, but the possibilities expanded after encounters with the music of daring vocalists like Phil Minton and Diamanda Galas. "With jazz I thought it must be OK to be Black, for the first time," she says. "That's one of the things, but I also fell in love with it because it was a progressive genre. That's how I interpreted it, that it constantly changes. All the heroes had an oeuvre, so you could follow how they started and how they ended up." While still in school she encountered harsh dichotomies. "Music genres are very connected to cultural identity, and what class you're from, how you want to feel and dress." Jernberg embraced music in all of its

rich variety, but early on she felt isolated with those feelings. “I’m always a displaced person in any situation. I have not met anyone who is like me, who’s seen three continents before they were 10, adopted and raised by a single mother.”

Jernberg has resisted societal pressures since she began singing, and her multilayered work blithely ignores genre lines. She’s a world-class improviser with extravagant technique and a peerless classical singer with unerring pitch control and technical precision. She sings with chamber ensembles and modern jazz groups. During Jazzfest Saalfelden last August, she performed an improvised duet with cellist Tomeka Reid, sang as an equal member of The End (a hard-hitting band led by reedist Mats Gustafsson straddling hard rock and Scandinavian folk music) and paired up with saxophonist Jonas Kullhammar as the front line in Petter Eldh’s Post Koma. Her voice is marked by a crystalline purity that can sound lighter than air, mirroring the weightless beauty of Minnie Ripperton, and she can tackle 20th century classical works by Arnold Schoenberg or Georges Aperghis with devastating exactitude and imagination. Jernberg rejects hierarchies or compartmentalization, taking on a dizzying range of work on its own terms, often to the detriment of her career in a business that prefers defining and slotting artists into this box or that one.


She first emerged on the international scene with Paavo, a shape-shifting ensemble she co-led with pianist Cecilia Persson, before joining Seval, a quartet organized by American cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm that interpreted his pop-like compositions with a wide-open improvisational aesthetic. Because of her inherent stylistic mobility, Jernberg often operates like a free agent, with countless collaborations and a handful of ongoing projects like The End, which has made three albums over the last six years, and the duo with Hawkins which began in 2016 with a partnership suggested by former Bimhuis director Huub van Riel during the October Meeting gathering, during which she also first performed with Swedish bassist Petter Eldh, who has regularly enlisted her in his bands Koma Saxo and Post Koma. She’s worked with the Norwegian trio Lama on a 2018 collaborative album for Clean Feed and collaborated with German free-improv duo Superimpose. She delved into her connection to Scandinavian folk on a remarkable project with the Trondheim Jazz Orchestra in 2019. It was through the TJO that she also cemented a partnership with the equally mobile pianist Cory Smythe, leading to the shape-shifting 2018 trio album *Circulate Susanna* (Pyroclastic) with guitarist Dan Lippel — a daring, skeptical look at Americana using Stephen Foster as a point of departure.

Although Jernberg isn’t averse to singing songs, she prefers to think of herself as an instrumentalist first and foremost. She laments the divide between singers and instrumentalists she’s experienced across her entire career. “I have worked a lot with how you stand on stage,” she says. “What I’ve done is just take away all hand movements and expressive movements, because often they’re cliché, and it takes away from music.” Performing with both The End and Post Koma, Jernberg deliberately situates herself as another member of the ensemble, not the focal point.

Jernberg is also a composer, although evidence of this work is woefully scant. There’s a version of her mutable solo work “One Pitch: Birds For Distortion And Mouth Synthesizers” on a 2021 anthology of performances from New York’s Resonant Bodies Festival, and her song “Correct Behaviour” is a highlight of the *Musho* album. A solo album of her own work is on the horizon, as are some U.S. performances in the near year. In April she will perform music by composer Chaya Czernowin at the L.A. Philharmonic, and in May she’ll perform solo at the Park Avenue Armory in New York as part of a series curated by Jason Moran. She pointedly notes that the U.S. has dealt with multiculturalism for longer than Europe. “I’m often the first Black person on some contemporary Western stages in Europe,” she says. “Classical music really has problems. It is an authoritarian structure, and I’m always a little bit messed up afterwards. But, someone has to do it.”

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Spinifex, from left, Jasper Stadhouders, Tobias Klein, Bart Maris, John Dikeman, Philipp Moser and Gonçalo Almeida.

Spinifex: A Crazy Blend

BY AMMAR KALIA PHOTO BY MICHEL MEES

Listening to the Dutch-based sextet Spinifex is an exercise in tension and release. During its 20 years as one of Europe's foremost improvising groups, the band has honed a fiery blend of free jazz, hard-hitting rhythms and time-bending orchestrations that produce live shows full of explosive moments.

“We’re always exploring the contrast between free improvisations and clearly structured compositions,” says bandleader and co-founder Tobias Klein. “It’s about building a story throughout the piece, taking listeners on that arc of tension and then elevating them into a totally altered state once we reach a resolution or move on.”

The band’s latest album, *Undrilling The Hole* (Tritone Records), is Spinifex’s most ambitious and hard-hitting yet. Spanning the driving rock groove and dextrous counterpoint melo-

dies of opener “Embrace The Contradictions” to the title track’s dark bass textures and yearning alto saxophone lines, the distorted guitar and heavy drumming of “Explode The Paradox,” the thunderous repeated motifs of “Tatiana” and the fast-paced, bebop-referencing swing of “Boiling Up Beautifully,” the album teeters on a fine edge between structure and chaos, revelling in a sense of playful unpredictability and wandering sonic explorations.

The record continues Spinifex’s interest in balancing freedom and form within its seven compositions, but it also marks the first time

in the group’s history that an album has been composed entirely by one member, alto saxophonist Klein. “It was a coincidence that I wrote all the compositions for *Undrilling The Hole*, since it started out as a way to distract myself while I was struggling to write music for a different project of chamber music,” he says. “It was 2022, towards the end of the pandemic, and I was writing music for a band I wasn’t sure I would be able to play with. I was wrestling with the uncertainty of life as a musician after spending two years without being allowed to play shows, and I was drawn to these pic-

es that explore contradiction and ambiguity, which is why so many of the titles contain terms like ‘paradox’ and ‘contradiction.’”

With the restrictions on performance thankfully lifted and live music resuming in full force, the group booked a European tour in December 2023 where Klein and the other Spinifex members took these new compositions on the road and honed their efficacy based on audience responses. “The pieces became alive because when you’re on stage, you can tell immediately what works and what doesn’t,” Klein says. “I began writing more, including the title track that came to me in the middle of our run of shows on the tour bus, and by the time we recorded in February 2024 it had taken shape as a perfect reflection of the difficulties we had all been through over the past few years. We put the tension we had felt into the tracks, and then we released it with love.”

Growing up in the German city of Saarbrücken, Klein initially studied classical clarinet before picking up the saxophone at 16 and teaching himself to improvise by ear. Interested in rock, punk, jazz and modern classical composition — “anything that was hard to understand,” he says — Klein’s musical tastes shifted from The Ramones, Motorhead and The Dead Kennedys to Charlie Parker’s frenetic bebop, avant-garde composer John Zorn and free-jazz clarinetist Louis Sclavis. By 18,

he moved to Amsterdam to study music and was soon taken by the local scene of improvisers who composed as well as playing in groups. “People like Tim Berne all wore different hats, leading bands, writing their own music and playing as part of ensembles. As improvisers they went on separate paths during a tune, hearing each other but not necessarily trying to get close to each other,” he says. “That was an enormous inspiration and something that we try to emulate in Spinifex, too.”

First founding Spinifex as a decet in 2005 with trumpeter Gijs Levelt and flautist Ned McGowan, the group initially took an acoustic approach, producing ensemble music mainly for woodwinds. Arranging regular shows for a group of that size proved challenging, though, and by 2010, Spinifex had splintered into a quintet side project that took a rougher and louder direction thanks to its reduced numbers. Finally, in 2015 the group settled into the core membership that continues today and that drives its forceful sound — one that aptly reflects its namesake, a hardy species of grass known for its ability to adapt and grow almost anywhere.

“We realized from our quintet days that we wanted a heavier sound, since our bassist Gonçalo Almeida is strongly rooted in the Dutch improv scene and he brought a more noise-oriented and droning way of improv-

ing to build the field of tension in our compositions,” Klein says. “Then our drummer, Philipp Moser, has played for metal bands, so he hits with a different energy and conviction that really blows you away. Our tenor saxophonist, John Dikeman, works a lot in free jazz and he comes from the States, so he has a different relationship and lineage to the music, while trumpeter Bart Maris has been all over the place working with different people, which makes him like a living library of styles. Finally, you have guitarist Jasper Stadhouders, who has such a deft ear and myself on alto sax. It’s our collaboration together that makes the group — a crazy blend of all our constituent experiences.”

Marking its 20th year as a group in 2025, Klein is already planning a special project with three guest musicians to celebrate the milestone, labeled *Spinifex Maximus*, as well as looking forward to booking new shows with the group to further explore *Undrilling The Hole*.

“We just want listeners to feel something elevating at the gigs,” he says. “This is music to lift them out of their lives and difficulties, something to make them forget what’s been going on for just a moment.”

In our current embattled state of ongoing war, right-wing politics and environmental collapse, that sense of escapism through Spinifex’s vital improvisation feels more welcome than ever.

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Tania Giannouli

SOLO & BEYOND

BY DAN OUELLETTE PHOTO BY BJORN COMHAIRE

While virtually unknown in the U.S., Tania Giannouli, born and based in Athens, stars as a genre-defying jazz piano maestra across Europe at various high-profile festivals including Jazztopad and Trondheim Jazzfest as well as at such impressive venues as Bimhuis in Amsterdam and both Flagey and Ars Musica in Brussels.

But she's most at home at the Enjoy Jazz Festival in Heidelberg, Germany, where she has annually offered new projects to the empathetic crowds fully prepared for her exploratory, unpredictable, complex music that is at once lyrical and urgent.

Giannouli first appeared at Enjoy in 2019 and then in 2022 was granted artist-in-residence status, which she shared with Swiss piano master Nik Bärtsch. They clicked in their artistic philosophies. The following year she and Bärtsch joined for an exhilarating duo Enjoy show. In the liner notes to her simply titled *Solo* album (her fifth recording for Rattle, a New Zealand-based label), Giannouli thanks Enjoy producer Rainer Kern for "giving me the space,

inspiration, encouragement and confidence" in debuting her one-person show at Enjoy in 2020.

In 2024, again at Enjoy Jazz and in the wake of *Solo*, Giannouli intoxicated the anticipatory crowd with her scintillating 90-minute performance at the sold-out Friedenskirche church in Heidelberg.

With her classical training at Athenaeum Maria Callas Conservatory, a love of improvisational jazz, explorations of prepared piano and an inherent sense of her native Greek folklore, she revealed fresh versions of pieces from *Solo*, such as "Spiral," "Novelette," "Intone" and "Prelude." She also rendered a solo version of her original "The Sea," which was recorded on 2015's *Transcendence* album with her five-mem-

ber ensemble. Key to her flights were the prepared piano with such "in-the-box" objects as sheets of paper, small mallets, chimes, pieces of cloth and hardened gum. Two encores championed her profound and personal exercises in stretching the jazz guardrails.

The next morning, sitting in an executive suite off the lobby of the hotel, Giannouli talked about the previous evening's triumph. "I don't plan what to play ahead of time," she says. "And while I'm playing, nothing is conscious. I don't really think about what I'm playing, what comes next. Last night I did something I've never done before in concert — playing a rhythm on the singing bowls inside the piano. That was a surprise even to me. But overall, what I play is a lit-

tle like being in meditation.”

As for playing prepared piano, she says that it has come into her repertoire over the last few years of playing solo shows. “I do it occasionally with my ensembles,” she says. “But I’ve really expanded it while solo. I’ve been involved in free improvisation for many years. When I was at school, I joined free improvisation bands with other students, and we did crazy things.”

As a soloist, Giannouli says the experience gives her great freedom and space to go on her personal journeys of vulnerability, truth and honesty. In the liner notes for *Solo* she writes: “Playing solo is ... the most liberating thing ever. Being alone with the instrument gives me an incredible sense of freedom. And yet, there is nothing more demanding than a solo recital. I like the unpredictability of it all.”

Beyond solo shows, she and Bärtsch did a duo set at the London Jazz Festival last November at the prestigious Wigmore Hall.

She recalls the beginning of their artistic connection in 2022. But because of their artist-in-residency work, the pair didn’t have time for a spontaneous collaboration. That would have to wait a year.

“We had respect for each other’s music and the common interest in composed and structured music in a classical sense in combination with improvisation and jazz,” says Bärtsch. “We

also thought it might make sense to work in advance to learn more about each other’s music and the approach to it. I was offered the opportunity to invite someone for a show at Moods jazz club in Zurich, in the neighborhood of my own club, Exile. So, I thought this might be a good preparation for the show at Enjoy Jazz.”

“It was very exciting,” says Giannouli. “Nik is one of my favorite artists. We have different musical languages, but the same desire in telling the story.”

When they started to work together, Bärtsch realized very quickly that Giannouli had excellent time feel that was crucial for him. “In combination with her classical training, this creates a very refreshing perspective,” he says. “We did not waste time with a lot of talking but immediately went into organizing the orchestration of the music with two pianos. The balance of sound, dynamics, phrasing and dramaturgy is quite delicate with two pianos.”

After the success of their Enjoy show, they decided to fill in the gaps of their busy schedules with a scattering of shows around Europe. Bärtsch is impressed. “Tania’s playing is natural and honest,” he says. “It seems to be nourished by her affinity to a floating state between tonal and experimental music. It sounds individual although it is influenced by cultural context and universal ingredients from the classi-

cal background. I experience Tania as one of the hardest working musicians I know. Very dedicated and hungry.”

In addition to fronting two trios, joining up with trumpeter Amir ElSaffar’s new quartet and working in other duo excursions (recently with trumpeter Nils Petter Molvaer at an invite-only private event during Enjoy), Giannouli settles in mostly at home, going it alone and journeying into the unknown. She is an improvisation genius who expands the piano’s range with that array of prepared piano objects tucked in the box. “I composed the music for *Solo* in just two days,” she says. “I could easily complete another in the same time frame.”

How does she categorize herself as an artist?

“I still cannot say that what I play is pure jazz,” she laughs. “It is some kind of jazz, so I guess I am a jazz artist who plays beyond genre. I have so many influences from the avant-garde world to contemporary composers like George Crumb. I don’t set out to play in the Greek folk tradition, but the music does influence me. All those melodies are in my head. My studies are purely in classical music. However, I am a musician born and raised in this country with the sound of the seas and landscapes that I carry with me. But there’s also something else going on. I’m not self-censoring about my influences. I believe that music is one.”

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When asked what he hopes people get from the new Knats album, Stan Woodward said, "That it makes them feel how passionate we are about the music. That old Geordie spirit of really going for it."



Knats

FROM NEWCASTLE WITH LOTSA LOVE

BY CREE MCCREE PHOTO BY ELLIE SLORICK

Let's get one thing perfectly clear: Though Knats currently live in London, they do not play London jazz. They're from the West End of Newcastle upon Tyne, in the far north of the U.K., and pride themselves on playing Newcastle's homegrown Geordie jazz, known for its deep, danceable, drum'n'bass grooves and infectious, aggressive melodies.

"It's funny when you say West End, because people not from Newcastle assume it's like London's West End, which is theaters and stuff," bassist Stan Woodward explained via Zoom. "The West End of Newcastle is like the rough part."

He joined the call along with drummer King David-Ike Elechi and trumpeter Ferg Kilsby. Lifelong friends, Stan and Elechi started

playing together in an after-school club, where they rocked out covering Arctic Monkeys and Metallica before forming their own band to play different genres like reggae. Then they heard the siren call of jazz, and applied to Trinity College, London's jazz conservatory, where they're now in their third year. But it wasn't until they met their "missing link," Kilsby — a fellow Geordie who they tracked

down after spotting him in an Instagram video — that they solidified into Knats.

Elechi and Woodward now live together in a spacious London flat with a skylight, which doubles as a studio, and Kilsby lives just a couple blocks away. During a lively conversation, they laid out the phenom of Newcastle jazz while discussing their musical evolution.

Fresh from a road tour blitz supporting *Geordie Greep* (Black Midi) and playing behind R&B legend Eddie Chacon on U.K. tours, Knats released its first single, "Tortuga (For Me Mam)," in advance of the release of the group's self-titled album for Gearbox Records, a "future analog" label that puts out previously unreleased work by jazz masters like Thelonious Monk and Don Cherry as well as genre-breaking new artists.

Dedicated to Knats' loved ones, the album includes Woodward's tribute to his dad — DJ Se7en — and Elechi's paean to his late sister Adaeze, which combines a gospel folk tune with West African percussive breaks. The trio took a deep dive into all of the honorees, while returning to the primary goal of their album: Newcastle is not to be overlooked.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Cree McCree: *Where did the name Knats with a K come from?*

Stan Woodward: Knats is a combination of me and King's names. My name backwards is actually just Nats, and the K, which is silent, is for King. When we first started, and were just making house tunes on SoundCloud, we called ourselves King Nats. And it didn't really have much of a ring to it, so I thought let's just shorten it.

McCree: *What about your "missing link," Ferg? What was it about his playing that drew you to him?*

Woodward: We hadn't heard anyone in the area playing jazz, and this 15-year-old kid's just burning it on Instagram.

We finally found him after searching for ages and ages.

Elechi: Ferg joined us at Trinity College a year after we entered, and he's now in his second year. So we're all studying jazz.

McCree: *What drew you to jazz?*

Woodward: My dad was a drum'n'bass DJ, and his DJ name was Se7en. And a lot of those old drum'n'bass records come from great jazz samples, so he got into it that way. So I grew up listening to Mingus and Herbie Hancock.

Elechi: I started in church, I've been singing in church since I was a kid. Mom's into smooth jazz, so I listened to a fair bit of David Sanborn and Brian Culbertson. But I didn't really get into jazz until I found '90s hip-hop and then started looking at the samples from there. Me

and Stan kind of found it at the same time, and started sending each other stuff.

Woodward: We spent two years together listening to records like Miles Davis' *Seven Steps To Heaven*. And we would just transcribe, play stuff together and teach ourselves.

McCree: *What about you, Ferg?*

Kilsby: My dad was a big, big jazz fan, so he showed me a lot. And my older brother's a jazz drummer, so as I was growing up, he was always just showing me stuff and how to play it. My entire career now is just trying to impress Henry. [laughs]

McCree: *When did you decide to dedicate the album to your loved ones?*

Woodward: After we recorded it. When we sat down and thought about it, we realized so many tunes are dedicated to people that we love.

McCree: *The first track on the album is "For Josh." Who's Josh?*

Woodward: Josh is our original keys player when we were in Newcastle. He's actually in London, too, but he's a classical composer and preferred going down that route. We parted ways quite early, but we still love him. And he wrote the initial riff of that tune.

McCree: *I love the story about "Rumba (!)" being conceived in a rum bar. Who had that vision?*

Woodward: That was me. I love rum. I'd been in Trinity writing and there's a bar nearby called Rhum Bar, spelled R-H-U-M-B-A-R. I went in for a drink there after, and the first part of that tune came together when I was in that rum bar.

McCree: *There's also a lot of island rhythms in the piece "Tortuga (For Me Mam)"*

Woodward: That's a special one because me and King were both brought up by single mothers. I did write it for my mom, but it's dedicated to single mothers in general, and both our moms. King's mom refers to me as her son and vice versa. They made everything possible for us.

McCree: *One of the most beautiful tracks on the album is "Adaeze," which you wrote for your late sister, King.*

Elechi: It's a gospel folk tune with West African percussion. I've been really getting into music from Senegal and West Africa in general. But there's an underlying rhythm, which is from organ music. Me and Stan sat together and arranged it.

McCree: *How did you end up signing with Gearbox Records?*

Woodward: Our manager, Dan Gray, who's amazing, is friends with Darrel Sheinman from Gearbox. Darrel came to our show at the London Jazz Festival and afterwards he said let's make an album. It's always been a dream of ours to get on a record label and make an album, and we were over the moon to have that opportunity. We recorded it in Studio 13, Damon Albarn's personal studio, and Darrel got Hugh Padgham to mix the album. He's an absolute legend, who created the gated reverb sound on Phil Collins' drum break on "In The Air Tonight."

McCree: *What would you most like people who listen to the album to take away from it?*

Woodward: That it makes them feel how passionate we are about the music. That old Geordie spirit of really going for it.

Elechi: Just taking a chance on Newcastle music from the north as well.

Woodward: British jazz as a whole gets a rep of just being from London. And it's really important to us that we differentiate ourselves from that. We're part of the British jazz scene, but we don't play London jazz. We play Newcastle jazz. The Knats album represents many things, but most importantly that Newcastle is not to be overlooked.

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Sachal Vasandani's

CHILL DANCE PARTY

BY JOSEF WOODARD PHOTO BY MORIAH ZIMAN

It was just another week in the organically genre-blurry life of singer Sachal Vasandani. On a Tuesday night in February, the respected vocalist was in the spotlight with the Knoxville Jazz Orchestra, directed by John Clayton.

The subject was Nat “King” Cole, whose subtle, silken vocal style is roughly in the same range and expressive palette of Vasandani’s musical voice.

Three nights later, on Valentine’s Day at New York’s storied Jazz Gallery, the singer was officially unveiling his latest album, *Best Life Now*. The album puts forth a seamless amalgam of pop songwriting, tight R&B grooves and jazz textures and sonorities in the mix, produced by drummer/bandleader Nate Smith in his first official production role. Vasandani’s voice occupies a smooth zone reminiscent of D’Angelo, Robert Palmer and David Sylvian, while his intel-

ligent songwriting rises above mere pop-soul genre generics.

Other musicians — especially vocalists — might strain and feel some idiomatic whiplash in such a week’s work. But for Vasandani, such code-switching runs deep in his history as a musician.

The Chicago native studied jazz and classical music at the University of Michigan and followed a natural path to New York. There, his quickly ascending reputation found him working with Wynton Marsalis, Bobby McFerrin and many others, including Brittany Howard on the pop side of the spectrum. His discography as a leader dates back to *Eyes*

Wide Open (Mack Avenue) in 2007 and has spanned a diverse swath of concepts and styles.

He spoke to DownBeat two days before the Valentine's Day birth of *Best Life Now*.

Joe Woodard: *Best Life Now* is an example of the idea that you really can mix pop sensibilities, R&B and jazz — and other flavors — and get away with it. Was that an underlying concept for this project?

Sachal Vasandani: It's just who I am at this point.

'My hope is that this music can reach out to anybody, anybody who wants to tap their feet.'

I love all the music, and I really enjoyed last night in Knoxville singing with a big band. It was as straightforward as it gets, singing Nat "King" Cole with arrangements by John Clayton. I don't get sick of that.

But there's another voice, especially when I'm writing, that I just need to be honest with. It certainly has all the other elements. I'm conscious of that — not so much when I'm writing it, but when it comes out. It's part of my own journey. I've always been writing and always been listening and trying to go deep and broad. With this (album), I was just trying to make it personal. It's almost like the genre comes as an afterthought.

Woodard: Did you go into this project with sort of a conceptual guideline for what it would be? Or, did it sort of materialize as you went along?

Vasandani: More of the former. I took a long time to write the music and a long time to collaborate with Nate on putting it all together. We had a couple days in the studio, which was enough because we had done the prep, and then I took a long time after the studio to retrack and think about things and bring my team into it, mixing engineers and tracking engineers and guest artists.

It has been a long process. As a musician, there's always more that we can do, and more that we can collaborate on. But it's really nice to have some kind of vision and feel like it has

come to life.

Woodard: *This album is very different, for instance, from the previous two albums, Midnight Shelter and Still Life, involving cover songs with just you and piano.*

Vasandani: That's right. And there was a reason for that. The last two records I did were recorded during the height of the pandemic.

And in both selection and instrumentation, and even the color of my voice, I was

thinking about melancholy and all the darkness that pretty much everybody else was feeling. I wanted to capture that because I also had been feeling that.

And then for this new one, I wanted to have something that feels more celebratory.

Woodard: Can we qualify the album as a dance record?

Vasandani: Yes, sir. After you've been in your little apartment for two years in a pandemic somewhere in the world, it's time to get out and dance. That's really what it was.

Woodard: But it does contain a melancholic strain to some of the lyrics, with different angles on love and lost love. It's not just party music.

Vasandani: That's right. I certainly was feeling I wanted to put everything to a beat, and that was coming out of the pandemic. But it doesn't mean that the troubles or the things that I'm feeling are resolved and super happy. [laughs] Even if there were some themes that we want to wrestle with, [there was an attitude of] "let's do it with a tapping of our toes," letting the band play and letting people like Nate bring the heat.

Woodard: Nate Smith is such a strong and versatile drummer, and his band Kinfolk also moves in various directions. How did the creative process work with him in producer mode?

Vasandani: He's outstanding as a musician and

as a collaborator. And if you saw Kinfolk, then you know that he's got his own vision, and it's dope. He has been in the thick of it for a minute there, crafting ideas, crafting strategies, writing melodies, writing lyrics. He's a real deal. Yes.

He co-wrote a song with Michael Jackson ["Heaven Can Wait," from the 2001 album *Invincible*] well before he was a famous drummer. He can play the piano, and he can help me reharmonize things. He has an ear for melody.

But I think the takeaway is that I really count him as a generous and solid human being, and I need that in my life. You're putting out there something [through the lyrics], and the songs are not entirely just my experience. They're not grotesquely autobiographical, [laughs] but there's a lot that's rooted in my experience.

Woodard: Your tune "Call Me" shifts from a pretty simple chord structure in main body of the song, the beginning, but then exploding into a more complicated coda section solo by saxophonist Dayna Stephens.

Vasandani: You're right. I kind of wanted to make it like an earworm and then surprise folks with a different kind of energy, but always popping.

Woodard: You have said that D'Angelo was one inspiration for this set of songs.

Vasandani: For sure. The sexiness, the simplicity and the focus on space.

Woodard: The title track, "Best Life Now," is almost a motto for living. Is there a story behind that song?

Vasandani: That is kind of autobiographical. I'm trying to work out married life and fatherhood with a smile on my face. It's not all coming together the way maybe I envisioned it. There are these jagged metal pieces and ways that I'm dealing with it. Maybe they're not always good for me or good for the people around me, but honestly writing the song has helped me a lot.

So many artists are great role models now, but I think when I was coming up, I was working through my own artistic journey and maybe was not great at relationships. I've evolved and part of that evolution is being honest, like with what I'm struggling with. Moving past it is part of what that song is about.

Woodard: You do a beautiful duet with Gretchen Parlato. Do you view her as a model of a "jazz" vocalist that you fit in with, that of being stylistically elastic?

Vasandani: Yeah, exactly. [laughs] I like that word elastic. And that is true, but before I documented it within my records, Gretchen was always doing that, that which felt natural to

her. Tierney Sutton was a big influence on us both. At that time, she was like a real mentor to Gretchen in particular because they're both L.A. people.

But I really enjoyed getting to know Tierney at that time. Tierney's got her own sound, too, but I think her aesthetic up until that point had been pretty straightforward, for lack of a better word.

Even at that time, Gretchen was saying, "That's not exactly how I'm thinking about performing this stuff." On my first records, even though I did originals and covers of pop songs, I did them in a very kind of acoustic, straight-ahead way. It kind of took me until 2009 to start to experiment with different sounds, different flavors, different textures, and I guess I've been doing that as a through line ever since.

I've really come to this idea, to bring us back to what you were saying earlier: It's just gotta be true to me. And if you want to tie it into Gretchen, that was true to Gretchen all those years ago. That's all we can really ask for as artists, that we connect with ourselves, give the best versions of ourselves, and then let it go out into the world.

Woodard: *When your life as a singer began, did you have a vision of what you wanted to do? Or did that shift?*

Vasandani: I was always writing songs off the side, but my North Stars were really the most swinging stuff I could find. That could have been some of the work I did with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra or other people that were in that milieu — Rodney Whitaker, John Clayton, Jeff Hamilton, Bill Charlap. These were kind of my go-to people as a performer and also as a listener, but not exclusively listening to that.

These other things started to seep in. But as a performer, I wanted to take whatever I was listening to and put it into that acoustic, largely swinging setting. It was fun and cool, but I started to feel there were different ways that I can get this music across that makes sense.

Woodard: *You have a fresh version of "What's New" on the new album, contrasting the intimate voice-piano jazz arrangement of the pop tune "I Can't Make You Love Me" on your Still Life album. That's an interesting paradox.*

Vasandani: For me, it's like finding the truth and the honesty and what I can relate to in a given moment, with any song. If I happen to write it, great. Sometimes there are great songs out there. That was a case with a pop song like "I Can't Make You Love Me," which I've been listening to since whenever it came out. I was just enamored with it. It's a great, well-written song. I wish I wrote it, [laughs] and I love singing it. There are some songs that I love to listen to, but

don't really feel like I have a perspective on it. But the flip side of that is the honest awesome things that I do have to say, I can say them in any genre.

When I find a connection with the song, whether it's "What's New" or "Straighten Up And Fly Right" or something like Bonnie Raitt — and I have a perspective to offer — I'm gonna sing it.

Woodard: *How did this spin on "What's New" come to be? Was it just kind of a light-bulb moment?*

Vasandani: That actually was a light-bulb moment. That was the one tune that we kind of worked on as a group in the studio. I had the idea for letting it be really spare. But then the vamp at the end was Nate — he hooked it up. We all kind of sat around at the piano and tried out a few things for like 10 minutes. Then, when we recorded it, I could sense right away that it was gonna be this wonderful vehicle for Dayna.

The record is tight, it's pocket-based, and on "What's New" and "Call Me" there's some stretching in a couple places. But mostly it's just about the songs. It's very singer-focused in that way, but those singers don't need to be pop. That's how the old jazz singers approached the Great American Songbook, Rodgers and Hart stuff, and they didn't have blazing solos. But now when I'm doing it live, I'm finding it fun and compelling to open it up, open up with the guys, and just have fun with it.

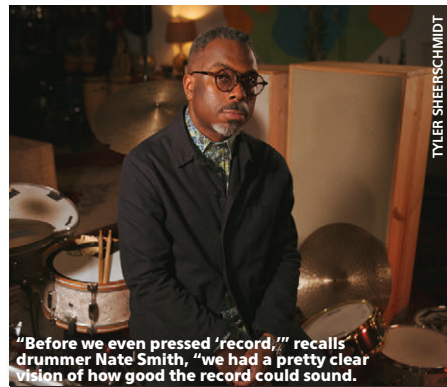
Woodard: *You might be engaged in some musical evangelism work here. Listeners who maybe aren't familiar with the breadth of what you've done might be lured in and then hear "What's New" and be hip to the tune, as happened when Linda Ronstadt did it with Nelson Riddle. Do you like that idea?*

Vasandani: This is my hope. My background is jazz. I'm a jazz singer. I'm being interviewed by a jazz magazine. It's all who I am. It's all who we are. But my hope is that this music can reach out to anybody, anybody who wants to tap their feet.

It's got to start with my jazz community, my people. But I'd be thrilled if the lyrics touched people — because oftentimes lyrics come a little bit later in the priority of jazz people. I know that from experience, and that's not good or bad. But out there in the listening public, folks do like lyrics. My hope is that folks will vibe on that from a lyrical perspective.

Woodard: *Just looking at the trajectory of your career, is this moment almost a new chapter that you're embarking on?*

Vasandani: I would definitely say so. It's been a minute since my last record, and something's brewing.



TYLER SHEERSCHMIDT

"Before we even pressed 'record,'" recalls drummer Nate Smith, "we had a pretty clear vision of how good the record could sound."

THE DRUMMER AS PRODUCER

Though Nate Smith has been best-known, at least on the jazz scene, as a powerhouse and flexible drummer playing with Dave Holland, Chris Potter and his own eclectic project Kinfolk, his musical resume includes genres beyond jazz, per se. He first worked with Vasandani on 2015's *Slow Motion Miracles* and gigged as a sideman with the singer, but *Best Life Now* marks the first project where Smith has worn a producer hat.

"Honestly," Smith says, "in the past few years I hadn't thought about producing anyone other than myself. I'm really grateful that Sachal trusted me with his vision."

As a first step in the process, Vasandani brought Smith demos, with ideas about players for the album. Smith was familiar with some of them, including pianist Jon Cowherd, who toured with Kinfolk. "Before we even pressed 'record,'" Smith recalls, "we had a pretty clear vision of how good the record could sound. I believe, regardless of genre, the sound of a tight rhythm section playing dynamically and musically is timeless. So, if you've got a good rhythm section and good songs, you're off to the best possible start."

Smith also relates to Vasandani's openness to blending genres, and tapping into vintage cross-genre models. "I'm a child of the '80s," says Smith, "and I grew up on the genre-blurring amalgam of artists like Al Jarreau, Sade and, of course, Earth Wind & Fire. I like the idea of mixing things up in a way that's interesting but still musical."

"More specific to this project is the storytelling element of Sachal's lyric writing, especially on the title track. There is something very Paul Simon-esque about the way he approached those lyrics and his delivery. It feels conversational, and I wanted the music to feel like a soundtrack to that conversation."

—Josef Woodard

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ERIC RYAN ANDERSON



Branford Marsalis's longtime quartet corresponds to, but doesn't replicate, Keith Jarrett's European quartet on *Belonging*.

Branford Marsalis Quartet *Belonging*

BLUE NOTE

★★★★★

What's more unexpected: Branford Marsalis using his debut Blue Note album to pay tribute to a recording originally released on ECM? Or a saxophonist covering a pianist's LP song for song?

Then, there's the fact that Marsalis' muscular voice sounds little like Jan Garbarek's metallic roar and that Justin Faulkner's drums seem like thunder when compared to the spring rain of the late Jon Christensen. That's all for the good: It enables listeners to focus on the performances in the moment rather than

be drawn back to Jarrett's original.

Indeed, the Marsalis *Belonging* is anything but a clone. The principal indicator is the difference in timing; Marsalis' paean clocks in at 17 minutes longer than Jarrett's album, primarily reflecting a five-minute extension of the title composition and an extra four minutes for both "Spiral Dance" and "The Windup."

Rather, Marsalis' quartet emphasizes the depth and variety of Jarrett's writing in the era when he still composed pieces in the traditional manner, rather than either improvising in the moment as a solo artist or exploring the beauty of standards with his trio. This shines a retrospective light on the beauty of songs like "Blossom," which, here, emphasizes the balance of the leader's delicate work and Calderazzo's slowly unfolding playing, or

the title piece — stretched to allow its beauty to resonate. This undogmatic approach also allows the quartet to stretch pieces like "Long As You Know You're Living Yours" and "The Windup" into realms that sound more like Jarrett's so-called "American quartet" (with Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden and Paul Motian) than they do the European quartet that made the original *Belonging*.

As unlikely a choice as this is for a high-profile debut on a new label, it hopefully bodes well for where Marsalis will take his quartet during his Blue Note tenure.

—James Hale

Belonging: Spiral Dance; Blossom; 'Long As You Know You're Living Yours; Belonging; The Windup; Solstice. (62:51)

Personnel: Branford Marsalis, saxophones; Joey Calderazzo, piano; Eric Revis, bass; Justin Faulkner, drums.

Ordering info: bluenote.com



Arturo O'Farrill *Mundoagua: Celebrating Carla Bley*

ZOHO

★★★★½

Arturo O'Farrill and Carla Bley first collaborated in 1979. He was 19; she, 43. Now, 18 months after her death, O'Farrill remembers both her work and its impact on him as a composer in this often intricate and effervescent program of three suites for his Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra.

Two are by O'Farrill. They flank Bley's "Blue Palestine" suite, which he commissioned himself in 2018. Each conveys specific narra-

Allison Miller with the One O'Clock Lab Band *Big & Lovely*

ROYAL POTATO FAMILY

★★★★

Allison Miller is no stranger to formidable ensembles. Even so, she is now for the first time in her career writing for a big band, penning eight expansive compositions for the University of North Texas' One O'Clock Lab Band.

Opener and title track "Big & Lovely" kicks things off with a bang, Miller laying down an earthy funk groove backed by a swinging horn section before trumpeter Joshua Zeitlin trades soaring solos with saxophonists Carly Stock and Anthony Bolden. The medium-tempo swing feel continues throughout much of *Big & Lovely*, vamping through the horn stabs and counterpoint of "Bow & Arrow," drifting into the bossa nova references of "Blue Wild Indigo."

In quieter moments, Miller's compositional ear excels, laying a cinematic foundation of gently bowed strings on "Fuster" and a bluesy, piano-led groove for the wozy trombone melodies of "Potomac." Yet with such a large ensemble at her disposal, Miller rarely uses their full might. "Fierce" plays through a driving rock groove and "Dan Dan" opens with force over an extended drum solo, but both numbers soon settle into compositional intri-

tives, which O'Farrill discusses in his notes. Nevertheless, permit yourself an unfiltered response, then backtrack as O'Farrill spells out the specific inspirations and intents of his various representations.

"Mundoagua," for instance, is about the power of water, but O'Farrill's narrative seems vastly more ambitious (and politically laced) than the jittery playfulness and logic of the music. Part one showcases the lyricism of the trumpets in solos. Part two alternates between mischievous staccato fragmentation and reflective repose that stirs its own internal tensions. Part three delivers a Daliesque interpolation of "The Star-Spangled Banner" that smirks ironically at America's inflationary sense of its "exceptionalism."

"Blue Palestine" has no special tale to tell, focusing on a menu of Mideast and Asian ingredients. Part two is a spacious still-life of vibes and piano. Bley's orchestration sneaks in subtly to summarize. —John McDonough

Mundoagua—Celebrating Carla Bley: Mundoagua: Glacial, Mundoagua, The Politics Of Water; Blue Palestine Part One, Blue Palestine Part Two, Blue Palestine Part Three, Blue Palestine Part Four; Dia de Los Muertos: Flowery Death, La Bruja, Mambo Cadaverous. (61:48)

Personnel: Adam O'Farrill, Seneca Black, Bryan Davis, Rachel Therrien, trumpets; Rafi Malkell, Renee Ashley, Abdulrahman Amer, Earl McIntyre, trombones; Ivan Renta, Adison Evans, Jasper Dutz, Larry Bustamante, saxophones; Arturo O'Farrill, Andrew Andron, piano; Sergio Ramirez, guitar; Patricia Brennan, vibraphone; Ricardo Rodriguez, Vince Cherico, drums; Carlos Maldonado, Keisel Jimenez, percussion.

Ordering info: zohomusic.com

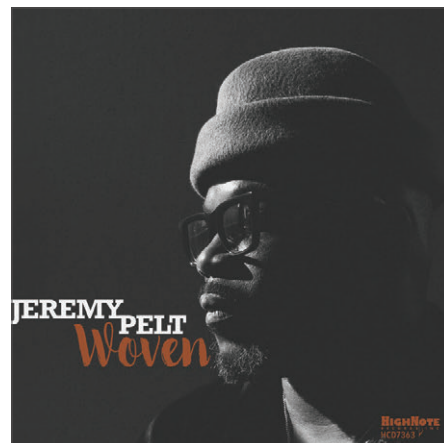


cacies and a familiar flow of soloing. Closer "Congratulations And Condolences" does make use of roaring horn fanfares but it feels too little too late. If Miller has the chance to record with a big band again, it would be a joy to hear her write with greater abandon, celebrating their full power. —Ammar Kalia

Big & Lovely: Big & Lovely; Fuster; Dan Dan; Potomac; Bow & Arrow; Fierce; Blue Wild Indigo; Congratulations And Condolences. (58:22)

Personnel: Allison Miller, drums; Ian Weidmann, Gabriel Burns, Carly Stock, Gabriel Nieves, Anthony Bolden, Jack Lanhardt, saxophones; Richie Thaller, Naoki Hoshi, Ben Carroll, Joshua Zeitlin, Craig Schroeder, trumpets; Ken Ebo, Jason Schilling, Nick Mailles, Connor Fallon, Paul Covert, trombones; Will St. Peter, guitar; Jake Nalangan, Yeeun Kim, piano; August Bish, bass.

Ordering info: royalpotatofamily.com



Jeremy Pelt *Woven*

HIGHNOTE

★★★★½

Woven epitomizes what a modern, 21st-century jazz album should be. It's not that it provides a model for other albums to sound like it. It's more that Jeremy Pelt delivers a set of mostly originals in a context that embraces slivers of contemporary textures and timbres — via synthesizers and electric instrumentation and rhythms — while retaining a strong historical foundation, which in this case is post-Motown bop.

Now in the third decade of his career as a leader, Pelt has become one of the most reliable trumpeters and composers of his generation. He possesses a warm, burnished tone that he amimates with fluid, melodically cogent improvisations. Even when he enhances his sound with electronics, as on the shimmering "Prologue: Invention #1," where he crafts bristly textures inside Marie-Ann Hedonia's galactic sound sculpture, Pelt's soulful warmth remains intact.

Woven is also a testament to Pelt's compositional brilliance. He's prone to write suspenseful, cinematic passages that maximize sophistication, enlivened by the crackling rapport of his ensemble. The majestic "Rhapsody" and the twirling "Dreamcatcher" are as thrilling as they are memorable. Bassist Leighton Harrell and drummer Jared Spears propel the music with a serrated urgency that often brims with volatile energy yet never bursts into needless mayhem. Jalen Baker and guitarist Misha Mendelenko underscore Pelt's flight of fancy with transfixing harmonic bedding.

Thus the album's lone standard, Kenny Dorham's "Fair Weather," doesn't come across as some obligatory concession. Pelt and his cohorts bring all the beauty and adventure as they do on his forward-thinking originals. —John Murphy

Woven: Prologue: Invention #1; Rhapsody; Afrofuturism; 13/14; Dreamcatcher; Michelle; Fair Weather; Invention #2/Black Conscience; Labyrinth. (50:16)

Personnel: Jeremy Pelt, trumpet; Jalen Baker, vibraphone; Misha Mendelenko, guitar; Leighton Harrell, acoustic bass, electric bass (1); Jared Spears, drums; Marie-Ann Hedonia, synthesizers (1, 2, 5, 8); Mar Vilaseca, vocals (2).

Ordering info: jazzdepot.com

The Hot Box

Critics	James Hale	John McDonough	Ammar Kalia	John Murph
Branford Marsalis Quartet <i>Belonging</i>	★★★★	★★★★½	★★★	★★★★
Arturo O'Farrill <i>Mundoagua: Celebrating Carla Bley</i>	★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★★½
Allison Miller <i>Big & Lovely</i>	★★★★½	★★★★½	★★★	★★★★½
Jeremy Pelt <i>Woven</i>	★★★★	★★★	★★★★½	★★★★½

Critics' Comments

Branford Marsalis Quartet, *Belonging*

An interesting, if unexpected, fit for the Marsalis quartet, which faithfully brings Jarrett's ECM original off a half-century on the shelf with a warmer spin on the ballads and a barrelhouse power on "Windup" and "Long As You Know."
—John McDonough

Marsalis' Blue Note debut is a spirited homage to Keith Jarrett's 1974 record of the same name. It's an enjoyable effort but not distinct enough to take away the original's shine.

—Ammar Kalia

This album illustrates the benefits of leading a longstanding ensemble while delving into a cherished body of work with sanguine joy and imagination.
—John Murph

Arturo O'Farrill, *Mundoagua—Celebrating Carla Bley*

Having once watched Bley rehearse an ensemble to perform her music, I can imagine her telling O'Farrill's musicians to add a bit more grease to their performances. The music here sounds timeless, but toothless.
—James Hale

O'Farrill's tribute to the late Carla Bley is a beautiful showcase of compositions inspired by her work. Impressive in its scope and unafraid to channel the orchestra's innate sense of melodrama, *Mundoagua* carries the torch for Bley's formidable legacy.
—Ammar Kalia

A passionate love letter to a mentor, brimming with the intrigue, excitement and humor, worthy of its honoree.
—John Murph

Allison Miller and the One O'Clock Lab Band, *Big & Lovely*

Sprightly, with multifaceted arrangements, *Big & Lovely* is not only a great showcase for the drummer's breadth; it's effective proof that the future of big bands is in sure hands.
—James Hale

A journeyman Lab Band anthology of Miller's many skills. With the color palette ruled mostly by the brass, though, "Fierce" caught my ear about half-way along with its silky, streamlined sax soli. Brief yet striking in its contrast. Has modernity forgotten the reeds?
—John McDonough

Miller powers the University of North Texas big band with grit and grace.
—John Murph

Jeremy Pelt, *Woven*

Wide ranging and stuffed with sticky riffs, *Woven* sounds beguiling and remarkably well integrated. As strong as the leader sounds, it's the contributions of Baker, Mendelenko and Spears that really sparkle.
—James Hale

Essentially an acoustic date with a light synth seasoning on the edges, Pelt's poised proficiency and glassy clarity lift a lackluster set list to performance level. Springs fully to life at the end ("Labyrinth") with Mendelenko and Baker on vibes and guitar.
—John McDonough

A fascinating blend of acoustic jazz instrumentation with electronic synthesis. Tracks like "Rhapsody" use a digital choir to impressive effect. Subtle interventions like the digital synth whispers of "Afrofuturism" are less effective, but the record is an enjoyable and distinctive feat nonetheless.
—Ammar Kalia

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ARTURO O'FARRILL & THE AFRO LATIN JAZZ ORCHESTRA

Mundoagua - Celebrating Carla Bley

Multiple Grammy winning composer, pianist Arturo O'Farrill presents two ambitious Jazz suites, plus "Blue Palestine" by iconic composer Carla Bley.

ZOHO



ON BOTH CD & VINYL

HIRABAYASHI MAKIKO

Gifts

Acclaimed pianist and composer recorded "Gifts" with the Weavers Quartet -- It serves as a deeply personal musical memoir.

ENJA



CORNELIUS CLAUDIO KREUSCH & JOSCHO STEPHAN

Highwire

Pianist Cornelius Claudio Kreuzsch and guitarist Joscho Stephan come together as two equal virtuosos, melodists and improvisers for "Highwire"

FINE MUSIC



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ALMA RECORDS



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Phillip Golub *Loop 7*

GREYFADE
★★★★½

A work for acoustic piano, vibraphone, electric guitar and live electronics, pianist and composer Phillip Golub's *Loop 7* is hardly most listeners' idea of jazz. Indeed, the 28-minute piece has very little in the way of conventional musicality on which to latch. Still, the audio is superb, as it almost must be in order to bring all of *Loop 7*'s subtleties to light.

The use of a 22-note-per-octave tuning system on a Yamaha Disklavier discards the notion

that *Loop 7* embraces traditional Western musical form. The very idea of microscopic sonic changes in a repeating sonic loop, juxtaposed against the more freely creative phrasings of Golub's supporting cast, brings to mind the idea of a type of sonic installation that needs some education or explanation and doesn't come across as easy to appreciate alone and/or without context.

There's a peaceful, ethereal quality to the fundamental motif one can enjoy at face value, but the piece is likely best presented in a gallery on hi-res audio equipment, and with Golub on hand to share his passion and talk with listeners directly: connecting what he sees, feels, hears and aspires to through *Loop 7*.

Outside of that, there's a very high bar of expectation for average listeners, both in the ideal kind of audio gear they ought to own to appreciate the piece in its optimal form, and in expecting someone to sit for nearly half an hour and deeply consider this kaleidoscopic journey. It's not to say that there aren't people who would do that, but such a premise as it is may leave listeners with more questions than answers.

—Kira Grunenberg

Loop 7: *Loop 7*, (28:20)

Personnel: Phillip Golub, MIDI-controlled Disklavier pianos; Aaron Edgcomb, microtonal vibraphone; Ty Citerman, electric guitar; Joseph Branciforte, live electronics, synthesizer.

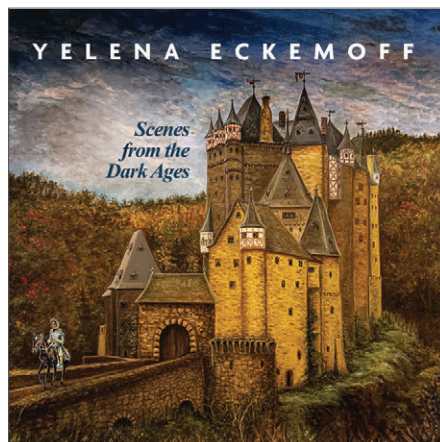
Ordering info: greyfade.com

Yelena Eckemoff *Scenes From The Dark Ages*

L & H PRODUCTION
★★★★½

This is clearly an ensemble effort. Yes, all the music comes from Eckemoff's pen, but the narrative qualities seem to have required an expanded sonic palette to be realized. Like Chick Corea's forays into storytelling (think *Romantic Warrior*), this isn't just an album consisting of songs but one made up of melodic threads that connect the roles and varied movements.

This isn't a jazz album, per se, although improvisation, instrumental skill and the occasional groove permeate. Riccardo Bertuzzi's electric guitar forays recall Corea's own sonic designs, along with the rapid-fire deliveries that come from Trilok Gurtu's uniquely combined percussion and drum work. The groove doesn't drive the music, which feels more orchestrated. And yet, as Eckemoff says about the project, "I didn't want just guitar and bass, I wanted rock guitar and electric bass and really strong drums." In other words, more of a prog-rock feel — in this case, tapered more to melodic expression instead of a driving beat. The flute playing of Carlo Nicita goes a long way furthering this particular approach. "Monks In Scriptorium," for exam-



ple, seems to inevitably lead to Nicita's evocation of the song's mood of mystery and tranquility. Likewise with the aptly titled, solemn "Cathedral," Eckemoff's sonic palette coursing throughout. Indeed, *Scenes From The Dark Ages* surfaces as a realized childhood dream of her "Medieval Symphony."

—John Ephland

Scenes From The Dark Ages: Pilgrims; From Peasants Life; Spell-bound Fortress; Monks In Scriptorium; Cathedral; Legends Of The Castle; Adventures Of A Knight; Battle; Chivalry; Tournament; Masquerade; Alchemist; Quest; From The Land Of The Lords. (105:05)

Personnel: Yelena Eckemoff, piano, organ, synths; Riccardo Bertuzzi, electric guitar; Carlo Nicita, flute; Eloisa Manera, acoustic and electric violins; Riccardo Oliva, electric bass; Trilok Gurtu, drums, percussion.

Ordering info: landhproduction.com



Deepstaria *Enigmatica* *The Eternal Now Is The Heart Of A New Tomorrow*

ESP-DISK
★★★★½

They call themselves Memphibians, and they navigate the depths of deep improvisation. These five players might not be so familiar outside of Memphis, aside from Misterioso Africano (who played guitar with Public Enemy as Khari Wynn), but they've forged an advanced flow of sensitised improvisation, moving with a linear flow, examining melodic themes and searing at full-force in this electroacoustic immersion.

Their only apparent bedfellows are Playfield in New York. A pair of extended tracks allow maximum development, with time for gradual evolutions.

Helicoptering hard-synth circles around with evil intent, electric bass prowls the sub-surface, acoustic piano measures carefully and flutes sometimes sound like saxophones, especially when their player Chad Fowler lunges in with his electronic tampering, sounding tangled and wiry, hacking up threads of instant thought.

Instruments creep forward, then recede, and everyone's constantly soloing, tidal movement bringing players forward for a moment, then tipping back into the distance.

The guitar has the straightest sound, anchoring the band, David Collins (also of Frog Squad) being the most overtly jazzed member. The bass is a glugging spring of hot tar. There is sometimes agonised vocal suffering, assisted by distortion effects.

This cosmic broth is teeming with the aural billows of the jellyfish creatures that lend this band its name. —Martin Longley

The Eternal Now Is The Heart Of A New Tomorrow: The Eternal Now; The Truths. (43:12)

Personnel: Chad Fowler, stritch, alto and bass flutes, Otamatone synthesizer; David Collins, guitar, Alex Greene, keyboards; Misterioso Africano, bass; Jon Scott Harrison, drums.

Ordering info: deepstariaenigmaticaesp.bandcamp.com



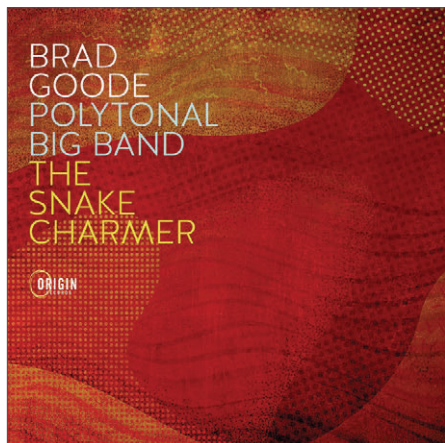
“Chemistry. Alchemy. Telepathy. All are appropriate words to describe the otherworldly quality of improvisation by a band with longstanding individual credentials.”

—DownBeat

All-star family band **The 3 Cohens (Anat, Avishai, and Yuval)** returns with *Interaction*—an electrifying new live album. This dynamic recording—featuring the esteemed **WDR Big Band**, conducted and arranged by **Oded Lev-Ari**—captures the siblings’ signature chemistry in full force. With exhilarating originals and joyous takes on classics like *Tiger Rag* and *Festive Minor*, the recording delivers pure energy, spontaneous interplay, and deep musical connection.



The **GTO Trio**—pianist Gadi Lehavi, bassist Tal Mashiach, and drummer Ofri Nehemya—presents *Within*, an intimate and exploratory release seamlessly weaving intricate interplay, global influences, and spontaneous artistry.



Brad Goode Polytonal Big Band *The Snake Charmer*

ORIGIN

★★★★

Polytonality is the practice of composing in multiple keys simultaneously. If the term rings any bells at all, maybe you happened across Brad Goode’s 2008 *Polytonal Dance Party*, on which the trumpeter applied the technique to fusion-adjacent combo jazz.

The Snake Charmer expands this to big band size and, frankly, does it more justice. Working against polytonal harmony gives an

improviser much more latitude melodically, but in a combo setting, putting the guitar, bass and piano in different keys can sometimes sound like somebody got the wrong chart. With a baker’s dozen horns on the other hand, it’s easier to exploit the contrapuntal nature of polytonality by layering lines against lines and chords against chords.

The title tune is a case in point. A version of “The Snake Charmer” also appears on *Dance Party*, and in that setting it’s pretty simple: a sinuous, vaguely Middle Eastern melody over a catchy, four-bar chord sequence. In big band form, however, it expands exponentially, elaborating on the harmony and teasing the melody into intertwining, contrapuntal lines.

Not everything here works. Admirable as his poly-harmonization of “Ornithology” may be, it’s hard not to wish the performance swung harder. But that may just be growing pains; once the rhythm reaches the same level of sophistication, this Polytonal Big Band may truly be something to hear. —J.D. *Considerine*

The Snake Charmer: Goose Chase; The Snake Charmer; Just a Thought; Ornithology; Pentacles; Cabin in the Sky; Hypnotic Suggestion; I Can’t Forget About You. (58:29)

Personnel: Brad Goode, trumpet soloist; John Davis, conductor; John Lake, Sean Applebee, Emily Hartrampf, Hugh Ragin, trumpet; John Gunther, Camden Johnson, alto saxophone; Carl Schultz, Jonas Shofler, tenor saxophone; Alexandra Loran, baritone saxophone; Sam Griffith, Grayson Stewart, Jack Bendure, Joanna Griffith, trombone; Victor Mestas-Perez, piano; Tim Wendel, guitar; Eddie Ness, bass; Paul Romaine, drums.

Ordering info: originarts.com

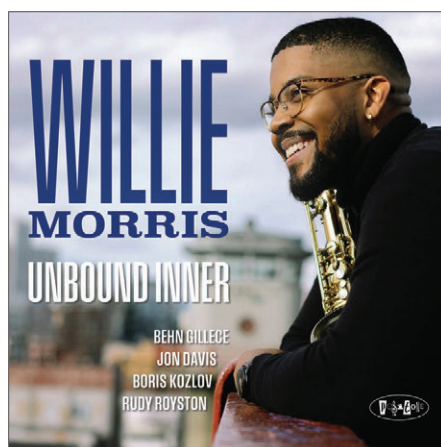
Willie Morris *Unbound Inner*

POSI-TONE

★★★★½

In their quest to get to the *Unbound Inner*, the title of Willie Morris’ latest album, the group succeeds and at the same time extends the outer boundaries. The tone and cadence of Morris’ husky tenor saxophone, evoking spurts and sprints of Dexter Gordon, pave the way in “Flyover Country,” which is emblematic of the blues he heard and absorbed coming of age in East St. Louis. Geography is fate, as the great author Ralph Ellison noted; it’s referenced again on “The Folks Who Live Down The Hill,” not on the hill, as composed by Kern and Hammerstein, and this funky rendition is indicative of the undaunted spirit of the city’s denizens.

The critical mass that arrives on “The Folks...” — particularly the interplay between pianist Jon Davis, bassist Boris Kozlov and drummer Rudy Royston — is then dispersed in a singular fashion by Kozlov on “Patterned,” Davis on Herbie Hancock’s “Tell Me A Bedtime Story” and Royston just about everywhere. On “Comfort Zone,” Behn Gillece’s vibraphone is the dominant and delightful force; it’s hard not to think of the late Bobby Hutcherson. Even so,



Gillece has his own inimitable way of making his instrument sing.

On “What’s Expected,” the album’s closing track, Morris continues his exploration, taking us even deeper into his music’s compelling interior, unraveling not only the expected but intimations of the unexpected: the intriguing nuances we are sure to hear as he grows in style and facility. —Herb Boyd

Unbound Inner: Flyover Country; Patterned; Comfort Zone; The Folks Who Live Down The Hill; How To Get Away With Murder; Charade; Into Somewhere; Dialect; Tell Me A Bedtime Story; What’s Expected. (48:15)

Personnel: Willie Morris, tenor saxophone; Behn Gillece, vibraphone; Jon Davis, piano; Boris Kozlov, bass; Rudy Royston, drums.

Ordering info: posi-tone.com

The Vintage Sound of V-Discs

The V-Disc era was a very special period in both recording and jazz history. It was triggered by the 1942 decision of James C. Petrillo, head of the American Federation of Musicians, to call for a strike banning all instrumental recording by labels to protest what he (and many others) considered poor financial deals. Army Capt. Robert Vincent asked him to allow AFM members to record discs — without pay — for the military. Petrillo agreed, with the proviso that they could not be sold and must be destroyed at the end of the war. Special V-Disc phonographs were manufactured and dispatched in envelopes with distinctive red, white and blue letterings, bearing the warning “This record is the property of the War Department of the United States and use for radio or commercial purposes [is] prohibited.” By 1945, more than eight million discs had been sent overseas. **Classic V-Disc Small Group Jazz Sessions** (Mosaic; ★★½ 841:00) gathers on 11 CDs a host of undestroyed 1943–1949 trad, swing and early bebop recordings.

A huge plus is the high audio quality of the 220 tracks, nine of which have never previously been released. Add a comprehensive 40-page illustrated booklet with Michael Steinman’s thorough essay, plus a complete discography from all the sessions and vintage photographs, and this is a treasure chest from a historical standpoint. (An interesting side note: The set includes, poignantly, Fats Waller laying down tracks on Sept. 16, 1943: his last studio recordings before his death that December.) While there’s thematic variety as you move through the 11 discs, the early sessions are heavy-duty traditional New Orleans material, starting with trumpeter Bunk Johnson (either in his 60s or 70s, depending on whose birth certificate you believe), the oldest performer of the bunch at the time of his 1946 session. Gems come from Sidney Bechet and His New Orleans Feetwarmers (and/or V-Discers), and Muggsy Spanier with two sessions — recorded a year apart (1944 and 1945) but presented here together — with Lou McGarity, Pee Wee Russell, Peanuts Hucko, Bud Freeman, Jess Stacy and George Wettling among those spread between the outings.

The highlight is disc 1’s “All-Star Jam Session,” from 1944. Any date with Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden and Bobby Hackett is going to be fabulous; add Herb Ellis, Billy Butterfield, Cozy Cole and others to the mix and it’s truly masterful, high-caliber material. The Armstrong alone (two takes of “Jack Armstrong Blues”) is beautiful in its blend of melodic simplicity and individualistic flair. A close second would



V-Discs were created solely for U.S. armed forces during World War II.

be the 21 Art Tatum 1945/’46 recordings. Occasionally, in these and other pages, come claims that Tatum was all harmonic and technical virtuosity, minus heart and soul. I’m not sure what selections those folks were hearing, but what he delivers on these sessions is take after take of brilliantly phrased, superbly executed and soulfully performed numbers that both swing and amaze. His Gershwin medley alone puts a lot of 21st-century renditions to shame, let alone what was being done in his lifetime.

There are other fine items. Anytime you can hear Nat “King” Cole, Hot Lips Page or Clark Terry, it’s a treat. The Woody Herman sessions are marvelous. Ella Fitzgerald’s 1945 session included “I’ll See You In My Dreams,” “I’ll Always Be In Love with You” and a lyricked-up “Bugle Call Rag” retitled “That’s Rich.” The boogie material from Meade “Lux” Lewis and all the Fats Waller material is sublime as well. Mosaic is to be commended for this project, putting this music back into circulation — albeit only for 5,000 copies, whereas any jazz fan whose relatives served in World War II might want a copy. (My late father, far from a big music fan, did comment to me once in passing that even he liked some of the music on “those V-Disc things.”)

Alas, the reason the set doesn’t rank higher is that the ratio of memorable, occasionally even great performances to competent but standard-quality items and period pieces isn’t high enough over this many discs. Still, a lot of the lesser-quality tunes are fun and highly enjoyable, and it’s understandable that the audience to whom they were aimed (soldiers who never knew when their time might be up) would enjoy hearing and/or dancing to them. The great selections are superb. Thus it is still very much recommended. **DB**

Ordering info: mosaicrecords.com



The Young Mothers *Better If You Let It*

CLANDESTINE

★★★½

The title track opens The Young Mothers’ third album with emcee Jawwaad Taylor rhyming, signifying on both the band’s journey and perhaps a personal story of perseverance. On their first release in more than half a decade, the Austin-based collective is back with a record that traverses familiar musical territory. Taylor, who fronts the opening track with lyrics and a chorus that repeats, “It gets better if you let it” as almost a mantra, reinforces this message on the trumpet.

More than just the typical hip-hop-jazz convergence, where two different worlds collide and the listener gets caught between, the eclecticism on *Better If You Let It* feels organic. Each track is suffused with the band’s interest in non-traditional sounds, with no style ever becoming dominant. Yet, it is when they move away from the lyrical that the album registers its titular sentiment.

The Young Mothers is the brainchild of Norwegian bassist Ingebrigt Håker Flaten, who has since returned to his home country where this album was recorded in 2022. Yet it retains the diverse palette of earlier approaches that Flaten sought when putting the band together in Austin, Texas, back in 2009. There are more than just hints of funk, electronica and free-jazz. Those idioms are crafted into a specific sonic energy that is both original and reminiscent of younger, popular musical collectives coming out of Texas during this era. But if we fall too easily into comparison, we might fail to appreciate the forward direction taken here by a group that continues to feel fresh on the scene.

—Joshua Myers

Better If You Let It: Better If You Let It; Hymn; Lijm; Song For A Poet; Scarlet Woman Lodge. (51:50)

Personnel: Jawwaad Taylor, trumpet; rhymes; electronics, programming; Jason Jackson, tenor and baritone saxophone; Stefan Gonzalez, vibraphone, drums, percussion, voice; Jonathan F. Horne, guitar; Ingebrigt Håker Flaten, acoustic and electric bass; Frank Rosaly, drums, electronics, programming.

Ordering info: theyoungmothers.bandcamp.com



Rebecca Martin *SHE*

SUNNYSIDE
★★★★½

On *SHE*, Rebecca Martin presents 13 original songs delivered with minimal arrangements, accompanying herself only on acoustic guitar. This is the first collection of originals she's released since 2013's *Twain*, a record featuring her husband, bass player Larry Grenadier. The deeply introspective songs here were composed over a seven-year period, addressed to "She" — the muse she says helps her deal with the pleasures and uncertainties of everyday life.

Tim Berne *Yikes Too*

SCREWGUN + OUT OF YOUR HEAD
★★★★

Branford Marsalis once said of his friend and colleague Tim Berne: "As players and jazz musicians, we spend so much time emulating popular culture. He never got caught up in that nonsense." Marsalis was implying that Berne preferred to focus solely on the music and the gig, and, essentially, that is what Berne has spent his 50-plus-year career doing.

On his new record, *Yikes Too*, he debuts his new band Capotosta featuring longtime collaborator Tom Rainey on drums and newcomer guitarist Gregg Belisle-Chi, a former student of Bill Frisell. The two-disc album is composed of studio tracks and a live concert recorded in Seattle, giving the listener the best of both worlds: a chance to experience music in a more pristine setting and longer, impromptu sessions where the band stretches out.

The original compositions are all products of Berne's extreme measures of pushing the trio to its fullest potential. The tunes "Oddly Enough," "Guitar Star" and "Yikes" spotlight Belisle-Chi's chops and how much color he adds to Berne's electric sound. He also features a tribute to his mentor, multi-instrumen-

"Play For Me" appeared on Martin's *People Behave Like Ballads* album, but her delivery here is more intimate. She almost whispers, describing the connection between singer and listener with soft sighing singing and minimal guitar work.

Her straightforward vocal and sparse picking makes her new arrangement of "All Day Long She Wrote," even stronger than the version she cut with the Portuguese Orquestra Jazz de Matosinhos. When she sings, "There's nothing she wouldn't do or say," it amplifies the song's feminist take on the creative life.

Slow fingerpicking, in the lower range of the guitar, opens "God Is In The Details." Martin describes a woman thinking of breaking the connection with a lover, uncertain of what may come next. Her vocal intensifies the subject's ambivalent feelings about the relationship and life in general.

SHE closes with "East Andover," a poignant ballad about a girl hurrying to catch a school bus on a winter morning. The lyric juxtaposes the child's thoughts with those of her mother for a meditation on the path from childhood to motherhood and beyond.

— j. poet

SHE: Play For Me; Just Another Heartbreak; Rise And Begin; All Day Long She Wrote; The Grass Are Cradled Too; The Dark Skies They Circle; To Be Told; To Up And Go; All In; Four Winds Blowing (I Don't Mind); On A Sunday Morning; God Is In The Details; East Andover.
Personnel: Rebecca Martin, guitar, vocals.

Ordering info: sunnysiderecords.com



talist Julius Hemphill. The live cuts on the second disc feature some of the same tunes from the studio version but are longer and potentially more satisfying. There are definitely more extreme, rock-infused tunes such as "Trauma," one of the longest tracks on the record at 11 minutes, 35 seconds, and "Clandestine," where heavy metal sounds from Rainey and Belisle-Chi dominate.

—Veronica Johnson

Yikes Too: Oddly Enough; Guitar Star; Yikes; Yikes 2; Marmite Woman; Julius Hemphill; Bat Channel; Trauma; Poky(e); Sorry Variations; Bat Channel; Oddly Enough; Curls; Guitar Star; Trauma; Sludge; Clandestine; Middle Seat Blues. (13:14)

Personnel: Tim Berne, alto saxophone; Tom Rainey, drums; Gregg Belisle-Chi, guitar.

Ordering info: timberne.bandcamp.com



Petros Klampanis *Latent Image*

ENJA
★★★★½

On the lyrical sonic surface, Petros Klampanis' *Latent Image* is an introspective beauty and a mostly piano-trio venture we could expect to hear on the ECM label. But distinctions are in the details, and various cultural colorations filter into the compositions and musical approach. Klampanis is a New Yorker of Greek heritage whose work crossed the alleged Israeli/Arab divide, working with both famed Pakistani singer Aroof Aftab and Israeli saxophonist Oded Tzur, among many other liaisons as a sideman/collaborator.

Here, Klampanis shows his subtle strengths as composer and leader in "piano trio" mode, with a special gift for interweaving bass lines in melodic meshes, all in the good and empathic company of luminous pianist Kristian Randalu and drummer Ziv Ravitz.

The opening track "Over The Calypso Deep" taps into memories of his youth in Greece, blending with mournful references to a tragic 2023 shipwreck in Greece resulting in 300 refugees perishing. The title track alludes to the innate ambiguity of its title image with a fast but light-handed triple-meter pulse, and "When I Know the Answer" has an infectious melodic gleam reminiscent of Pat Metheny tune.

Occasional wisps of electronic textures drone in the background, distracting from the acoustic purity of the trio tradition. A more welcome textual additive comes in the form of Greek trumpeter Andreas Polyzogopoulos' contribution on "Day Breaks," the album's penultimate track. Closing out this generally graceful song set on a particularly graceful note, "Disoriented" makes for a bittersweet parting gesture.

—Josef Woodard

Latent Image: Over The Calypso Deep; Latent Info; Stenahoria; Menerbes; When I Know the Answer; Day Breaks; Disoriented. (45:28)

Personnel: Petros Klampanis, bass; Kristian Randalu, piano; Ziv Ravitz, drums; Andreas Polyzogopoulos, trumpet (6).

Ordering info: petrosklampanis.bandcamp.com



Nels Cline issues his jazziest Blue Note offering yet with *Consentrik Quartet*.

Alternative Takes on Jazz Guitar

There has been no more fervent a champion of guitar, in all of its myriad colors and expressions, over the past 20 years than **Joel Harrison**. Composer, arranger, bandleader and founder of the Alternative Guitar Summit, an annual showcase of inventive players “celebrating the road less taken on guitar,” Harrison also promotes the instrument through his annual Alt Summit Guitar Camp, a summer gathering for players of all levels that features master classes by notable guitarists at a 100-acre wilderness retreat in upstate New York.

With 25 wildly eclectic releases as a leader already to his credit, Harrison explores some brave new territory on his ambitious, two-CD *Guitar Talk, Vol. 2* (AGS; ★★★★★ 95:38), which is divided into classical duos and jazz duos. His nylon string duets alongside fellow acoustic guitarists Fareed Haque and Dan Lippel on strictly through-composed material for the classical portion recall groundbreaking '70s recordings like Egberto Gismonti's *Sol De Melo Dia* (with Ralph Towner) and Bola Sete's *Ocean*. On the jazz disc, Harrison offers lyrical gems in “Song For Carla Bley” (with Wolfgang Muthspiel), “D.C.” (with Mike Stern), “Listen To Luther Sing” (with Adam Levy) and “Point The Way” (with Camila Meza). His edgier, experimental side comes across in electric encounters with Gregg Belise Chi (“Endless Wars”), Nels Cline (“Rang, Bang, Thrum”) and Anthony Pirog (“Etude #1 For Improvising Guitarists”).

Ordering info: joelharrison1.bandcamp.com

The ever-prolific multi-instrumentalist **Elliott Sharp**, an indomitable force on New York's downtown scene over the past 50 years, has released well over 100 albums in

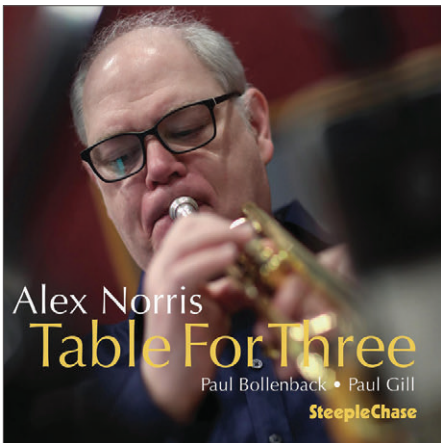
various configurations from solo and duo to string quartets and orchestral projects. On *Hudson River Compositions 1973–74* (zOaR; ★★★½ 52:08), he revives some compositional ideas that lingered since his days living in Germantown, New York, on the Hudson and were documented back then as graphic images and later superimposed on manuscript paper. Recorded in 2024 with a nonet featuring pianist and longtime collaborator Anthony Coleman, trumpeter Nate Wooley and Sharp alternating between reeds and stringed instruments, these pieces travel from sparse interactions like “Fireflies” to more dense abstractions like “Unison” (with Sharp on guitar going toe to toe with violinist Sara Salamon in a hellacious encounter) and “Play The Opposite.” “Flocking” alludes to Third Stream while “Max Density” is not recommended to the faint of heart. Sharp's unique guitar prowess is unleashed on the aptly named “Overtone Frenzy.” He takes more of a grindcore approach in his caustic duet encounter with drummer Bobby Previte on *Poppo—Eternal Performance* (zOaR; ★★★ 36:58), documenting a 1985 live performance where they accompanied a butoh dance company in a vacant lot outside of the underground East Village club 8BC.

Ordering info: joelharrison1.bandcamp.com

The jazziest of his recordings since coming to the iconic label in 2016, guitarist **Nels Cline's** *Consentrik Quartet* (Blue Note; ★★★½ 67:44) finds him in a loose, playful and often swinging mode in the company of tenor saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, bassist Chris Nightcap and drummer Tom Rainey. While the rubato opener “The Returning An-

gel” sets an ominous, darkly atmospheric tone, things get lively from there on “The 23.” Built on a muscular guitar ostinato in combination with Lightcap's hypnotic bass line and Rainey's polyrhythmic groove, this animated number is buoyed by some powerful tenor playing from Laubrock. Cline's potent guitar solo here, as well as on the bubbling “Surplus,” is edgy, unapologetically electric and eminently swinging, à la early John McLaughlin on *Extrapolation*. The suite-like “Satomi” starts as a giddy romp through an intricate alt-rock head before giving way to some freewheeling abandon, topped by conversational exchanges between Laubrock's soprano sax and Cline's guitar. Midway through this complex 10-minute number, it settles into a peaceful bit of introspection, with Lightcap's bowed bass and Laubrock's soprano sax blending in long tones over the leader's gentle staccato chording. “Slipping Into Something” does the same about-face, but in reverse — from peaceful introspective to swaggering, groove-oriented, blues-tinged throwdown replete with rowdy call-and-response between Cline's guitar and Laubrock's robust tenor. The frantic swinger “The Bag” finds the husband-wife team of Rainey and Laubrock engaging in a fierce tenor-drums breakdown mid-song while Cline's backwards guitar effects add a touch of avant garde to the jam. A more delicate side is revealed on conversational rubato numbers like “Allende,” the sparsely introspective “Inner Wall” and the melancholy “Time Of No Sirens,” the latter underscored by Rainey's sensitive brushwork. And the open-ended “Down Close” is a reverent nod to '60s free-jazz. **DB**

Ordering info: bluenote.com



Alex Norris Table For Three

STEEPLECHASE

★★★½

Powerhouse trumpeter Alex Norris takes an intimate trio sidebar here with a pair of Pauls: guitarist Bollenback and bassist Gill. It's a "cool jazz" affair that maintains interest with clever instrumental combinations. Norris executes architecturally perfect solos and Bollenback's blues-forward twang provides contrast. Gill, supple and nimble, is a rock. For some, *Table For Three* may be too white-linen, but there's no gainsaying its emotional honesty.

Norris leads over traditional guitar-and-

bass rhythm section about half the time. The tasty opener, "Tight Grip," rides over deliciously dissonant chords; the trio creates a warm glow on "The Lamp Is Low," taken at a good clip for a ballad, with Bollenback interjecting smart commentary. The more angsty "Struggle Without Respite," a crisp waltz, features more vigorous dovetailing, with Bollenback taking sharp turns and sprinkling notes à la Tal Farlow. The three trade fours on Norris' swinging "Pat's Groove" and he cup-mutes his horn on "Just Wait Til Next Year," a jaunty ditty over "I Got Rhythm" changes.

Elsewhere, the trio employs alternate tactics. The title track nudges free-jazz. A Harmon-muted Norris duets with Bollenback on "A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square" and conscripts Gill for another duo on Horace Silver's "Strollin'." Trumpet and guitar kick off Norris' "Empty Subway Car Blues." A loping threesome starts "Around Here Somewhere" (a twist on "Out of Nowhere") and creates a dense ensemble feel on "Waiting For BL."

All in all, a handsome display of trio ingenuity and panache. —Paul de Barros

Table For Three: Tight Grip; Around Here Somewhere; The Lamp Is Low; A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square; Table For Three; Strollin'; Struggle Without Respite; Empty Subway Car Blues; Waiting For BL; Pat's Groove; Just Wait Till Next Year. (67:12)

Personnel: Alex Norris, trumpet, flugelhorn; Paul Bollenback, guitar; Paul Gill, bass.

Ordering info: arkivmusic.com

Dennis Mitcheltree/ Johannes Wallman

Holding Space

SHIFTING PARADIGM

★★★½

Dennis Mitcheltree and Johannes Wallman first recorded together in 1997, on Mitcheltree's album *Transformation*. They've played together on two other albums by the saxophonist, and on Wallman's 2017 release *Love Wins*, and have toured the U.S. and Germany. This is their first duo album, though, and it shines a warm, gentle light on their long musical partnership.

Nine of the 18 compositions are Wallman's, and seven Mitcheltree's; two short, untitled duo improvisations complete the program. Many of the pieces have simple titles that indicate or at least hint at their form: "Via Valse," "Blues For Mark," "Trio Adagio," "Sephardic Blues." And, indeed, this is music with firm structure, not free-jazz. Even the duo improvisations are bluesy dialogues, and a piece like "Soul Occupant" tells you what it's going to sound like long before you hear it. The tracks are also mostly short and to the point; the exception is "Trio Adagio," which runs almost 10 minutes at the album's exact midpoint, but a guest — trumpeter Russ Johnson — is present for that one, and "Via Valse" and "Digging A Shallow Grave For My Enemy," too. The two



horns have an intriguing relationship, conversing in hushed tones as the pianist lays down simple chords that serve as both road and guardrail.

The music here is so friendly and low-stakes, in fact, that it would be easy to think you were listening to a rehearsal, two buddies limbering up on basic forms before getting down to serious business. —Phil Freeman

Holding Space: Annus Mirabilis; Via Valse; Willis; Dalia Eats A Strawberry; Sasayaki; Liberty Hop; Blues For Mark; Duo Improvisation 1; Later That Year; Trio Adagio; Piano Improvisation; Soul Occupant; Holding Space; Sephardic Blues; Duo Improvisation 2; Pretty Good Life; Saxophone Improvisation; Digging A Shallow Grave For My Enemy. (71:55)

Personnel: Dennis Mitcheltree, tenor saxophone; Johannes Wallman, piano; Russ Johnson, trumpet.

Ordering info: shiftingparadigmrecords.com

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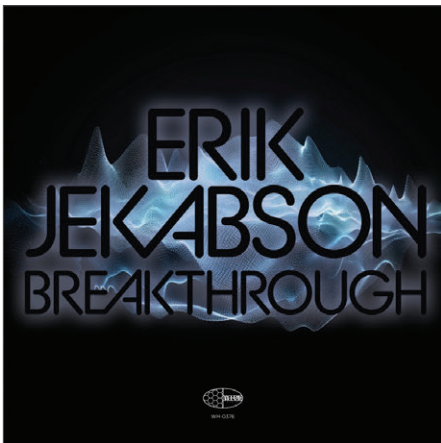
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Erik Jekabson *Breakthrough*

WIDE HIVE

★★★½

Trumpeter and flugelhornist Erik Jekabson, who is based in the San Francisco Bay Area, has been prolific during the past 20 years in a variety of contexts. *Breakthrough* is his first time composing and arranging for orchestra with strings. Jekabson is the main soloist in an ensemble that also includes a five-piece jazz rhythm section, vibraphonist Dillon Vado, a string quartet, four woodwinds and three other brasses. They perform 13 Jekabson originals, including two multipart extended works.

Nicole McCabe *A Song To Sing*

COLORFIELD

★★★

Since the start of the decade, Los Angeles reedist Nicole McCabe has demonstrated a voracious curiosity, rapidly expanding her sound world and aesthetic interests on a series of recordings that leap from strength to strength. Her alto saxophone playing reveals kaleidoscopic depth, toggling between or braiding adroit bebop rhythm, the soulfulness of R&B and the skittery energy of '80s-steeped electropop. Her previous albums have tended to compartmentalize these different tactics; this new effort seamlessly brings those multifarious interests together.

In addition to her fluid alto saxophone work, McCabe reveals impressive heights as a producer, arranger, and multi-instrumentalist. While there are some valuable contributions from pianist Paul Cornish, bassist Logan Kane — her partner in Dolphin Hyperspace — and veteran drummer Justin Brown, by and large she creates the sounds on *A Song to Sing* herself. McCabe produces and plays gauzy woodwind arrangements marked by contrapuntal figures that she layers atop intricate electronic beats, synth colors, and piano scaffolding. Her sounds fits neatly alongside broad-minded L.A. colleagues like

Most exciting are the numbers in which the trumpeter engages in stirring interplay with guitarist Jeffrey Burr, particularly during the inventive arrangements of “Speedway Meadow” and “Washington As A Surveyor.” The three-part “Into The Jungle” evolves from dramatic to picturesque while having some of the musicians emulating sounds one might hear in the jungle. Also of strong interest are the virtuoso and adventurous playing by the strings behind the trumpeter on “Sun On The Keys.” the two-part medium-tempo ballad “Jane Wants To Tell You Something,” a feature for vibist Vado (“A Centered Vibe”), and the playing of violinist Mads Tolling on “Above The Clouds,” which, with the leader’s passionate trumpet, leads to a memorable climax.

Inspired by both classical music and modern jazz, Jekabson’s writing on *Breakthrough* explore many moods, have a strong forward momentum, are often cinematic and effectively use a variety of tone colors. —Scott Yanow

Breakthrough: Jane Wants To Tell You Something (Pt. 1); Jane Wants To Tell You Something (Pt. 2); The Whisperer; A Centered Vibe; Speedway Meadow; Sun On The Keys; Above The Clouds; El Don; Washington As A Surveyor; Into The Jungle (Pt. 1); Into The Jungle (Pt. 2); Into The Jungle (Pt. 3); Sunset On The Keys. (69:17)

Personnel: Erik Jekabson, trumpet, flugelhorn; Dan Zelman, piano; Jeffrey Burr, Max Brody, guitar; Dan Feiszli, bass; Jason Lewis, drums; Stan Muncy, percussion; Dillon Vado, vibes; Mads Tolling, Anthony Blea, violin; Charith Premawardhana, viola; Ben Davis, cello; Mary Fetting, flute, alto flute; Dana Bauer, oboe, English horn; Matt Renzi, clarinet, alto, tenor, oboe; Jamael Smith, bassoon; Jeff Cressman, trombone; Jonathan Ring, French horn; Jonathan Seiberlich, tuba; Becca Burrington, Alexis Lane Jensen, vocals (5).

Ordering info: widehive.com



reedists Josh Johnson and Sam Gendel and bassist Anna Butterss, eliding stylistic divides with a holistic aesthetic. A ballad like “Change In Scenery” spikes silky seduction with rumbling, splattery beats, while “Inner Critic,” a duet with Brown, evokes the spirit of John Coltrane and Rashied Ali in miniature and as heard through a wind tunnel. —Peter Margasak

A Song To Sing: Running Backwards; Change In Scenery; San Benito; Prism Prison; Mystic Mountain; Inner Critic; Balloon Race; A Song To Sing; Driving Alone at Night; Passages; Foraging For Truth. (37:12)

Personnel: Nicole McCabe, woodwinds, synthesizer, piano, percussion, voice; Paul Cornish, piano (2, 8, 11); Logan Kane, double bass (1, 2, 5, 11); Justin Brown, drums (6, 7, 9).

Ordering info: colorfieldrecords.com



Charles Owens Trio *The Music Tells Us*

LA RESERVE

★★★½

This very long album by tenor saxophone master Charles Owens, bassist Cameron Ralston and drummer Kofi Shepsu presents originals, updates of legacy jazz and daring re-castings of more pop-oriented material. While some tunes could have used a trim, the organic texture of this digital-only offering makes *The Music Tells Us* unusually gratifying.

Owens launches his 10th album as a leader with an assertive “Body And Soul” and closes with “A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing,” a Billy Strayhorn classic featuring Owens’ brooding piano. Other Great American Songbook mainstays this trio re-energizes include “Darn That Dream,” “Nature Boy” and “My Ideal,” a tune of saxophone flurries, drum attacks and bass rumbles. Owens’ aggressive piano and saxophone on “My Ideal” underline his approach: mainstream, yet full of unexpected melodic turns. That attitude also informs “Love Is A Song Anyone Can Sing,” a jaunty original in which Owens negotiates steep chromatics on piano.

Two pop tunes from different eras attest to Owens’ catholic tastes: the 1948 Nat “King” Cole hit “Nature Boy” and “Tomorrow Never Knows,” a searing cut from the Beatles’ 1966 album *Revolver*. On “Nature Boy,” Shepsu lays back as Owens and Ralston intertwine, crafting an eerily sensual interpretation; Owens, meanwhile, worries the tune into new shapes. On the loopy “Tomorrow Never Knows,” Owens deploys treated piano and screaming saxophone to evoke John Lennon’s cutting vocals, Shepsu’s drumming blends the robotic and the explosive, and Ralston stabilizes a composition that will always be startling. —Carlo Wolff

The Music Tells Us: Body And Soul; Nobody Else But Me; The Joy Of Letting Go; Afro-Centric; Darn That Dream; Easy Living (for Vijay); FJD; Love Is A Song Anyone Can Sing; Nature Boy; Bass Blues; Old Folks; My Ideal; Tomorrow Never Knows; A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing. (88:49)

Personnel: Charles Owens, tenor saxophone, keyboards; Cameron Ralston, bass; Kofi Shepsu, drums.

Ordering info: charlesowens.bandcamp.com



Richard Baratta *Looking Back*

SAVANT
★★★★

Back in the mid-1960s, when the sales of rock recordings began to explode, record labels pressured jazz artists record the current pop hits. Executives at Columbia Records even tried to push Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis in that direction (both successfully resisted). Does anyone remember Joe Pass' *Stones Jazz* from 1966?

Nowadays, when jazz musicians record popular numbers from the 1960s and '70s, chances are that they grew up hearing the hits.

Sun & Rain *Waterfall*

OUT OF YOUR HEAD
★★★★½

Jazz has always been an artistically promiscuous endeavor. The immediate delight of discovering a new acquaintance's musical proclivities can be the driver behind many spontaneous moments in this music. To move beyond that initial spark to discover a more profound level of trust and meaning is a process that can take months or even years. Such is the case with alto saxophonist Nathaniel Morgan, tenor saxophonist Travis Laplante, guitarist Andrew Smiley and drummer Jason Nazary, who first convened in 2014 to begin a devout but arduous task of finding their collective path forward. Six years after their first meeting, this album is the fruit of their efforts, an homage to the power of the Earth through sonic metaphors for the natural world and its elements.

The music they created is a bracing study of extreme contrasts; whisper-like overtones and chime-like jangles inexorably giving way to organized chaos. The band certainly plays with one mind, moving in the same direction but unbridled like a hurricane-force gale or, as the album's title suggests, a torrent of energy rushing over the edge into the abyss. The pieces are epi-

They are also better skilled at turning the relatively simple melodies and chord changes into more sophisticated jazz.

Drummer Richard Baratta gathered together an all-star group and used pianist Bill O'Connell's arrangements on *Looking Back*, a collection of songs associated with James Brown, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan, the Beatles and Led Zeppelin among others. While retaining the melodies, O'Connell reharmonized the songs and gave prominent roles to Baratta (who has many drum breaks) and percussionist Paul Rossman, Latinizing most of the performances. The solos of altoist Vincent Herring, guitarist Paul Bollenback and O'Connell (who often recalls McCoy Tyner) put these versions on a much higher level than the unimaginative attempts to make jazz more commercial 60 years ago.

While the arrangements and the concise solos are first-rate, it's doubtful that taking James Brown's "I Feel Good" as an instrumental, interpreting "Purple Haze" as a relative of "Afro Blue" or playing the first half of "Hey Jude" as a moody ballad will make anyone forget the originals, but these versions are fun on their own.

—Scott Yanow

Looking Back: I Feel Good; Purple Haze; Blowin' In The Wind; Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds; Feeling Good; California Dreamin'; Whole Lotta Love; Hey Jude; Respect; Get What You Want. (54:32)

Personnel: Richard Baratta, drums; Vincent Herring, alto saxophone, flute; Bill O'Connell, piano; Paul Bollenback, guitar; Michael Goetz, bass; Paul Rossman, percussion; Carroll Scott, vocals (5, 8).

Ordering info: jazzdepot.com



sodic, contrasting sections of minimalist repetitive figures with varied intensity, more conventional measures of harmony and rhythm, and the extended frenzy of what they describe as "patented freak-out improvisations."

But the pandemonium is far from random: There is a tightly woven narrative throughout the album that reflects the group's shared vision, intentionality of purpose and heart.

—Gary Fukushima

Waterfall: Waterfall I; Waterfall II; Waterfall III; Waterfall IV; Waterfall V. (43:49)

Personnel: Nathaniel Morgan, alto saxophone; Travis Laplante, tenor saxophone; Andrew Smiley, guitar; Jason Nazary, drums.

Ordering info: outofyourheadrecords.com



The John Santos Sextet & Friends *Horizontes*

MACHETE
★★★★

What would a soundtrack of this very moment sound like? For The John Santos Sextet & Friends, the sound is one that highlights resistance, resilience and heritage. Though *Horizontes* is explicitly "dedicated to, and inspired by all the world's children," it is a project chock full of the sort of choruses that resonate in our minds when we're looking for ancestral inspiration amidst dark times.

This album's primarily in the bolero/Latin-jazz bag ("Tonada Azul y Verde" feels like it belongs to a juicy Nuyorican scene from the original presentation of *West Side Story*) but the collection is nothing less than cosmopolitan in its approach. "Time's Up" plays with polyrhythmic changes in a strictly postmodern mode, while Santos' "Yes, Yes" is structured more traditionally, as a bubbly Cuban changüí. Meanwhile, "Sangre Africana" takes on luscious African hues and Santos' "Calzada Mexico-Cuba" was inspired by "one of the most emblematic avenues in Mexico City," according to Santos' album notes.

The track notably features a muted trumpet solo by the late Jerry Gonzalez. Tying the Afro and Latin traditions quite succinctly is "Ocha Olufandei," which draws deeply from the Yoruba spiritual practice so prevalent both in Nigeria and Cuba.

Horizontes is an expression of unity and brotherhood, a message of connection that hits all the right notes in these divided times.

—Ayana Contreras

Horizontes: Un Levantamiento; Mañengue; Calzada Mexico-Tacuba; Tonada Azul y Verde; Time's Up; Yes Yes; Sí Pues; Ocha Olufandei; Sangre Africana. (49:10)

Personnel: John Santos, percussion; David Flores, drums, timbale; Saul Sierra, baby bass (3, 5), electric bass (2, 4, 6, 7), acoustic bass (8); Marco Diaz, piano, trumpet (3–5, 7); Dr. John Calloway, flute; Melecio Magdaluyo, tenor saxophone; Jerry Gonzalez, trumpet (3); Einar Leliebre Núñez, coro (2, 3, 7), bongó del monte (2); Christelle Durandy (2, 3, 7, 8), Juan Luis Pérez (2, 3, 7, 8), coro; Charlie Gurke, baritone (2–4, 7) and alto saxophone (6, 8); Melecio Magdaluyo, tenor saxophone (5); Marcel Joao Santos, piano, keyboards, synth bass (7); Anthony Blea, violins (7); Josh Jones (7), Eric Harland (8), drums; Jerry Medina (2), Elena Pinderhughes (8), vocals.

Ordering info: johnsantosofficial.com

ECM to the World

There's something about ECM records. No matter who the artist is, they never seem to be in a hurry. Don't mistake that for a lack of intensity: It's there. But the music that producer Manfred Eicher sends out into the world allows artists a wide berth to experiment and find more interesting roads home. These five recent ECM selections are no exception.

Mathias Eick's *Lullaby* (ECM; ★★★★★ 46:31) offers a perfect example. Eick comes to us as a trumpeter of beautiful tone that simply shimmers throughout this album. The title tune may be a lullaby, but it's putting no one to sleep. With the subtle twists and turns of his playing, Eick creates a dreamlike state with the help of Ole Morten Vågan, a beautifully thoughtful bassist; Kristjan Randalu, a pianist who finds so much more by doing less; and silky brushwork by Hans Hulbækmo on drums. It's a lovely launchpoint for this really fine album. While Randalu finds space on "Lullaby," his solo on "My Love" chimes in perfectly, setting the stage for more of Eick's beautiful trumpet work.

Eick proves to be a fantastic leader, but he's also an excellent sideman, as he demonstrates on pianist **Benjamin Lackner's *Spindrift* (ECM; ★★★★★ 46:25)**. Lackner may be a gifted musician, but he's an even better talent scout, bringing in Eick, tenor saxophonist Mark Turner, bassist Linda May Han Oh and Matthieu Chazarenc on drums. This is a killer band playing Lackner's compositions with grace and exceptionally lovely pace. The title tune kicks off the recording with Turner's brooding tone creating a noir-ish mood before Lackner's solo flight lifts the tune with clusters of runs; Lackner hands the solo back to Turner, who matches the pianist's intensity. "Mosquito Flats" introduces Eick to the proceedings. It's a joy to hear this tenor/trumpet combo, and, again, Lackner demonstrates control and grace on the piano.

It's very difficult to compare the star-power of *Spindrift* to the fine ensemble interplay of the **Julia Hülsmann Quartet on *Under The Surface* (ECM; ★★★★★ 41:07)**. What's nice about Hülsmann's art is that she makes a statement and moves on, as she does on the sweet ballad "May Song," which clocks in under three minutes and leaves you wanting more, like a great song should. With Uli Kempendorff on tenor saxophone, Marc Muellbauer on bass and Heinrich Köbberling on drums, the quartet creates flowing, atmospheric art that floats on clouds. The group is joined on five of the 10 tunes in the set by Hildegunn Øiseth on trumpet and goat horn, which brings an ancient, howling effect, especially on the tune "Bubbles."

For something a bit more outside the



Mathias Eick, a trumpeter of serious tone and substance.

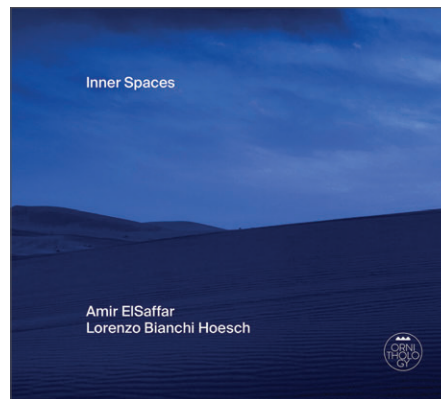
box, there's ***Preludes And Songs* (ECM; ★★★★★ 50:04)** by pianist **François Couturier** and violinist **Dominique Pifarély**. Leaning more toward a contemporary classical vein, the music, nonetheless, is intriguing. Pifarély is a massively talented, emotive violinist, and Couturier has a pleasant touch on piano. They perform a really interesting arrangement of "A Nightingale Sang In Berkeley Square" with a slightly different title. And the closing number, "I Loves You Porgy," comes in sweet and just a little off-kilter. It's a nice way to finish this thoughtful recording.

Finally, **Yuval Cohen**, the soprano saxophone playing older brother of clarinetist Anat Cohen, steps out of the shadows for his debut on ECM. Titled ***Winter Poems* (ECM; ★★★★★ 44:27)**, the music matches the title with plenty of space, tension-building and blue notes. It's another quartet recording wherein Cohen is joined by long-time friends Tom Oren on piano, Alon Near on bass and Alon Benjamini on drums. The rhythm section creates a generous bed for Cohen to drift over. It's one part jazz, for sure, but Cohen's classical training is absolutely at play throughout with a wonderful clarity of tone. The recording features eight originals composed by Cohen; a personal favorite is "A Song For Lo Am," a melt-your-heart airy ballad packed with grace. And, just for fun, there's Cohen's "For Charlie," not penned for Mr. Parker, but rather a tip of the hat to Charlie Chaplin. On it, he takes a spin on the melodica that he hauled with him for the occasion. It's all nostalgia and smiles on this one.

COLIN EICK

DB

Ordering info: ecmrecords.com



Amir ElSaffar/Lorenzo Bianchi Hoesch *Inner Spaces*

KURONEKO

★★★★★

"Meditative jazz" sounds like the title of a faceless compilation offered by some company trafficking in lifestyle music, but it's an apt descriptor for a growing adjacency in the genre. *Inner Spaces*, the new recording by trumpeter/multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Amir ElSaffar and electronics master Lorenzo Bianchi Hoesch, fits this category. Although it mines a different Asian tradition than *Love In Exile*, the stunning 2023 collaboration between Arooj Aftab, Shazad Ismaili and Vijay Iyer, it shares an elegant and inviting sense of introspection.

Cross-cultural experimentation is at the core of ElSaffar's career. Born in Illinois to an Iraqi father, he's spent years developing a sumptuous sound that blends jazz and Iraqi maqam music. Lorenzo Bianchi Hoesch is a composer and sound artist; his work has been presented by several major European institutions, and he has done impressive collaborations with Malian kora master Ballake Sissoko.

Here, their music is strikingly intimate. The opening "River" starts out so softly that it seeps into your sonic awareness, gently creating a sense of wide-open spaces. ElSaffar's crisp trumpet tones lead "River," underpinned tenderly by bell-like percussion before building toward a driving, almost cinematic finish. The pensive vibe returns on "Pas de Deux," which if we're lucky some modern choreographer will adapt the shimmering, cascading sounds into the soundtrack for contemporary movement. So would "Tahlia," which features virtuosic, flamboyant trumpet and rare, fervent percussion. For the most part, this isn't music for the gym (except maybe the yoga room), but it would make for a compelling Tiny Desk Concert.

—Martin Johnson

Inner Spaces: River; Spirits; Pas de Deux; Tahlia; Spirits Intro; Spirits (radio edit). (46:13)

Personnel: Amir El Saffar, trumpet, santur, vocals; Lorenzo Bianchi Hoesch, electronics.

Ordering info: lorenzobianchihoesch.com



Ches Smith *Clone Row*

OTHERLY LOVE

★★★★½

“Abrade With Me” opens drummer and vibraphonist Ches Smith’s newest small group effort with some harsh, choppy electric guitar chords that could have been lifted off of a record by Afro-improv-punks The Ex. Ten seconds in, the rest of the ensemble falls into place; a cleaner-toned guitar strums while the rhythm stutters like some drum ‘n’ bass CD skipping as someone wobbles the player during playback. Inside of 30 seconds, the music has delivered a statement of intent and an inventory of resources. *Clone Row* is all about the interaction between contrasting guitar tones and irregular, electronically inspired rhythms within a space bounded by the quartet’s four tightly drawn corners.

Smith’s latest project might involve a smaller ensemble than his other recent projects, *Laugh Ash* and *We All Break*, but its music is just as complex and perhaps more stylistically restless. The way guitars and vibraphone execute the title track’s broad intervals and interlocking parts recalls Captain Beefheart’s *Magic Band*, but Smith’s gated snare and syndrum beats push the music into progrock; the doubled guitar and mallet lines of “Heart Breakthrough” lean towards fusion, but Mary Halvorson’s dissenting guitar part evokes the junkyard electronics of the Congolese dance band *Konono No. 1*.

Smith’s compositions display Halvorson and Liberty Ellman’s prodigious technical gifts and profoundly differing sounds, as well as his and bassist Nick Dunston’s abilities to double on complementary instruments. However, there are moments that make one wish that *Clone Row* was looser. —Bill Meyer

Clone Row: Abrade With Me; Clone Row; Heart Breakthrough; Play Bell (For Nick); Ready Beat; Sustained Nightmare; Town Down. (39:38)

Personnel: Ches Smith, drums, drum machines, vibraphone; Mary Halvorson, Liberty Ellman, guitar; Nick Dunston, acoustic bass, bass synthesizer.

Ordering info: otherlyloverecords.bandcamp.com



Burnt Sugar The Arkestra Chamber *If You Can't Dazzle Them With Your Brilliance, Then Baffle Them With Your Blisluth Pt. 2*

INDEPENDENT RELEASE

★★★★

A collective project initiated by the late writer and musician Gregory “Ironman” Tate and guitarist Vernon Reid, inspired by titans like George Clinton, Sun Ra, Fela Kuti and the late Butch Morris, Burnt Sugar The Arkestra Chamber has thrived for 20 years as a free-groove party band that takes funky rhythms, soulful solos, improvised compositions and a harmolodic approach to the whole affair as its birthright.

As well it should. *IYCDTWYB, TBTWYB Pt. 2* shouts back to a 20-year-old founding document, *Pt. 1*, with live tracks and studio sessions from 2024. Though the players have changed over the years, Burnt Sugar has always been a loose amalgam, characterized by a throbbing essence and forward bent. It retains that profile here.

Highlights include Shelley Nicole’s bluesy singing and offhand talking, sax solos by Anthony Arrington, a turn by trumpeter Flip Barnes, electric guitar from André Lassalle, electronics by Leon Gruenbaum and others.

These emerge from and are mixed into medium-tempo vamps founded on bubble-bass lines and solid backbeats, punctuated by riffing horns, comping keyboards and guitars and background chorales.

The two “Hollering Hoodoo Ghosts” conceptions — employing Butch Morris’ real-time arranging practice — have counterpoint developing with immediacy. “Spiritualizing” is an ambient interlude, fitting for the program, as are the band’s only slightly ironic covers of earworms by Steely Dan (“Black Cow”) and A Taste of Honey (“Boogie Oogie Oogie”). BS nods to its transporting previous release, *Angels Over Oakanda*: tracks like “Frankenstank” compel dancing, sans shame, hesitation or bafflement. So, success! —Howard Mandel

If You Can't Dazzle Them With Your Brilliance, Then Baffle Them With Your Blisluth Pt. 2: Chicken Scratching Dré Shows Saxtone The Way; Hollering Hoodoo Ghosts Conduction #1; Spiritualizing; Black Cow; Detroit Blisluth Blues Conduction; Frankenstank; Back Pain; Some to Love You; Slop Jar Boogie Oogie Oogie Blues; Inna Shella Over Detroit; Hollering Hoodoo Ghosts Conduction #2; Summertime at Paula’s Barn; Shelley & Smoota Converse ... Smoota Has the Last Word.

Personnel: Shelley Nicole, vocals; Bruce Mack, vocals, synthesizer, conduction; Leon Gruenbaum, keyboards, Sarmchilian, talk box; JS Williams, trumpet; Anthony “Saxtone” Arrington, alto saxophone; V. Jeffrey Smith, soprano, tenor and baritone saxophones, electric guitar and vocals; Dave “Smoota” Smith, trombone; André Lassalle, electric guitar; Chris Eddleton, trap drums; Paula Marcus, congas and percussion; Jared Michael Nickerson, electric bubble bass; Vernon Reid, conduction; Lewis “Flip” Barnes, trumpet; Ben Tyree, electric guitar; Marque Gilmore Tha Inna Most, acoustic-electric drums.

Ordering info: burntsugarthearkestrachamber.bandcamp.com

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ANNA YATSEVITCH

already familiar with.”

As Alterman beat his compulsions and brought the sunny bluegrass spirit into his playing, he also copied the style of piano jazz giants like Les McCann, Ramsey Lewis and other players who would soon become dear friends.

Alterman developed a joyful, almost palliative sound. That spirited noise can be heard on his latest release with tenor saxophonist Houston Person, *Brisket For Breakfast*. Joined by his longtime trio mates — drummer Justin Chesarek and bassist Kevin Smith — the new recording is a continuation of a musical dialogue with Person that stretches back to Alterman’s studies at New York University. Trace the throughline on YouTube: There’s a young Alterman, in 2011, with Person performing “Georgia On My Mind” at the pianist’s senior recital. Person would appear later, in 2013, at the Iridium with Chesarek in tow. The tenor saxophonist is also on three tracks from Alterman’s 2012 and 2016 albums.

This long musical relationship led to a deep friendship and a kinship for breaking bread, hence the title of Alterman’s latest recording. And Person and Alterman have had a lot of meals together.

“He definitely makes friends with waiters and waitresses wherever we go, whether that’s Waffle House, Longhorn, Outback or Ruth’s Chris,” Alterman said. “We went to the same Waffle House in Atlanta twice a year in between each visit, and the staff 100% still remembered Houston and were excited to see him.”

An early internship at the Blue Note in New York, which grew into offers to open for headlining artists, helped solidify his bonds with jazz royalty. While most of his peers at NYU were striving to develop their own voices, Alterman found his approach by trying to play like the musicians he idolized.

“So much of my early college was trying to sound like these guys,” Alterman said, adding that this was unusual among the other student musicians. But in those old recordings, Alterman heard friends he knew intimately, and he wanted to imitate that approach. “I really resonated with their sound. It felt really personal.”

Alterman attributes his connection with the past to his love of history, his need to research jazz lineages and track the twists and turns of an artist’s career. When he was first becoming a jazz player, in high school in Atlanta, he indeed thought all of it was history. He got to New York and realized that the artists he listened to on recordings were still making music and he could learn directly from them.

Instead of performing a history lesson for the audience, Alterman simply strove to evoke an emotion. His approach became “this music makes me feel good, I

JOE ALTERMAN PIANISTIC SALVATION

The piano saved Joe Alterman’s life. Dealing with crippling obsessive compulsive disorder as a teenager, Alterman would work to hide his compulsions from his friends at Woodward Academy south of Atlanta, balling up his anxieties the best he could.

After school, he needed a release. That’s when the instrument became his “best friend.”

“I’d come home at the end of the day totally worn out, and I’d run up to the piano and just play — just improvise for hours and hours every day,” said the Atlanta native. “It was really a healing thing for me.”

Those initial sounds, and the feelings in his head, didn’t come from jazz. That came

later. Alterman focused on replicating the feeling he got when attending bluegrass festivals with his dad. He wanted to bring Doc Watson’s hard-driving boogie-woogie sound or the soul of “You Are My Sunshine” to the piano.

“My first ‘in’ to jazz wasn’t really the solos,” he said. “It was really how these jazz musicians interpreted melodies that I was

bet it could make you feel good, too." He added, "So it wasn't really looking back on the past as much as it was connecting with the past and wanting to share that with the present."

Chesarek, his longtime drummer, sees Alterman's openness reflected in how he

somewhere that's not intended to be a venue because of his connections, his network."

Alterman and Chesarek have been performing together for more than a decade. He said the trio has long since evolved into a musical kinship. The musicians all have the same likes, the same depth of knowl-

with. The trio is so rooted in a shared love of the music," Chesarek said. "It feels like home to play with that trio."

That trust means when an artist like Houston Person is added to the mix, they can fully focus on the new voice. *Brisket For Breakfast* is a live recording put together from gigs at the Breman Museum in Atlanta and the Savannah Music Festival. Chesarek said these recordings were full of special moments. They captured the intimacy of the gigs but also the energy from the crowds responding to the fun, vibrant music.

"It really unfolds on the recording like it felt onstage to me," the drummer said.

Alterman keeps this lively feeling in his playing partly by keeping his love of instrumental string music close to his heart. He proudly adds that the first improvisational sound he fell in love with might have been the labyrinthine solos and jam-band aesthetic of the Grateful Dead. It's this music, and this dedication to riding on a riff, to taking a phrase and playing with it, letting it sink into the groove and slowly morph into a new melodic idea that keeps his music happy, approachable and full of joy.

—Jon Ross

'This music makes me feel good, I bet it could make you feel good, too.'

pursues the business of making music. The pianist's willingness to make music happen opens up opportunities that wouldn't normally occur. In the somewhat limiting scene of Atlanta, Alterman doesn't need to play a jazz club or an established music venue.

"He's one of the more resourceful people I've ever met," Chesarek said. "He's also such a big-ideas guy. We'll end up playing

edge, to go along with their deep familiarity as musicians and artists. Alterman just has to start a tune with a certain feel, and Chesarek said he and Smith know what to do; this allows them to be more spontaneous on the bandstand and truly react to the crowd.

"We all speak the same language with the recordings that we've fallen in love

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"They are all part of the same harmonic river," Anne Sajdera says about artists ranging from Ravel, Debussy and Isaac Albeniz to Geri Allen, Sullivan Fortner and Terence Blanchard.

ANNE SAJDERA HARMONIC CONNECTIONS

When Anne Sajdera enrolled at San Francisco Conservatory in the late 1980s, her fellow piano majors were mostly bearing down on the traditional canon, focusing ever more intently on European classical works.

But for Sajdera, who grew up feeling slightly out of sync with her San Diego-area contemporaries, the conservatory proved to be a global gateway, launching her on the multifarious creative path that has defined her journey as a player, arranger and composer. Intersecting with some of the Bay Area's most influential musicians and educators at key moments, she's become a singular artist with a bespoke sound integrating her Czech roots and classical training with her love of the modern jazz continuum, popular Brazilian music and Hindustani raga.

Sajdera's slim but jewel-like discography documents the punctuated expansion of her creative purview, which continued to blossom on her fourth and latest album, 2024's *It's Here*. Like on many of her gigs and previous projects, the music is built on the veteran rhythm section tandem of drummer Deszon Claiborne, a coveted accompanist since his early days with Peter Apfelbaum's world-jazz Hieroglyphics Ensemble, and bassist Gary Brown, who spent more than two decades touring and recording with Brazilian jazz

legends Flora Purim and Airto. "I always call them first," she says. "They understand exactly what I'm trying to express. We all connect in some sort of vibe way. Gary has been on every CD I've recorded, and Deszon was on the last one."

Traces of her previous album also manifest with the presence of two Prague collaborators from 2018's *New Year*, the leading Czech jazz trumpeter Miroslav Hloucal and alto saxophonist Jan Fečo (who contribute most memorably on a Slovak folk song arranged by Hloucal in the spirit of Kenny Garrett). Their long-distance participation is an echo from a pandemic-thwarted album that was initially intended as a follow up to *New Year*, which found Sajdera exploring melodies and cadences that started filling her ears as a child via her Czech-born maternal grandmother. Unable to return to Prague due to the advent of COVID, she focused on crafting quintet arrangements with trumpeter Mike Olmos, a Bay Area mainstay, and alto saxophonist Jesse Levit. Equally arresting are Sajdera's increasingly ambitious string orchestrations,

like on her exquisite ballad "Lovely," which evokes a saudade-like sense of longing and loss with Bill Evans-inspired harmonies. The achievement is all the more impressive as Sajdera produced the album herself.

Her previous albums were produced by or co-produced with Ray Obiedo, and *It's Here*, notwithstanding her creative journey, continues to intersect often with the guitarist, producer and composer whose resume includes an improbably vast array of musicians. From jazz giants and Latin music legends to singer-songwriters and soul belters, his five-decade track record led Tim Jackson, former Monterey Jazz Festival artistic director, to declare that Obiedo "should be in the Bay Area hall of fame."

Obiedo has formed a mutual admiration society with Sajdera, hiring her to write orchestrations for projects while often relying on her technical savvy for Digital Performer support. She recently contributed a chart for an upcoming album by the Ray Obiedo Latin Jazz Project, "a beautiful medium-slow bossa nova arrangement," he said. "I just love what

she did with the strings, and she thought it was really important to have an oboe play a counter line she wrote for my melody. She's a fantastic writer. Her arrangements and tunes are gorgeous, and as a collaborator she's not precious about making changes."

In many circles, Sajdera is inextricably associated with the Bay Area's thriving Brazilian music scene. She spent more a decade performing in leading Bay Area Brazilian ensembles such as drummer Phil Thompson's Rio Thing, drummer Celso Alberti's band and the Tropicalia combo Bat Makumba. Studying at the Jazzschool in Berkeley with Rio-born pianist/composer Marcos Silva, who's inculcated several generations of players into the nooks and crannies of Brazilian jazz, "shaped how I learned to arrange in a jazz context," she says. "Marcos has such knowledge of a huge variety of Brazilian rhythms. The American approach can focus so much on bossa nova, which is beautiful of course, and can turn your mind around about how rhythm can interface with harmony in unexpected ways."

Released on her own Bijuri label, Sajdera's 2012 debut album, *Azul*, reflected her deep engagement with contemporary Brazilian jazz, alternating between her lyrical originals with tunes by Ivan Lins, Egberto Gismonte and Chico Pinheiro. Joined by an excellent cast of Bay Area players and special guest percussionists Airtio and Michael Spiro, she earned national attention with "a jazz samba album that shows the creative breadth and beauty of a San Francisco charmer," wrote Marc Myers on his JazzWax blog.

In many ways her trajectory is still shaped by her formative experience at San Francisco Conservatory. While she'd been interested in jazz as a listener, Sajdera spent her mid-20s intensely preparing for the audition. Once enrolled, she continued her laser-like focus until a brief interlude studying with pianist Mark Levine showed her a route toward her nascent interest in McCoy Tyner and Herbie Hancock.

Focusing on 20th century repertoire, Sajdera performed regularly with the Conservatory Orchestra, which provided some rarified opportunities, like playing the score for *Nixon In China* under the baton of John Adams, the opera's composer. At the same time, she was starting to make connections between iconic recordings by Hancock and Wayne Shorter with her conservatory studies. She continues to find harmonic resonances between the artists in regular rotation on her playlist, like Ravel, Debussy, Isaac Albeniz, Geri Allen's *Grand River Crossings*, Sullivan Fortner's *Solo Game* and Terence Blanchard's *Jazz In Film*.

"I'm currently learning the first folio of Albeniz's *Iberia Suite*, and I hear a harmonic connection between all of these artists," she says. "They are all part of the same harmonic river, and my love of jazz is the real outgrowth from that extended harmony, using the same elements but from a different angle. To have all these elements in your kaleidoscope of sound, it's a spiritual feeling, a matter of completeness." —Andrew Gilbert

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The Chicago area native has released two volumes of solo piano improvisations, with a third on the way. They reflect a decade-long, single-minded obsession with the instrument.

THE OTHERWORLDLY PATH OF PIANIST PAT LEARY

If you were lucky enough to grab a copy of pianist Pat Leary's solo debut, *Vol. 1*, from its 50-unit, limited vinyl run, you'd find a surprise inside: a handwritten note on card stock, and a doodle of bug-eyed, needle-fingered alien waving at the reader.

"That's Ertkit," Leary said during a visit to his apartment on Chicago's West Side. It's his alter ego from years ago, when he used to DJ at a now-defunct bar; he still uses the alien's name for his Instagram handle.

Leary's path to the piano is indeed a bit extraterrestrial, and so is Leary himself. The third of four children in the southwest Chicago suburbs, Leary, 35, has a dreamy, drifting quality. He always adored music, amassing an iTunes library with tracks in the tens of thousands before college. But beyond slinging a mean guitar in high school and college bands, music didn't seem to be part of his future. Piano certainly wasn't. Like so many kids, Leary took piano lessons at 6, only to abandon them a few short years later. He would have rather been skateboarding.

"My mom gave me the option to quit, and I did. I was too cool for school," he says, his speaking voice still slack with a skater's vocal fry.

The only other piano lessons Leary would take would be with Rodney George Peacock, a saxophonist who had once played with Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Then a student at the

University of Illinois, Leary met Peacock while heading home from a college party in Urbana. ("He was hip, man. He wore an ank around his neck and was writing an opera for the college," Leary remembers.) Peacock gave him two or three lessons and invited him to listening sessions at his house.

A physics major, Leary intended to leave U of I with a well-paid engineering job. Instead, he burned out. He moved back in with his parents, toyed with going to med school, got a job delivering pizzas. Most of all, he spent hours — as in, eight hours or more a day — playing his family's old upright.

"I'd wake up and play piano 9 to 5 before my shift. My mom thought I was insane," Leary says. "She thought I'd do this for a little bit, then get a professional job. But I didn't want that."

He liked the pizza delivery job in the first place because he could score study in his copious downtime. Shortly after returning to piano, Leary had challenged himself to learn all 15 of Bach's dexterous Inventions. He went from there to transcribing solos.

"I was listening to a lot of music that I found exceptionally beautiful — a lot of Bill Evans Trio, Krystian Zimerman playing Chopin nocturnes and ballades, Glenn Gould. ... It was blowing my mind," he says. "I thought, 'Man, if I can grab like 10% of this beauty, that's enough for me.'"

2020 was going to be the year that Leary really put himself out there as a performer. Instead, we all know what happened next. He burned out again, this time on music.

"Between March 2020 and March 2021, I basically didn't touch the piano," he says. "Maybe once a month, I would sit down and just play the blues for an hour, just to exorcise those demons."

Once the world slowly started to reopen, Leary's mental health healed along with it. He tentatively returned to the keys. To keep his fingers and mind fresh, he challenged himself to perform a solo piano improvisation a day. Some, he says — with his usual, easy-going understatement — "sounded pretty good." So, he decided to record them.

Those solo excursions became 2023's *Vol. 1*, Leary's solo debut. *Vol. 2*, based on the same conceit — each track is not just titled but dated — is in the can and looking for a label. Between the volumes is *Live At Midnight Tea*, a solo set recorded in Chicago's historic Fine Arts Building.

In all, Leary's sound reflects the melting pot of influences he absorbed when returning to the keyboard. The solo chops and long-form command of Keith Jarrett. The heart-on-sleeve lyricism of Bill Evans and Chopin. The impressionism of Ravel and Debussy. Counterpoint and clarity of touch from Bach.

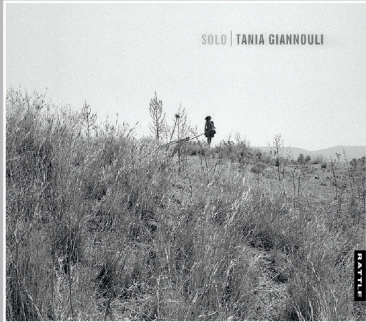
These days, Leary performs between 100 and 150 gigs a year, or between two and three a week. He's a member of several working groups — he's recorded a trio album with drummer Alex Santilli and bassist Jeff Wheaton, and he plays frequently with a quartet at Lemon, a new bar/performance space in Chicago's West Town neighborhood. He's got another duo recording planned for later this year with guitarist Tom Kelleher. Though his discography to date would imply otherwise, Leary only sparingly performs solo sets, mostly for private bookings and other jobbing gigs. He hopes to do more of it going forward.

"It's in my blood for whatever reason. I don't know why. Some people are like, 'Isn't it really hard?' To me, it's the opposite. It'd be harder to play something like Bach — everyone hears when you [mess] up. But [when you improvise solo], you can mess it as much as you want. You just gotta make it sound nice."

Leary has to end the interview so he can pack up his gear. He is, in fact, off to one of those 150-odd gigs, so he walks this interviewer out. Waving goodbye from the front gate, Leary is silhouetted in the darkness. Ertkit, that alien? I see the resemblance.

—Hannah Edgar

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STEVE O'BRIEN

Richardson has written a series of exercises based on gestures he uses while improvising.

Dexterity Studies for Trumpet

While there is no shortage of method books containing patterns for jazz improvisation, I have not found many resources aimed at helping brass players to improve their technical dexterity and consistency in the context of improvisation.

As such, I have published an extensive series of exercises based on the gestures I use while improvising, expanded to cover the typical range of the trumpet (from written F#3 to C6 and above) and structured to address both diatonic and chromatic contexts.

This article will serve as a preview to my upcoming book, *Dexterity Studies for Trumpet*, which will be available via qPress Music Publishing. Some exercises are rather basic in concept, though they're not necessarily easy to execute.

Our first example is a simple diatonic 7th chord arpeggio pattern, which can present great challenges in terms of finger dexterity in the bottom range of the instrument and accuracy with partials above the staff. For trumpet players, these should either start on written F#3 or G3, regardless of the key. To illustrate this idea, Examples 1–2 show the exercise in the keys of F# and G.

These exercises — and all of the others I will present here — should be practiced very slowly until the patterns can be played with consistent and fluid execution. Once this is the case, the metronome will become your most important tool. First, establish a metronome marking at which you can play with accuracy and consistency. Next, aim to increase the tempo by a click or two with each practice session, isolating individual beats as needed, and never sacrificing the quality of

your playing for the sake of speed.

I've added articulations to this exercise, reflecting the pattern I use most frequently when playing uptempo lines. However, each exercise can be worked on with a variety of articulation patterns, including those that might reflect a more "classical" style of performance.

While diatonic 7th arpeggios should probably be practiced by every musician, other patterns are more particular to my personal language as an improviser (derived, like most improvisers, from the artists I have transcribed over the years, and often modified slightly).

For example, try the four-note patterns using 7ths and 4ths, which I discovered that I use very frequently while improvising (see Examples 3–4).

Practicing the pattern shown in Examples

5–6 across the range of the instrument, with both diatonic and chromatic treatment, has been very helpful for my dexterity and accuracy, as well as my fluidity of technique across keys.

These patterns can also be performed in alternating thirds. Example 7 illustrates that, in addition to the virtually infinite variety of patterns we can practice, there are nearly endless variations we can invent.

Of course, the four-note patterns shown in Examples 8–9 can be subject to a variety of chromatic treatments as well.

The major 7th-tritone-perfect 4th pattern in Example 10 can be used over altered dominant chords. The three pitches in the patterns align with the 3rd, dominant 7th and #9. While studying the work of some of my favorite improvising saxophonists (who seem to have a penchant for easy use of wider intervals that often eludes us trumpeters), I found that I could truncate the four-note pattern, omitting the first note, to create a useful, albeit very challenging, variation. This illustrates the importance of “personalizing” one’s practice, at least in the long run. I find this pattern to be useful in terms of dialing in my accuracy and precision, particularly when I get above the staff, as well as for strengthening vocabulary in more harmonically open settings.

I created another personalized exercise to help me achieve a particular goal: integrating wider intervals into my improvisational vocabulary. I realized that I was, on occasion, using the pattern shown in Example 11 while improvising over turnarounds in the key of concert F. So, I decided to create a few studies based on this idea. First, Example 12 shows a chromatic version of the original. Next, Example 13 is a chromatic ascending version of the four-note gesture, which, of course, should be practiced descending as well.

My hope is that trumpeters will find my new book very helpful in terms of developing their own dexterity and accuracy while improvising, and that they’ll also be inspired to create their own, more customized exercises based on their own current vocabulary and their personal goals.

DB

A veteran of Joe Henderson’s quintet, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the chamber ensemble Rhythm & Brass and the world-renowned Brass Band of Battle Creek, trumpeter/composer and educator Rex Richardson tours globally as a soloist and clinician in jazz and classical

contexts. He is the newly appointed Associate Professor of Trumpet at the University of South Carolina, and his most recent album, *Elegy* (Summit), features saxophone legend Steve Wilson. Richardson has performed on six continents, appearing as a soloist with such ensembles as the Phoenix Symphony and Thailand Philharmonic Orchestras, the U.S. Army Field Band and Tokyo Symphonic Winds, England’s Fodens Brass Band and the U.S. Air Force’s Airmen of Note Jazz Ensemble. He taught at Virginia Commonwealth University from 2002 to 2024, and he served as International Tutor in Trumpet at England’s Royal Northern College of Music from 2012 to 2015 and at Austria’s JAM Music Lab University since 2018. Richardson is currently celebrating 30 years as a Yamaha Performing Artist. Visit him online at rexrichardson.net. For more information about Richardson’s new book, *Dexterity Studies for Trumpet*, visit opress.ca.

3. Minor 7ths & 4ths



4. Major 7th, Tritone & 4th



5. 7ths & 4ths (Diatonic, Ascending, in A \flat)



6. 7ths & 4ths (Diatonic, Descending, in A)



7. 7ths & 4ths (Diatonic, Ascending in Alternating Thirds, in D \flat)



8. Minor 7ths & 4ths (Chromatic, Ascending)



9. Major 7ths, Tritones & 4ths (Chromatic, Ascending)



10. Tritones & Perfect 4ths, Ascending & Descending



11. Improv Patterns Used Over Turnarounds in Concert F



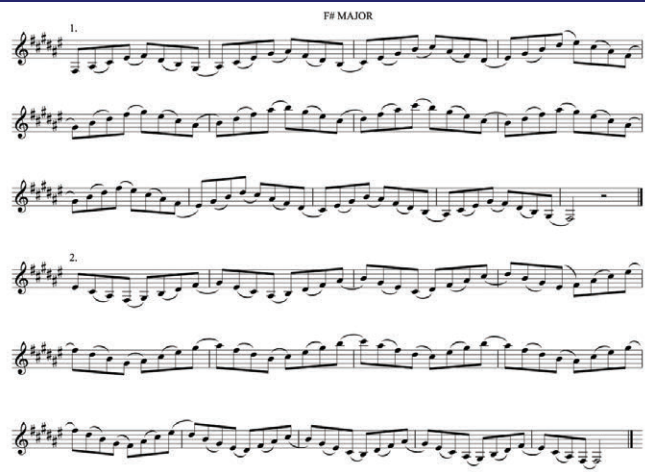
12. Major 7ths Turnaround Lick Descending in Alternating 3rds



13. Major 7ths Turnaround Lick, Ascending Chromatically



1. Diatonic 7th Chord Arpeggio Pattern in F# Major



2. Diatonic 7th Chord Arpeggio Pattern in G Major





Gordon stays connected to the key of the song by playing variations of B-flat scales, even when the chord changes deviate from it.

Wycliffe Gordon's Trombone Solo on '1st Thang'

Once again we visit the blues, this time through trombonist Wycliffe Gordon's "1st Thang" from the appropriately titled 2007 album *BloozBluzeBlues, Vol. One* (Blues Back). It's a nice, laid-back shuffle in B \flat , and the band is grooving, with Gordon playing mostly within the B \flat blues and major pentatonic scales, even as the harmonies move far afield of B \flat . In fact, there aren't a lot of B \flat 7s in this section of the tune.

Gordon chooses his notes and scales well. In bars 2, 9, 12 and 23 (all with the E \flat 7), Gordon goes with B \flat minor pentatonic with

an emphasis on the D \flat , the flat-7 on this chord, so his scale of choice here relates to the song's key but he plays it in such a way as to connect it to the chord. Measure 9 ends with a B \flat major pentatonic lick, which should be at odds with this chord, but it does lead our ears to the Gm7 in the subsequent bar. (B \flat major pentatonic is a scale equivalent of G minor pentatonic.)

Bar 8 is another example of the B \flat blues scale, but on an E7 chord? (That's about as far as you can get harmonically from B \flat .) Gordon makes sure to emphasize the A \flat (enharmonic

of G#, the third of the E7 chord) and E natural (the flat-5 of B \flat) in this bar. So, on one hand, it fits with the underlying harmony, but likewise it still connects to the song's key center.

I would say that Gordon's choice to stick mostly with variations of B \flat scales is how he keeps his solo connected to the key of the song, even when the chord changes deviate from it.

Another brilliant technique Gordon uses to connect his solo to the tune is in his phrasing. He starts many of his lines on the "and" of 3, which isn't where the melody phrases

begin, but it does give the same “long pickup” feel that the melody has.

His very first pickup lick (which overlaps the saxophonist ending the main melody statement), as well as his licks in measures 4–9, 13, 15 and 21, all have lines commencing on the “and” of 3. I don’t think it’s accidental that he plays a string of them early on in his solo, with fewer appearing later on. Once he’s established that connection, he doesn’t want to overdo it.

This is also true of the previously examined scale choices. In bars 16 and 18 Gordon deviates from the B \flat pentatonics, in both cases with a technique I learned as having the appropriate name of “four-note groups.” There are two types, the R–2–3–5 and the R–3–4–5. Both are basically triads with either the second or the fourth added in. This enables them to sound melodic but still brings out the quality of the underlying chord. As you can see (and hear) in measure 18, Gordon is employing the R–2–3–5 version, which fits E7 very well.

In measure 16 he’s using the R–3–4–5 group, but wait a minute — he’s using the minor form and it’s clearly a dominant chord (meaning a major triad with the flat-7). Stranger still, the major third of D \flat (F natural) is the fifth of B \flat . So, although using a minor sound on a dominant chord can be bluesy, this makes it deviate further from the key. Perhaps that’s his intention.

Check out the bar in between (measure 17). We have another four-note group, this time the R–3–4–5. If you’re questioning my reading abilities, let me make it plain: It’s not a G \flat four-note group, but a B \flat one, once again getting us in touch with the key center. He’s also using the minor form, which makes sense since the minor third of B \flat is the fifth of the underlying G \flat . But it also connects these two bars since we get the D \flat minor sound transposing downward to the B \flat minor sound.

To cap it off, in bar 19 Gordon plays what is a G diminished four-note group, and is also a G blues scale lick (which happens to be the same as a B \flat major pentatonic with the flat-3, or what I’ve heard called the “country blues scale”), and is also part of an E \flat 7 arpeggio (with the sixth added in). So he’s led us through this four-note group sound not just to match the changes but to bring our ears back to the bluesy B \flat sounds exhibited earlier.

That low E in the four-note group of measure 18 happens to be the lowest note in the solo. We’ve pointed out a soloist’s use of range before in this column, and this low note comes much more than halfway through. Also, the highest notes aren’t used in the middle for a climax, either. Gordon places a high D \flat in bar 2 (the first measure of the chorus)

and in measure 22 (essentially the final bar of the improvisation, since the actual final bar is used for the pianist to set up their solo). He’s used this high range not to create a climax in the middle of his improvisation but instead to sort of bookend it.

Gordon’s use of subdivisions and rhythmic density is more typical of what we’ve observed in other improvisations. While he employs eighth notes and longer and more frequent use of space in the first six bars of his solo, we see a reduction in the use of space when triplets are introduced at bar 7. (They were “sort of” introduced two measures prior, but as more of a reversed swing eighth, creating a transition to the denser rhythms.) At measure 12, he brings in 16th-note triplets, and there is no space in that bar.

One measure is enough of that (and this rhythmic climax is about half-way through his solo), and after one triplet and a beat-and-a-half of rest he’s brought us back to eighth notes — which is a fairly quick let-down. Maybe that’s because he plans to bring

us through it again, but with a twist (again, avoiding the predictable). This time, after building into triplets Gordon brings us back to eighths for two measures and then hits us with the 16th-note triplets (so we don’t see it coming). They only last one bar, and there’s no easing us down this time. We go right into a half measure of space before a handful of quarter notes emerge. Fantastic use of drama.

A crucial aspect of Gordon’s playing, not just here but throughout this album, is how he varies his sound. His use of the mute to create vocal-like wah-wah sounds is essential to the emotions created. If you’re a trombone player, I strongly suggest playing along and doing your best to imitate the sounds Gordon creates. If you’re not a trombonist, I suggest the same thing, attempting to imitate Gordon’s growls, squeaks and chuckles in whatever manner your instrument will allow. **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.

Yamaha BR Xeno Artist Model Trumpets

More Vibrance & Harmonics for Jazz, Commercial Music & Modern Repertoire

Yamaha has kept its foot on the gas pedal in trumpet R&D for the past 50 years. The company's never-let-up approach to the instrument continues with the introduction of its BR Series trumpets, an expansion of the Xeno Artist Model trumpet lineup. Historically, the Artist Model series has catered to orchestral and classic trumpeters, but in recent times Yamaha has seen some adoption of the line on the commercial and jazz sides, especially among players who gravitate toward a heavier instrument — not quite in the David Monette category of heavy, but weightier than some of the trumpets in Yamaha's existing pro lines.

Indeed, Yamaha's Xeno Artist Model trumpets have traditionally started more toward the darker side of the sonic spectrum. But the new BR Series Artist Models are different. The current Artist Models are constructed using a balanced blend of brass and nickel-silver — nickel-silver being a little heavier and denser, giving a darker starting point. The BR models, by contrast, feature a brass-forward design that imparts a brighter tone and free-blowing playability on the instruments. Yellow brass has a lower specific gravity than nickel-silver and helps lend a bit more resonance and vibrance to the sound. As a result, upper frequencies and overtones are more present in the sound of BR Series trumpets, and tonal brilliance is a little easier to achieve.

Unlike the regular Xeno Artist Models, which are configured with a two-piece valve casing featuring a nickel-silver upper section and a brass lower section, the new YTR-9335NYS-BR III New York and YTR-9335CHS-BR Chicago models I play-tested have yellow brass on both the bottoms and the tops of the valve casings, including the top and bottom caps. Other components that are nickel-silver on the current Artist Models have been shifted over to yellow brass as well on the BR Series, including the bell braces (designed for quick response and well-centered tone) and the tuning slide outer tubes. The BR type also features a Malone Pipe leadpipe that has a thinner wall than the Xeno Artist Model leadpipe, enhancing the tone and playability in a way that augments the special character of the instrument's brass components. The BR models feature an unsoldered finger hook, providing a noticeable difference in tone quality and response.

All of these elements contribute to a consistent depth of tone and vibrant texture, played with a smooth precision all the way through the lower and upper registers. Even the resistance of flow creates a desire in the player to rise to the occasion of performing with focus and intention.



"We've found that the BR Series has a lot of success with orchestral players who are looking for something that will give them more ease of play and efficiency, and a more vibrant sound for holiday pops, and any time they have to do anything jazz related," said Jonathan Goldman, senior product marketing specialist of wind instruments for Yamaha. "Upper-register stuff, too — orchestral players are not necessarily geared for that style of playing. They're amazing players, but it's not their wheelhouse. The BR Series has a lot of appeal for those players looking for an instrument that was going to shift things a little more into that wheelhouse."

In developing the BR Series, Yamaha worked with several of the trumpeters who helped the company design the existing Artist Series models, including Tom Hooten of the L.A. Philharmonic, and Thomas Rolfs of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and David Bilger of Northwestern University (formerly of the Philadelphia Orchestra). "The BR additions are working really well for a lot of these great crossover players," Goldman said. "José Sibaja and Jeff Conner from Boston Brass are using the silver New York Artist Models, but José also has his "Latin Fire" shows and is gravitating toward the BR Series because it's got that somewhat darker sound as a starting point but it can go further in that other commercial direction. Crossover players like Tony Kadleck in New York and Brian Lynch in Miami have really gravitated toward that BR horns when they've experienced them, too. I think it gives them a bigger palette of sound to work with. It starts a little brighter than the current Artist Series models, but it's not a bright instrument in general."

When playing through both orchestral pieces and brass band repertoire, I found it easier to deliver a controlled but expressive sound with a more well-rounded tone than I usually get with my Bach Stradivarius 37. The upper register plays bright, but substantial. I appreciated the brilliance without the bite, as I could produce a heavier and deeper sound, whether layering on top of a big brass wall of sound or filling out the colors and textures within an intricate cinematic orchestration.

The BR models are easy to control while maintaining precise and reliable intonation. While they project easily over just about any type of ensemble — be it a symphony orchestra, studio orchestra, big band or chamber group — trumpeters can soften the sound and alter the color in more subtle musical settings, blending with a variety of demands. With their overall flexibility and ease of tone production, players can achieve a commercial profile of sound while still maintaining the warmth, beauty and presence that Xeno trumpets are known for.

—Dan Gorski

GETTA HOODIE!



DOWNBEAT.COM



Jon Batiste light up the Yamaha Grand Plaza Stage.



Mia Asano electrifies the ADJ Arena Plaza Stage.



The Legacy Ukulele Ensemble plays a good-morning set on the ADJ Arena Plaza Stage.

BEST OF THE 2025 NAMM SHOW

REPORTING BY ED ENRIGHT AND KATIE KAILUS

This year's edition of The NAMM Show, a global showcase for new instruments and gear, was held Jan. 23–25 at the Anaheim Convention Center in Southern California. The sprawling show and its many musi-

cal hangs once again drew an enthusiastic cast of retailers, manufacturers, distributors and artists who browsed the exhibit areas, gave product demonstrations and took part in after-hours concerts and jams. In the

following pages, DownBeat presents the best of the The 2025 NAMM Show.

(The NAMM Foundation has committed \$50,000 to its L.A. Wildfires Relief Fund and continues to accept contributions. For more info, visit namm.org or donate.nammfoundation.org.)

COURTESY NAMM



Jacob Collier performs at the Grand Rally for Music Education.

COURTESY NAMM



Jack White was honored at the NAMM TEC Awards.

COURTESY NAMM



Stevie Wonder greets fans on the show floor.

SPECIAL EDITIONS

Yamaha's YAS-62IIIA NAMM 2025 limited edition alto and tenor saxophones combine stunning visual aesthetics with iconic sound. They feature a gorgeous contrast between the player's choice of gold or amber lacquer and silver-plated keys. The addition of the Yamaha Atelier Special (ASP) neck screw adds increased stability to the playing feel. A unique "Kangakki" engraving on the bell adds to the saxophones' distinctive look. usa.yamaha.com



ANNIVERSARY SX90R

Julius Keilwerth's 100 Anniversary Limited Edition SX90R saxophones feature a nickel-silver body with a sandblasted finish, black nickel-plated keywork, ebony wood key buttons, removable "angel wing" key guards, two neck options (standard and ICON included), special engraving and a leather embroidered case with accessories. Available in alto and tenor models, only 100 total units will be made and distributed worldwide. julius-keilwerth.com



ESSENTIAL PIECES

Theo Wanne's comprehensive, affordable Essentials collection of saxophone mouthpieces are designed for players in all genres and at all levels. Made from the company's proprietary AMP material and finished with the same quality as Theo Wanne's Signature Collection, the Essentials collection includes Concert, Contemporary and Jazz models. thewanne.com

DIVERSE TONES

P Mauriat's PMSA/PMST-600 Venus Saxophones pair aesthetics with a diverse tonal palette. Available in alto and tenor models, the horns feature a 95% copper alloy body combined with silver-plated keywork, black pearl key touches, an enlarged bore ratio and a hand-hammered traditional bell. pmauriatmusic.com



SOPRANO METAL

Vandoren has answered saxophonists' calls for a metal soprano mouthpiece for modern and straightahead jazz players. The V16 Metal Soprano Sax Mouthpiece offers exceptional focus and projection, a warm and vibrant timbre and sufficient flexibility to cover a range of stylistic demands. It is currently available in an S7 facing. vandoren.com

BIG, FAT & WARM

JodyJazz has added the DV JC "Jody Custom" alto saxophone mouthpiece to its DV Series. Featuring design modifications based upon JodyJazz founder Jody Espina's customized personal mouthpiece, the DV JC's sound falls between the company's DV and DV NY models, with a big, fat and warm tone and sufficient power to suit a variety of musical settings. jodyjazz.com



INTERFACE FOR PROS

Audient's Axient Digital PSM iD48 is an eight-channel, 24-in/32-out USB-C audio interface designed with professional producers and engineers in mind. With advanced 32-bit ESS converter technology and new Switchable Analogue Insert technology, the interface makes integrating outboard fast and intuitive. The iD48's eight ultra-low-noise, low-distortion Audient Console Mic Preamps deliver 68dB gain. audient.com



DIGITAL IN-EARS

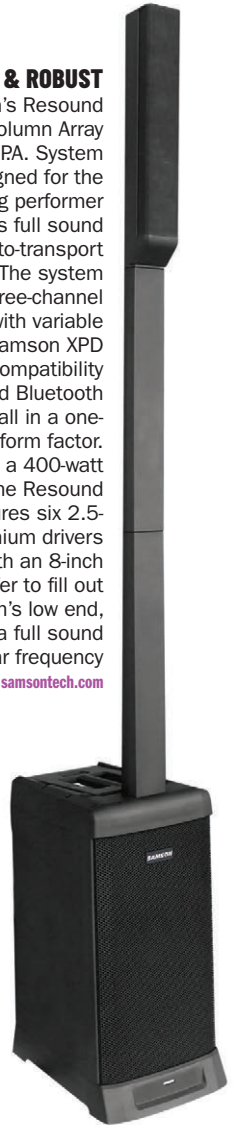
Shure's digital wireless in-ear monitoring solution offers flexibility and scalability for monitor engineers, RF engineers and rental houses, ensuring high-performance RF and spectral efficiency. Axient Digital PSM features a multi-channel wideband mode that significantly increases spectral efficiency and frees up radios for improved RF performance or channel count scalability. shure.com



BOOSTED RANGE

VocoPro added three new packages that use the company's fin antennas to boost range. The FIN-ACAPPELLA-20 (handheld mics), FIN-PLAY-20 (headset/body pack mics) and FIN-CONFERENCE-20 (conference mics) are 20-person professional long-range wireless mic systems. The new packages use five Digital-Quad wireless systems with a pair of fin antennas and an antenna distributor/amplifier to improve the efficiency of wireless signal transmission to multiple receivers and reduce signal dropout. vocopro.com

CLEAR & ROBUST
Samson's Resound VX6.1 Column Array Portable PA System is designed for the traveling performer who needs full sound in an easy-to-transport package. The system features a three-channel mixer with variable reverb, Samson XPD Wireless compatibility and Bluetooth connectivity, all in a one-hand-carry form factor. Driven by a 400-watt amplifier, the Resound VX6.1 features six 2.5-inch neodymium drivers arrayed with an 8-inch subwoofer to fill out the system's low end, providing a full sound with clear frequency separation. samsontech.com



STUDIO-QUALITY LIVE SOUND

Zoom's LiveTrak L6 digital mixer/recorder is compact and versatile. It is designed for musicians, synth players and live streamers who need studio-quality sound in a portable package. The LiveTrak 6 features a full channel strip for each track, including aux sends, pan controls, effects and a three-band mid-sweepable EQ. It can capture 10 discrete tracks plus the full stereo mix. zoomcorp.com



IN THE MIX

DiGiCo's Quantum326 mixing console offers 128 input channels with 64 busses and a 24-by-24 matrix, all with full channel processing. Twenty-six 100mm touch-sensitive faders are laid out in two blocks of 12 fader banks, plus two dedicated user-assignable faders, each complete with high resolution metering. The desk also features a pair of 17-inch, 1,000-nit high-brightness multi-touch screens, plus 58 individual TFT channel displays. digico.biz



BEST OF THE 2025 NAMM SHOW

PIANOS & KEYBOARDS

ENTRY-LEVEL DIGITAL

Kawai's ES60 is the newest addition to its ES Series of digital pianos. Offered at an entry-level price, the ES60 features Responsive Hammer Lite keyboard action coupled with the rich, expressive sound of the Shigeru Kawai SK-EX concert grand piano, brought to life through Harmonic Imaging technology. It includes 17 versatile sounds, including grand pianos, electric pianos and organs, and features USB-MIDI, line-out jacks and headphone connectivity. kawaius.com



REIMAGINED BASS STATION

The Novation Bass Station synthesizer has been reimagined as a virtual instrument by synth modeling pioneers GForce Software. GForce's take on Bass Station is faithful to the original 1993 keyboard version with several key additions, including polyphony, new oscillator waveforms, sub-oscillator, unison mode, powerful modulation options, delay, reverb and chorus effects, a high-pass filter, macro controls, new arpeggiator and sequencing functionality, and advanced patch browsing. gforcesoftware.com



GET A GRIP

The KS1355 Single Tier Z Keyboard Stand from OnStage has a 400-pound weight capacity and features a nonslip rubber grip on the top of the arms, ensuring keyboards or synthesizers remain in place. The included headphone hanger keeps headphones and in-ear monitors within arm's length. With its sleek black finish, the KS1355 blends into any stage setup. The height and width are adjustable using pull-and-tighten knobs, allowing for a height range of 20.5 inches to 33.5 inches and a width range of 21 inches to 34 inches. on-stage.com

CONCERT GRAND UPDATE

Bösendorfer has updated its 280 VC Vienna Concert Grand Piano with a redesigned acoustic system that improves tone and projection. usa.yamaha.com



AFFORDABLE AUTHENTICITY

Casio's Celviano AP-300 and AP-S200 digital pianos provide a grand piano's authentic touch and sound, complemented by elegant cabinet designs, in affordable packages. With gold accents on the logo and key cover, the AP-300 exudes a traditional aesthetic. The AP-S200's slim profile allows it to fit into small living spaces. Both models feature a two-channel, two-speaker sound system incorporating acoustic and sound source technologies from Casio's higher-end Celvianos. casiousa.com





V-GUITAR EVOLUTION

The BOSS VG-800 V-Guitar Processor delivers an expansive selection of high-quality guitar modeling guitar and bass tones and alternate tunings using a wide range of instrument, pickup position and string settings. A Dual Guitar/Bass function merges two distinct guitar or bass elements into a single instrument, each with its own customizable signal path. Players can instantly switch between custom or alternate tunings, including drop, open, 12-string and more. [boss.info](https://www.boss.info)



NEW STANDARDS

Fender has released the latest updates to its Standard series, which delivers approachable playability and inspiring rock tone. The updated models include the Standard Series Stratocaster, Standard Series HSS Stratocaster, Standard Series Telecaster, Standard Series Precision Bass and Standard Series Jazz Bass. [fender.com](https://www.fender.com)

DOUBLE UP

Gator's ICON Take Two Series Gig Bags are designed to carry two electric guitars or two basses. They feature one-inch-thick protective padding while maintaining a compact profile for easy travel and storage. The exterior is sewn from durable nylon sourced from 50% recycled materials, providing a strong yet lightweight design. A built-in neck block secures the instrument's neck, and the electric model includes an additional neck rest block to elevate pitched headstocks, preventing unwanted contact. [gatorco.com](https://www.gatorco.com)



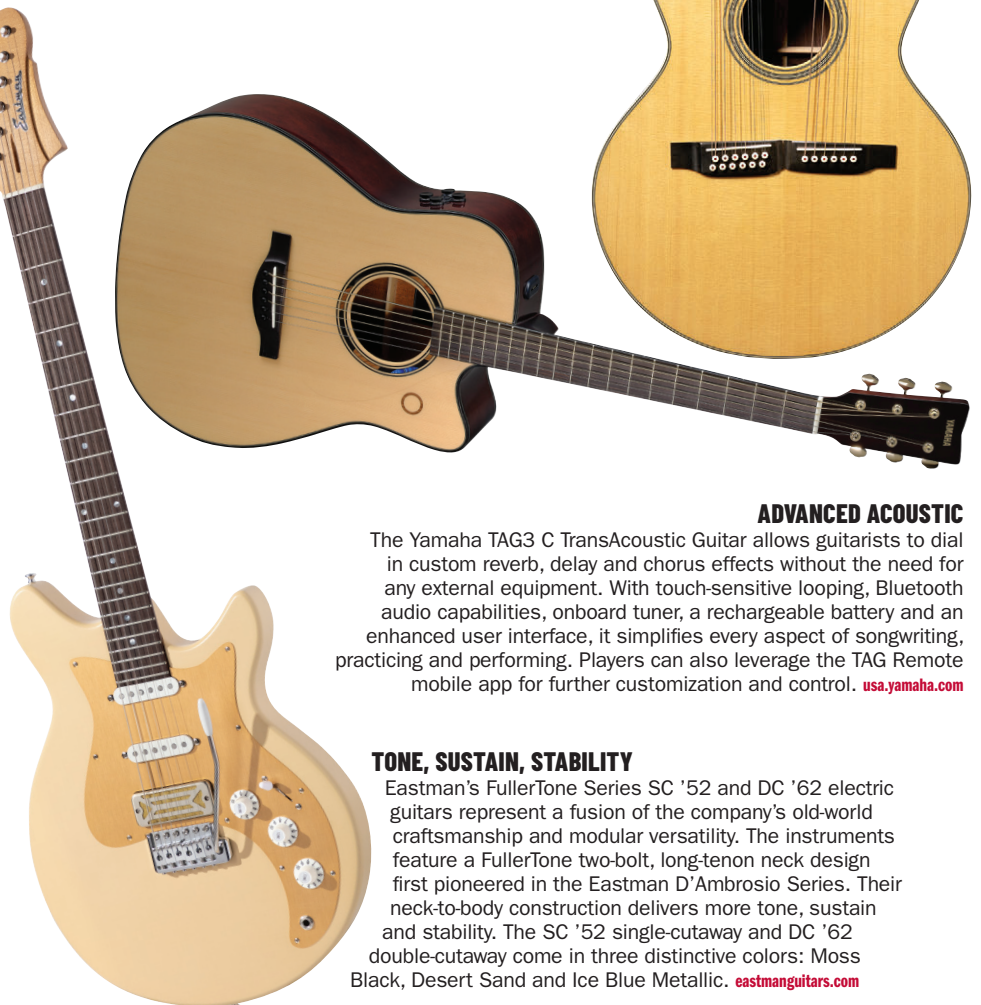
DOUBLE NECK

Martin's Grand J-28E DN is a double-neck acoustic-electric guitar with 12-string and six-string necks. Its powerful Grand Jumbo body delivers a bold, resonant tone, with solid East Indian rosewood back and sides and a solid spruce top. Both necks feature a smooth satin finish and ebony fingerboard, with the six-string neck offering a slightly slimmer profile at the nut. The guitar also includes built-in custom Fishman electronics. [martinguitar.com](https://www.martinguitar.com)



ADVANCED ACOUSTIC

The Yamaha TAG3 C TransAcoustic Guitar allows guitarists to dial in custom reverb, delay and chorus effects without the need for any external equipment. With touch-sensitive looping, Bluetooth audio capabilities, onboard tuner, a rechargeable battery and an enhanced user interface, it simplifies every aspect of songwriting, practicing and performing. Players can also leverage the TAG Remote mobile app for further customization and control. [usa.yamaha.com](https://www.usa.yamaha.com)



TONE, SUSTAIN, STABILITY

Eastman's FullerTone Series SC '52 and DC '62 electric guitars represent a fusion of the company's old-world craftsmanship and modular versatility. The instruments feature a FullerTone two-bolt, long-tenon neck design first pioneered in the Eastman D'Ambrosio Series. Their neck-to-body construction delivers more tone, sustain and stability. The SC '52 single-cutaway and DC '62 double-cutaway come in three distinctive colors: Moss Black, Desert Sand and Ice Blue Metallic. [eastmanguitars.com](https://www.eastmanguitars.com)

CLARITY & PROJECTION

Dixon Drums' Artisan Select PMT channels the clarity and projection of silkwood through double-cut 45-degree bearing edges to achieve optimal versatility. The drums utilize the harvested skin of the paper mulberry tree in a three-layered, lacquer/laminate/lacquer finish treatment. Their one-of-a-kind appearance is elevated by the functionality of Gibraltar racks and accessories. playdixon.com



PREMIUM SHELLS

Tama's limited-edition Starclassic Walnut/Birch drum kit in Vermillion Bosse Fonce Fade finish is offered in a five-piece, two-up/two-down configuration with an optional matching snare drum. The 6mm-thick rack and floor tom shells feature four plies of birch, two inner plies of walnut and one exterior ply of bosse fonce. The 8mm-thick bass drum shell has five plies of birch, two inner plies of walnut and one exterior ply of bosse fonce. Complementing the shells are black nickel hardware, die-cast hoops and Starclassic lugs. tama.com



NEW FINISHES

Drum Workshop is offering a wider choice of colors for its DWe convertible acoustic-electric drum set with the release of new shell finishes in Diamond Nebula, Laser Blue Metallic and Limited-Edition Exotic Santos Rosewood. DWE offers an authentic playing experience that blends acoustic and electronic drum elements to support the diverse needs of modern drummers. dwdrums.com



MESH SURFACES

Yamaha's DTXS series digital drums are now available with popular two-ply mesh heads. The DTX6K5-M heads expand the DTX6 Series of electronic drums with larger mesh playing surfaces. usa.yamaha.com

RADIO KING RETURNS

Slingerland is back with the Radio King Limited Edition Snare Drum. A recreation of the legendary snare from the late 1930s and early '40s, the Radio King Limited Edition Snare features shells constructed using steam-bent solid maple. The snares have period-correct nickel-plated hardware, nickel-over-brass stick chopper hoops and calfskin batter heads. They are available in 7- by 14-inch and 5- by 14-inch sizes. slingerland.com



PRO TIMBALES

Meinl has introduced Artist Series signature timbales designed with Diego Camacho. Available in 14-inch and 15-inch sizes, the timbales are equipped with a playing stand and cowbell holder for pro percussion and drum setups. They deliver sharp accents and cascara rhythms. The Diego Camacho Signature Timbales feature steel shells with two flanges, black synthetic heads, black nickel hardware and an L-shaped tuning key. meinlpercussion.com



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Ethan Iverson

Between last Christmas and New Year's Eve, Ethan Iverson performed as part of the 31st Umbria Jazz Winter festival in Orvieto, Italy, presenting "Simply Cinematic," a set of movie themes he had creatively reimagined for the UJ big band led by alto saxophonist Manuele Morbidini, plus bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Kush Abadey. The music featured tunes — some familiar, some not-so — composed by soundtrack giants Bernard Herrmann, Ennio Morricone, Jerry Goldsmith, John Williams and others. On a Sunday morning, Iverson participated in his second DownBeat Blindfold Test, this time live, attended by more than 40 jazz-inspired early risers.

Dave Brubeck

"Someday My Prince Will Come" (*Disney Jazz Volume 1: Everybody Wants To Be A Cat*, Disney Records, 2011) Brubeck, piano; Michael Moore, bass; Randy Jones, drums.

The song is "Someday My Prince Will Come" from the Disney movie *Snow White* — the first waltz jazz musicians played. Dave Brubeck, Bill Evans and Miles Davis all recorded this song in the '50s and '60s. I don't think this is from then, though. This is a more recent recording. There are moments when there are out-of-key triads over the harmony, so that makes me think it is Mr. Brubeck. I have to say I am here right now because of Dave Brubeck. He was one of my first heroes. I think he has something that can reach out and touch anybody. There are many greater jazz pianists than Brubeck, especially many with a better groove — sorry, Dave — but he still has something so charismatic.

Charles Mingus/Hampton Hawes/Dannie Richmond

"Yesterdays" (*Mingus Three*, Jubilee, 1957) Hawes, piano; Mingus, bass; Richmond, drums.

Is this the Charles Mingus record with Hampton Hawes and Dannie Richmond? I never liked this record. Mingus was really worried about being a leader. Here he has Hampton Hawes, one of the greatest bebop pianists, and he's stopping him from making a complete statement. It's the same problem with *Money Jungle* — Duke Ellington and Max Roach and Mingus. But in that case Ellington fought back and the result was a masterpiece. Hawes didn't fight back and this album is mostly bass solos. On this tune, "Yesterdays," by Jerome Kern, you can hear how much Hampton Hawes loves Art Tatum. All of the great bebop piano players — Sonny Clark, Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Bud Powell, Barry Harris — loved Art Tatum and took a lot from him. A very important puzzle piece, Art Tatum.

Charlie Haden/Paul Motian featuring Geri Allen

"Shuffle Montgomery" (*Etudes*, Soul Note, 1988). Allen, piano; Haden, bass; Motian, drums.

This was easy. This is the album *Etudes*, originally billed as Charlie Haden and Paul Motian with Geri Allen, "Shuffle Montgomery." I think this is a pretty magical record. At the time it was almost revolutionary to play a song by Herbie Nichols, a kind of a statement about the history. I saw Geri Allen first in 1990 with Anthony Cox and Pheeroan akLaff. I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever seen, the freshest sound. Today she is the No. 1 influence on jazz piano, at least among many critically acclaimed piano players: Kris Davis, David Virelles, Craig Taborn, Vijay Iyer, Marta Sanchez, Jason Moran. [raises hand] And me, I guess. I don't know if I'm critically acclaimed but I'm certainly influenced by Geri Allen. Now that everyone else plays like her, I try not to play like her anymore.



Jerskin Fendrix

"Bella" (*Poor Things—Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Waxwork, 2023). Uncredited musicians.

I love it. That was a sentimental tune made creative through microtonality. This kind of microtonality is becoming part of a language modern musicians deal with. I am eager to hear the rest of the record. [afterwards] I asked my wife if she wanted to see the movie but she said no because she had read the book. I actually don't know the name Jerskin Fendrix. Beautiful. I am looking forward to learning more.

Paul Bley

"And Now The Queen" (*Closer*, ESP-Disk, 1966) Bley, piano; Steve Swallow, bass; Barry Altschul, drums.

Fred Hersch has told me this was his favorite Paul Bley album. Paul Bley is one of my biggest influences and, as with Geri Allen, I have fought to not play like him. This is *Closer* by Bley with Steve Swallow and Barry Altschul. This is on ESP, and most ESP albums feature long free-jazz tracks. But on this one, the tracks are little pretty pictures. The tune is "And Now The Queen" written by Carla Bley, and I think almost the whole album is her compositions. Paul is playing exactly what Carla wrote in the melody. The piece is in G-flat but the colors around it are Carla's very specific choices. I didn't know her well, but now I wished I had asked her, "Who was the Queen?"

Franco D'Andrea

"Tenderly" (*Something Bluesy And More*, Parco della Musica, 2024). D'Andrea, piano; Gabriele Evangelista, bass; Roberto Gatto, drums.

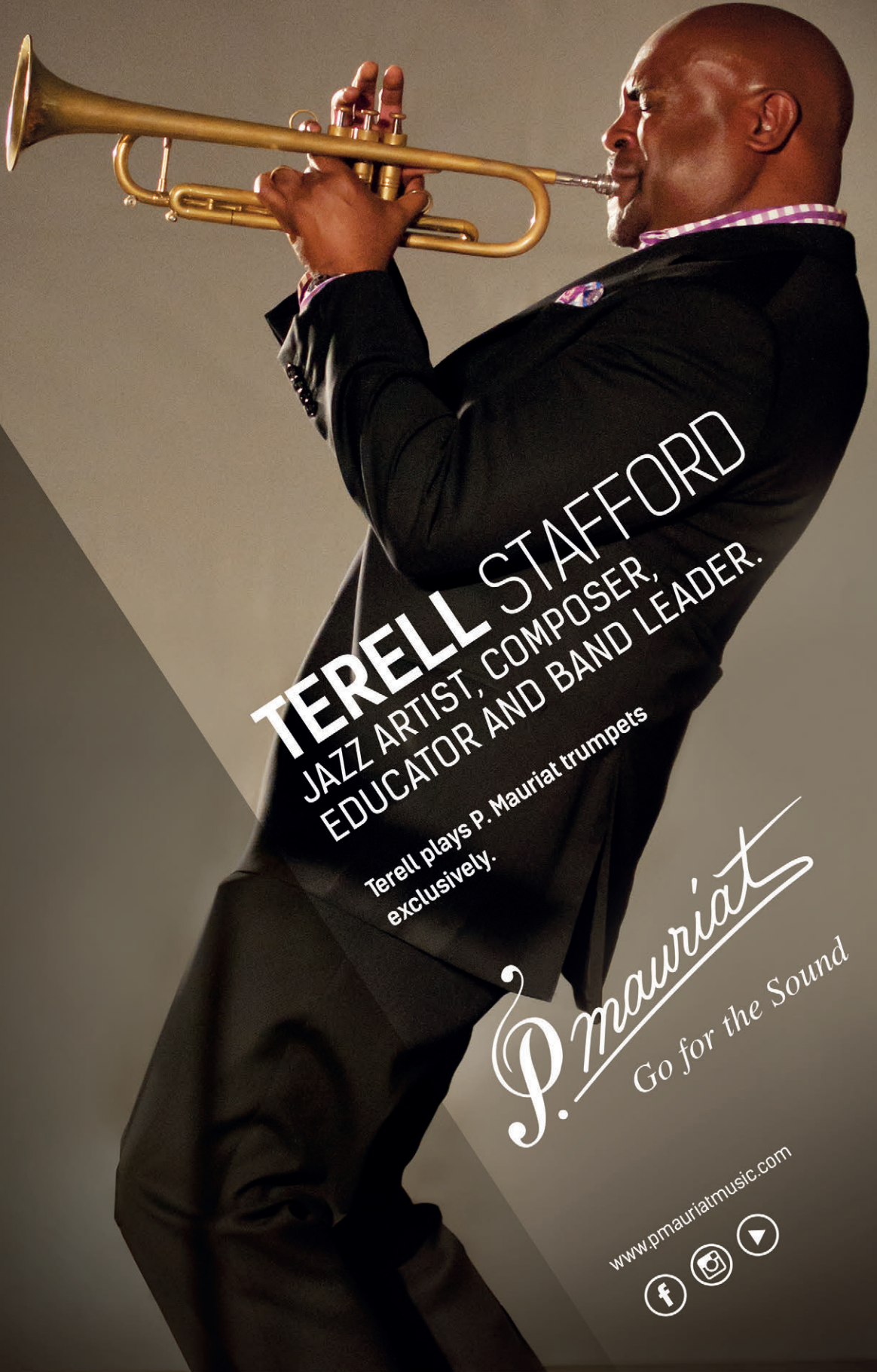
The song is "September In The Rain." No, it's not. It's "Tenderly." Ha. The first four notes of those two songs are exactly the same. Amazing piano player. The control of harmony in the solo interludes is great. But this is a complicated trio arrangement of stops and starts, and I want them to be in the song. It's not so much to my taste, as good as it is. My teacher Sophia Rosoff always talked about how once you start you shouldn't stop. [afterwards] I know he's a master musician and very important to Italian jazz.

Mary Lou Williams/Cecil Taylor

"Basic Chords (Bop Changes On The Blues)" (*Embraced*, Pablo, 1977). Williams, Taylor, pianos; Bob Cranshaw, bass; Mickey Roker, drums.

Is this the album with Mary Lou Williams and Cecil Taylor together? There's been nobody else in the music like Williams. She could play it all. She was there at the beginning, and she stayed current until the end. **DB**

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



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