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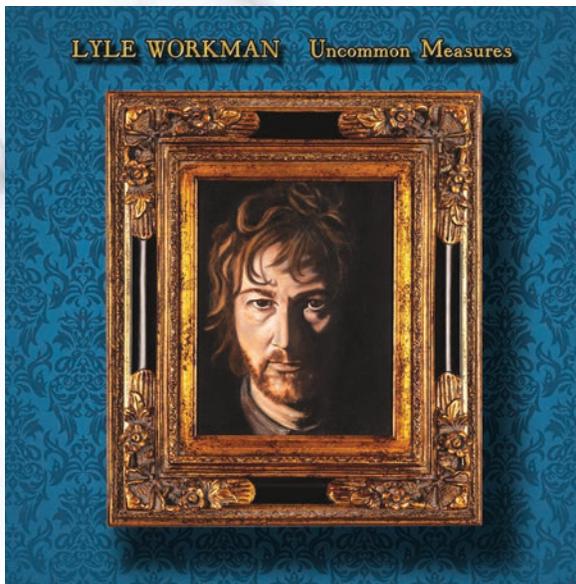
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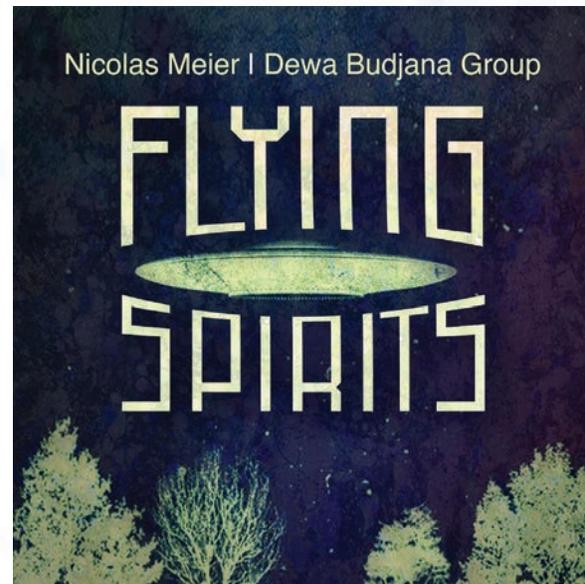
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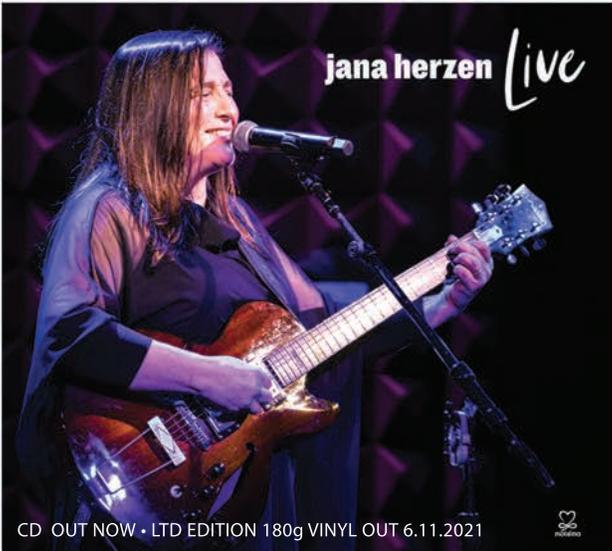
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STOLEN moment



Robert Glasper has had an enormous influence on a generation of musicians making jazz in the hip-hop era. The keyboardist and composer (above, far right) has assembled an allstar crew on his latest Blue Note album, *R + R = Now Live*. His collaborators are, from left, Taylor McFerrin, Terrace Martin, Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, Justin Tyson and Derrick Hodge.





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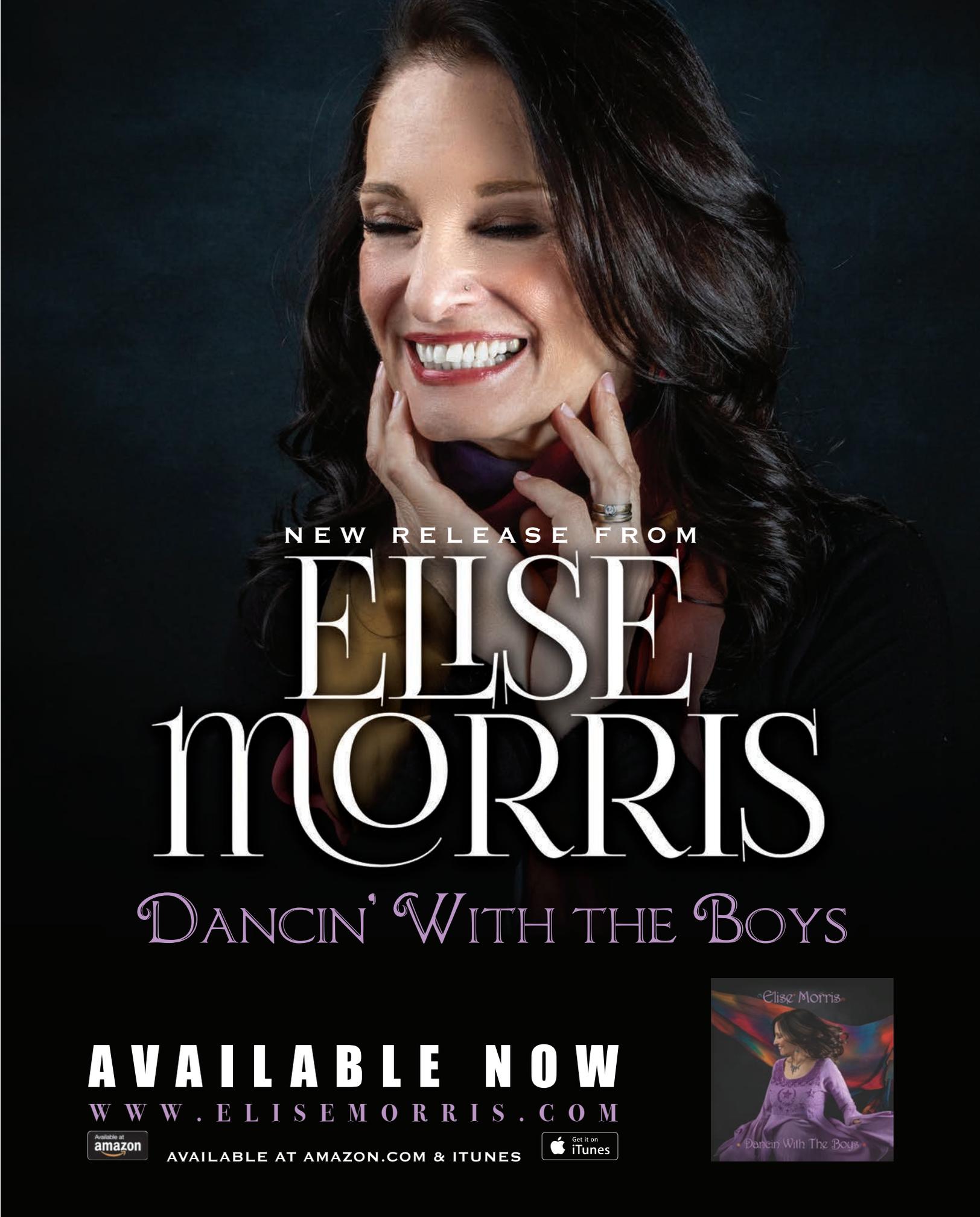
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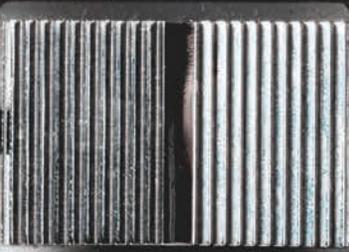
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Editor and Publisher Michael Fagien
Publisher Zakiya Fagien

Executive Editor Brian Zimmerman
Managing Editor Bob Weinberg
Editor-at-Large Larry Blumenfeld
Online Editor Matt Micucci
Audio Editor Ian White

Creative Director Eric Beatty
Contributing Designer Kelsey Morrison

Live Media Geoffrey Fagien

Webmaster Matt Pramschufel

West Coast Ambassador Léan Crowley

Accountant Karen Rosenfeld
Certified Public Accountant Melamed & Karp

CONTRIBUTORS: Hrayr Attarian, Philip Booth, Shaun Brady, Lissette Corsa, John Diliberto, Ted Drozdowski, Enid Farber, Sascha Feinstein, Phil Freeman, Steve Futterman, Jon Garelick, Fernando Gonzalez, Mark Holston, Jeff Jackson, Ed Kopp, Bill Meredith, Bill Milkowski, John Frederick Moore, Daniel Nevins, Ted Panken, Michael J. Renner, Michael Roberts, James Rozzi, Eric Snider, Neil Tesser, Jonathan Widran, Asher Wolf, Josef Woodard, Scott Yanow

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Tips From Q

Over the years, I've written about my admiration for Quincy Jones on a personal level. Like legendary jazz producers Bruce Lundvall and Tommy LiPuma, Quincy was already legendary when we met. And as I did with Lundvall and LiPuma, I felt honored whenever I received a call, invite or request from him and even more so when in his physical presence. The ever-present support for *JAZZIZ* from these icons is one of the reasons why we're still here. Looking back it's clear that, on a professional level, I learned so much from each of them — from the stories, wisdom and contacts they shared with me, their risk-taking and vision of the future.

In the late-'80s, Quincy got me to rethink the rap and hip-hop scene. Admittedly, I wasn't paying too much attention to it at the time because most of what I was hearing didn't speak to or appeal to me. But when he insisted that there was a new generation of young talented musicians and rappers that were entering the scene in the same way it

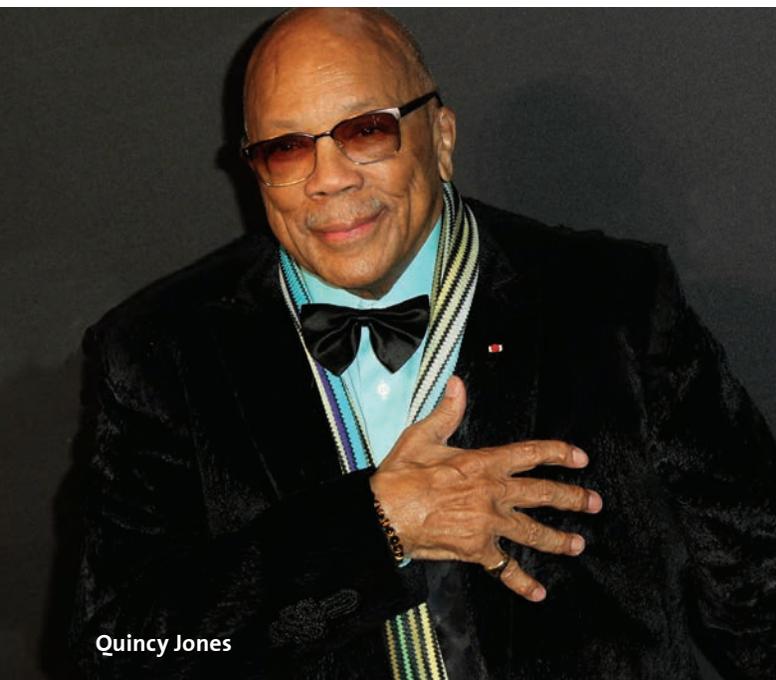
happened in jazz nearly a half-century earlier, I dug deeper, though still not quite "getting it."

It wasn't until I got an advance release of Quincy's *Back on the Block*, circa late 1988, and an invite to his record-release party, that things started to make sense. Quincy put his money — and his name, which appears atop the album — where his mouth is on a production that featured Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Al Jarreau, Take 6 and Ray Charles on vocals, while ingeniously weaving in rappers Kool Moe Dee, Big Daddy Kane and Ice-T; all alongside tracks with solos by Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Herbie Hancock, James Moody and George Benson. *Q's Back on the Block* party — like his world-shattering approach to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* — was not part of a record company marketing plan, but rather a genuine statement of the shape of things to come. And from that point on, we saw the movement he championed take flight — from London's acid jazz scene (including music from Us3 on Lundvall's Blue Note) and groundbreaking albums including A Tribe Called Quest's *The Low End Theory*, Meshell Ndegeocello's *Plantation Lullabies* and Branford Marsalis' *Buckshot LeFonque*. Each project echoed what Quincy had been saying all along: Rap is here to stay.

It has been said that most innovations take around 30 years. As author Greg Satell wrote in his book *Mapping Innovation* (and said in a *JAZZIZ Not What You Think* podcast), "We tend to focus on the commercialization stage, when agility can be an important advantage, but often ignore everything that comes before it. And that, unfortunately, leads us to ignore much of what makes a transformation happen. The truth is that important innovations are rarely created in weeks or months. It usually takes about 30 years."

Today, and included in this issue dedicated to the topic — from Gil Scott-Heron to Kendrick Lamar — we're seeing at least 30 years of artists moving the music forward while incorporating jazz's rich heritage, much like Miles, Dizzy and Herbie did in earlier decades. As a result, we're being introduced to new directions in improvisation that maintain the spirit and the passion of the music we love.

—Michael Fagien



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Super Collider

Karriem Riggins shrugs off the strictures of genre.

Drummer-producer Karriem Riggins is equally versed in jazz and hip-hop. But he feels most at home in the spaces where they collide. *Pardon My French*, Riggins' latest project with multi-instrumentalist Madlib as Jahari Masamba Unit, is one of those spaces — somewhere between breakbeat and experimental jazz. The full-length debut is the first in a series of installments to be released. Riggins, who produced and plays drums on Common's *A Beautiful Revolution Pt.1*, feels good about 2021. A solo album is on the horizon, as well as a new label. "I'm very optimistic about being on the other side of everything we're going through," he says from a hotel room in Atlanta, while on a senatorial campaign performance stop with Common. "Music is gonna bring us home." — **Lisette Corsa**

Rhythmic elements seem to drive and anchor the different layers that Madlib brings to the new album. How would you describe the project?

It's hard to even put into words because we don't necessarily talk about or define what we're doing. It's as simple as I pass Madlib a batch of drums, of ideas, and some melodies, and a week later we'll have a batch of music. Then we just add on to it. On this project, we had an abundance of music and made something special.

What inspired you to revive Jahari Masamba Unit now?

A lot of this music we've had for a long time, trying to figure out the right time to put it out. I think people, as well as myself, need this. This is healing. It's

Zen. From the perspective of someone who creates hip-hop, a lot of people would expect us to just do boom-bap and hard beats and vibes like that, and this is just like throwing a curve ball.

You're known for straddling jazz and hip-hop. Do you feel that you have an advantage as a drummer when it comes to blurring those lines?

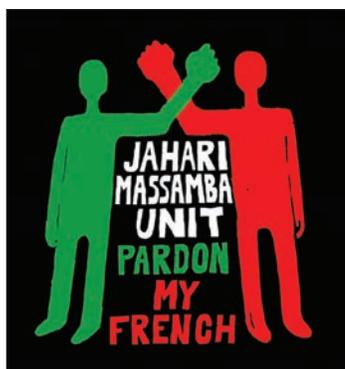
No, I think the only advantage I have is being exposed to hip-hop and jazz from an early age and being around the elders, the creators of bebop. That's something that I wish a lot of younger musicians and producers were able to see. That's how we get to the future, by staying a student of the music.

You met Madlib through J Dilla, producer for hip-hop bands such as The Pharcyde, De La Soul, Tribe Called Quest, all of whom experimented with jazz. Are there any artists, in that vein, that you draw inspiration from?

There are so many, and we all love Dilla. I feel like we should continue to ring his name. A lot of people hear this music, but they don't know the origin of where this style came from. I come from that school.

You've collaborated with artists from Roy Hargrove to Kanye West. Do you see yourself as a vehicle for a future in music in which there are no labels?

Yeah, that's all I'm about. I hate being boxed into saying I do jazz or just hip-hop. I want to add a limitless, genre-less sound to the art form. When I open my computer, I'll go from Chopin to [rapper] Peedi Crakk to Ray Brown Trio to Diana Krall. I want to create music just that way. ■







Alive and Kickin'

Jazz Is Dead's **Ali Shaheed Muhammad** maintains a vital pulse.

When A Tribe Called Quest emerged in the early 1990s, the band was at the forefront of an innovative new scene melding jazz influences into hip-hop. Three decades later, Tribe's ground-breaking music can be counted among the formative influences of a generation of hip-hop-reared jazz musicians, many of whom first discovered jazz by tracing the band's samples back to their sources.

Now, one of Tribe's founding members, DJ and producer Ali Shaheed Muhammad, is taking a new approach to the hybridization of the two genres. Muhammad teamed with the equally revered producer Adrian Young (who has worked with the likes of Jay-Z and the Wu-Tang Clan) to launch Jazz Is Dead, a new record label that grew out of a Los Angeles concert series of the same name.

In its first year of existence, the label has released an introductory sampler and four albums featuring the co-founders in collaboration with undersung jazz luminaries including organist Doug Carn and vibraphonist Roy Ayers, as well as singer-songwriter Marcos Valle and jazz-funk trio Azymuth from Brazil. Another slate of releases is

scheduled for 2021, kicking off in April with *Jazz Is Dead 006* with saxophonist Gary Bartz.

"I've sampled a lot of these artists," Muhammad says via Zoom from his L.A. studio. "Adrian and I have been raised on their music, and it's helped shape my level of musicianship and the way that I see the world. So when we decided to venture into a creative space with these luminaries, we wanted to [explore] the aspects of their music

that meant the most to us and that has helped to shape us, while keeping the foundations of hip-hop in mind."

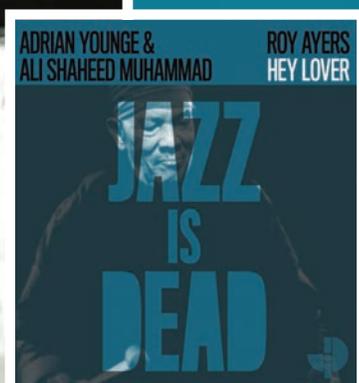
The Jazz Is Dead project is far from Muhammad's first direct collaboration with his jazz idols. A Tribe Called Quest famously invited legendary bassist Ron Carter into the studio during the production of their 1991 sophomore album, *The Low End Theory*. The difference between then and now reflects the DJ's own evolution as an artist and his ascendance to the exalted status in which he's always held his own influences.

"At the time we brought Ron Carter into the studio," Muhammad recalls, "we were just sitting on the other side of the glass, watching in awe while this master did his thing. Now, we're masters in our own right and we can jump in there with them."

The results hark back to the finest moments of each artist's career — Ayers' pioneering mid-'70s soul-jazz hits, for instance, or Carn's spiritual excursions for the Black Jazz label — and reexamine them through a modern lens. In part, it's an exercise in reaching back: Young's studio is built on vintage analog technology, while the new compositions are heavily influenced by the elders' bodies of work. That was wholly intentional, Muhammad explains.

"I've always wanted to take my next life and go into archeology," he says. "It took me some time to really figure out that I was already doing that. Uncovering these records and the stories and lives that went into these records is what we do every day. From the technical aspect, the sound [of those records] is a factor in the way that they feel, so it's important for us to take some of the old and some of the new to capture where we are right now."

— Shaun Brady



Warp Speed Ahead

Emma-Jean Thackray gains momentum with her jazz-electro-hip-hop hybrid.

Many American listeners were introduced to the work of Emma-Jean Thackray on *Blue Note Re:imagined*, a vibrant compilation for which many of the brightest young talents on the British music scene offered fresh interpretations of label classics. They have some catching up to do.

The U.K. trumpeter, producer, beat-maker and all-around boundary-pusher is building on a body of work that includes two outstanding EPs, 2016's *Walrus* and 2018's *Ley Lines*, by way of her own label. Dubbed Movementt, the imprint is a subsidiary of Warp Records, a famed indie whose catalog includes electronic-music groundbreakers (Aphex Twin), eccentric rappers (Danny Brown) and genre-defying legends (Brian Eno).

Thackray received multiple offers from record companies to launch her own label, but she chose Warp in part because of its eclecticism, which echoes her own. "I didn't want to limit myself," she says. "I wanted to be able to put out a free-jazz record one month and a techno one the next."

Hip-hop is on the menu, too. Among her follow-ups to "Rain Dance"/"Wisdom," a propulsive blend of electro and jazz elements that became the first Movementt single, was a remix of her track "Open," featuring rhymes by West Coast MC Blu that celebrate being receptive to everything the world has to offer. In her words, "I'm just trying to show people the different sides of me."

Her multi-faceted approach has a solid foundation. She studied jazz and classical composition at tony institutions such as the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff and the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London. But she also immersed herself in the dance club scene during her early



teens — "Let's just say that recreationally it was full of fun," she notes, laughing — and studied the works of the jazz-obsessed hip-hop outfit A Tribe Called Quest and the late rapper-producer J Dilla as closely as any assigned text.

"Tribe is what made me want to get into beat-making," Thackray says. "I heard the way they could

open up this music and make it their own world, and that's what I started doing, sampling drums and things like that. And listening to Dilla made me a little bit more explorative in my crate-digging. Like, 'What is this Cambodian gong ensemble? What can I make from a bit of it?'"

Her *Blue Note Re:imagined* contribution is an inspired interpretation of "Speak No Evil" and "Night Dreamer," a pair of tracks by one of her personal heroes, saxophonist Wayne Shorter. But she definitely didn't want to duplicate them. "I always feel that unless you make it different from the original, why put it out?" she says. "We already have the original. There's no point in copying it."

If this approach strikes some listeners as strange, that's fine by her. "I used to feel incredibly bad if someone heard my music and thought it was weird," she admits. "But it's completely a point of pride now. It helped forge who I am."

— **Michael Roberts**



requisite

Gil Scott-Heron

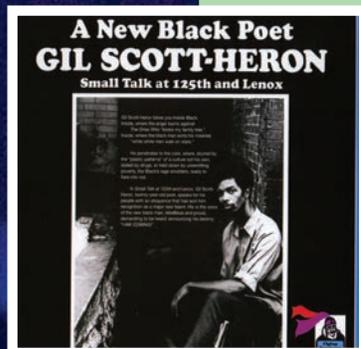
Small Talk at 125th and Lenox (Flying Dutchman, 1970)

On his debut recording, Gil Scott-Heron channeled the anger and disgust of Black America in startling, sometimes biting humor, laying out a blueprint for the rappers who would follow a decade later. Accompanied by a pair of conga players, the 20-year-old Scott-Heron rhythmically recited his urban and urbane poetry for an intimate and appreciative nightclub audience.

The opening “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” truly heralded something new, as Scott-Heron eviscerated mainstream culture and its numbing effects on the psyche, skewing the words of corporate commercialism as a wakeup call to his people. “The revolution will not go better with Coke,” he intoned with righteous indignation. “The revolution will not fight germs that cause bad breath/The revolution *will* put you in the driver’s seat.” Then there was the scathing “Whitey on the Moon,” a stark remonstrance of national priorities at the height of the space program: “A rat done bit my sister Nell/With Whitey on the moon/Her face and arms began to swell/And Whitey’s on the moon.”

As on “Brother,” Scott-Heron could be equally unsparing when addressing Black folks, taking to task pseudo street-corner revolutionaries who were more interested in sporting the right daishiki or Afro than in accomplishing anything truly valuable for the community. His very real ire was tempered by deep compassion, but unfortunately not for everyone, and his anti-gay diatribe “The Subject Was Faggots” foretells rap’s egregious attacks on homosexuality.

Accompanying himself on piano, Scott-Heron reluctantly showcased his fine singing voice on a couple of numbers — it would figure more prominently on future recordings — but for the most part, he, well, raps. His influence on hip-hop was well-recognized before his death in 2011. — **Bob Weinberg**



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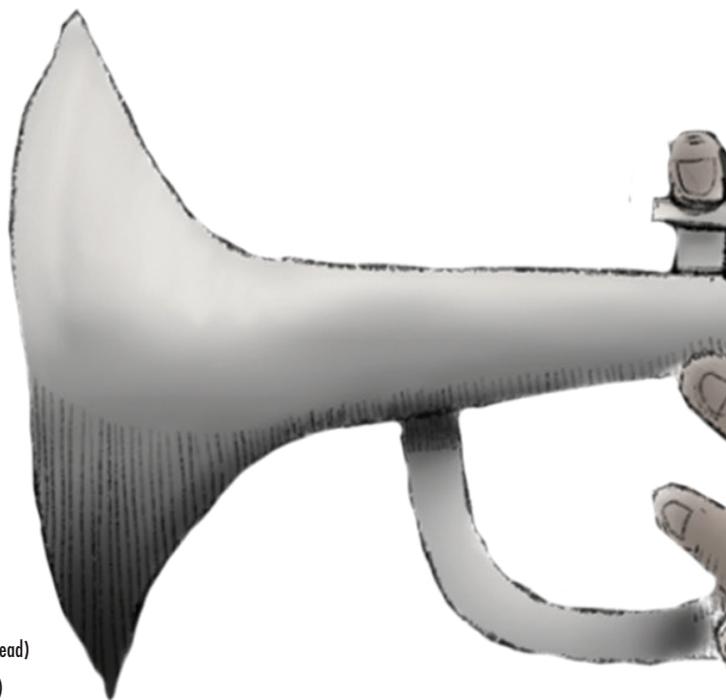
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DISC ONE: JAZZ IS DEAD

1. Gary Bartz, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Visions of Love" *JID006* (Jazz Is Dead)
2. Rzymuth, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Fall Afternoon" *JID004* (Jazz Is Dead)
3. Adrian Younge "James Mincey Jr." (single) (Jazz Is Dead)
4. João Donato, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Conexão" *JID001* (Jazz Is Dead)
5. Roy Ayers, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Sunflowers" *JID002* (Jazz Is Dead)
6. Doug Carn, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Windfall" *JID005* (Jazz Is Dead)
7. Marcos Valle, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "A Gente Volta Amanhã" *JID003* (Jazz Is Dead)
8. Brian Jackson, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Nancy Wilson" *JID001* (Jazz Is Dead)
9. Roy Ayers, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "Synchronize Vibration" *JID002* (Jazz Is Dead)
10. Gary Bartz, Adrian Younge, Ali Shaheed Muhammad "The Message" *JID006* (Jazz Is Dead)
11. The Midnight Hour "Jazz Is Dead" *JID001* (Jazz Is Dead)

DISC TWO: JAZZ IS NOW

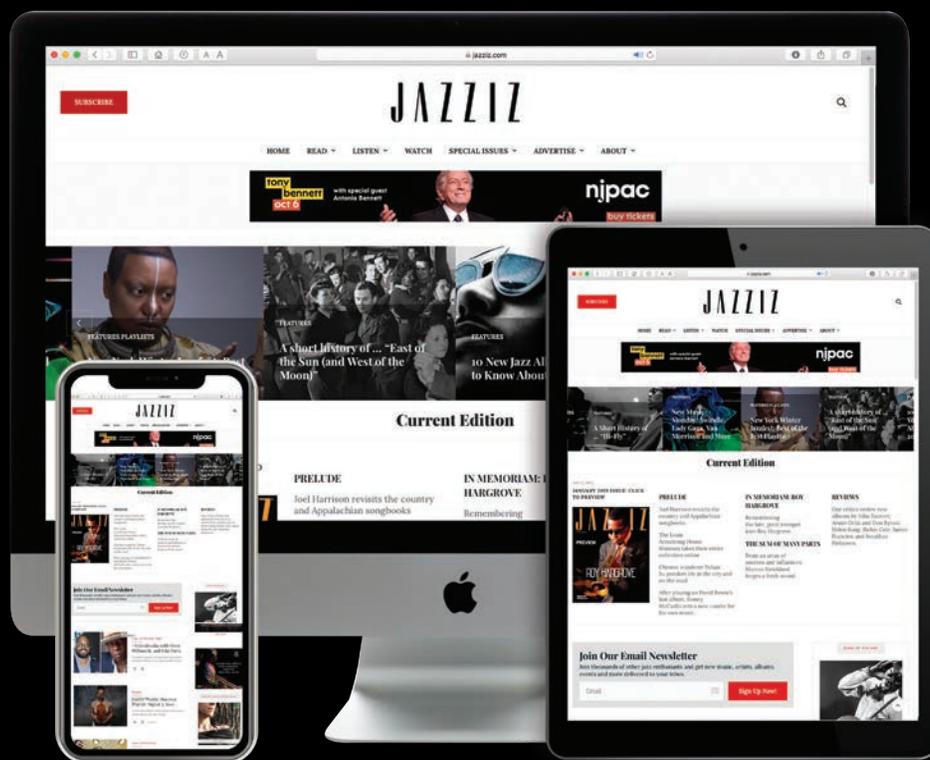
1. Tony Glauzi "Once Upon a Dream" *When It All Comes Crashing Down* (Outside in Music)
2. Lyle Workman "Noble Savage" *Uncommon Measures* (Blue Canoe)
3. Chad Lefkowitz-Brown "All the Things You Are" *Standard Sessions* (La Reserve)
4. Jihye Lee Orchestra "Struggles Give You Strength" *Daring Mind* (Motéma Music)
5. Lafayette Gilchrist "The Midnight Step Rag" *NOW* (Lafayette Gilchrist Music)
6. Pete Malinverni & Juliet Kurtzman "Body and Soul" *Candlelight: Love in the Time of Cholera* (Saranac)
7. Daniel Blake "Cry of the East" *Da Fé* (Sunnyside)
8. Cowboys & Frenchmen "Where Is Your Wealth" *Our Highway* (Outside in Music)
9. Elise Morris "Mardi Gras" *Dancin' With the Boys* (Jazzbo)
10. Jarrod Lawson "Love Isn't Always Enough" *Be the Change* (Dome)
11. Yoko Miwa Trio "Largo Desolato" *Songs of Joy* (Ubuntu Music)
12. Jana Herzen "With an Open Heart" (Live at Joe's Pub) *Jana Herzen Live* (Motéma Music)
13. David Garfield feat. Marcus Miller, Steve Jordan, Lenny Castro, Chuck Loeb "Rainbow Seeker" *Jazz Outside the Box* (Creatchy)





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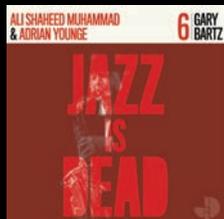


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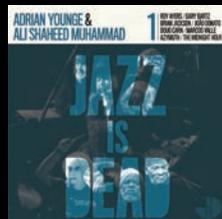
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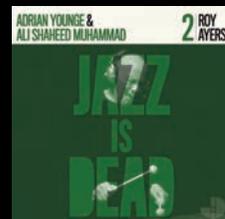
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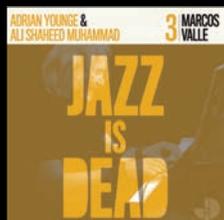
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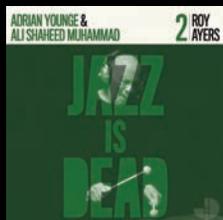
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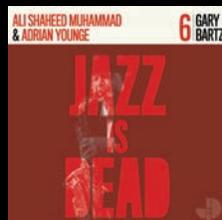
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JID002



GARY BARTZ, ADRIAN YOUNGE, ALI SHAHEED MUHAMMAD
JID006



THE MIDNIGHT HOUR
JID001



TONY GLAUZI
When It All Comes Crashing Down



LYLE WORKMAN
Uncommon Measures



CHAD LEFKOWITZ-BROWN
Standard Sessions



JIHYE LEE ORCHESTRA
Daring Mind



LAFAYETTE GILCHRIST
NOW



PETE MALINVERNI & JULIET KURTZMAN
Candlelight: Love in the Time of Cholera



DANIEL BLAKE
Da Fé



COWBOYS & FRENCHMEN
Our Highway



ELISE MORRIS
With the Boys



JARROD LAWSON
Be the Change



YOKO MIWA TRIO
Songs of Joy



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Jazz Spoken Here

Archie Shepp bridges generations of poetic expression.

By Bob Weinberg

Decades before Public Enemy and NWA, Archie Shepp was electrifying audiences with his gritty urban poetry. “Where tracks is, the money ain’t/It’s all in them tracks,” the saxophonist recited on “Scag,” a performance captured on a recording of his landmark concert at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1965. The arco drone of Barre Phillips’ bass strings, the anxious punctuation of Bobby Hutcherson’s vibraphone and the nervous patter of Joe Chambers’ drums evoked a feverish jones for the narcotic embrace of heroin. Shepp’s impassioned street reportage revealed an eye for the chilling detail: “And as our various bloods commingled on the ceiling there, I said ‘Scag ain’t dope, it’s death!’”

An acolyte of John Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, Shepp is celebrated for his anguished, edgy tenor saxophone, a powerful voice of 1960s-’70s avant-garde jazz that sounded a primal cry from the heart of the Black community. But early on he realized his words could be every bit as potent as the sounds he elicited from his instrument. So it’s not unreasonable that the 83-year-old saxophonist would find value in the verbal dynamism of rap, last year releasing an album with his nephew, rapper and vocalist Raw Poetic (Jason Moore), and multi-instrumentalist and producer Damu the Fudgemunk (Earl Davis). The resultant

Ocean Bridges (Redefinition) connects generations and genres in an organic way, with Shepp’s bluesy tenor lines adding depth and texture. Tracks titled “Professor Shepp’s Agenda” are woven throughout, as the revered jazz elder speaks or teaches his bandmates chord changes.

The seeds of the collaboration were sown when Moore and his mother, Shepp’s younger sister, attended the 2016 Kennedy Center Honors during which Shepp was recognized as a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master. After the ceremony, Moore visited his uncle backstage. “We had danced around the idea of doing something together for a few years,” says Moore, 41, who lives in Virginia just outside Washington, D.C. “And he was like, ‘Hey, you need to be putting out more music.’ So I said, ‘We need to do something.’ He said yes, and I honestly thought he was just joking around. So I left, and then somebody from the label was like, ‘Yo, you need to follow up with him.’”

Shepp first recorded with his nephew 20 years ago in less-than-ideal circumstances — during a blizzard, in Moore’s Centerville home, which had no heat. The efforts were for naught. Moore lost the tape. “Oh my God, I’m still depressed about that,” he says. “I was so green at the time.”



**Sachal Vasandani/Romain Collin
Midnight Shelter (Edition)**

Vocalist Vasandani and pianist Collin have crafted a stark and lovely album that rivals John Coltrane's classic with Johnny Hartman for intimacy. Recorded during the COVID-19 lockdown, the duo's *Midnight Shelter* reflects a longing for connection and nostalgia for simpler times, as in the achingly wistful "Summer, No School." Vasandani's velvety vocals are particularly well-suited to Nick Drake's "River Man" and Abbey Lincoln's "Throw It Away," and Collin's dark-hued accompaniment adds layers of atmosphere. A rendition of Wayne Shorter's "Dance Cadaverous" is particularly moving, as are Vasandani's impossibly romantic lyrics. You can literally hear the singer breathing between lines, a very personal punctuation not unlike a saxophonist's fingers clacking on the keys.

NOW PLAYING

This time, the stars aligned. Shepp says Moore's artistry has grown more sophisticated over the years. "As far as rap is concerned, I found he had matured quite a bit," he says by phone from his home in Massachusetts in mid-December. "But he was always quite 'on it.' The things he wanted to say he expressed very eloquently. And now I feel a sort of maturation in the thematic elements. He's evolved."

As has the jazz/hip-hop hybrid. Late-'80s recordings often emphasized turntable-scratching or relied heavily on samples from classic jazz records. *Ocean Bridges'* live in-studio instrumentation captures the immediacy of a free-flowing jam session by a group of musicians who've worked together for years and their honored guest. "I've never looked at myself as a hip-hop musician," says Davis, a.k.a. Damu, 36, a D.C. native, who plays drums and vibraphone on the album, engages in some turntable scratching and mixed and produced the tracks, as well. "I just felt like hip-hop was my instrument to create jazz. I didn't want to do any snap-your-fingers, '60s kind of generic, 'Hey, cool, play that horn!' I didn't want to do any of that. It had its place. So we have all of these ideas and influences and points of view in a room, but all of us have been exposed to these different worlds."

Ocean Bridges wasn't Shepp's first foray into the world of hip-hop. He's performed with Mos Def and Public Enemy's Chuck D, the latter of whom appeared on his 2007 recording *Gemini*. "Chuck is very much a part of what's going on, in terms of the Black struggle and the Afro-American liberation movement," Shepp says. "He's been very inspiring and is very well-informed."

High praise from someone of Shepp's stature, who was making fight-the-power statements in verse and music at the height of the Civil Rights movement. "Rufus (Swung His Face at Last to the Wind, Then His Neck Snapped)" he titled a scathing instrumental track on his 1964 recording *Four for Trane*. Directly after the assassination of Malcolm X, Shepp recorded the spoken-word track "Malcolm, Malcolm, Semper Malcolm" for

his 1965 masterpiece *Fire Music*. And "The Wedding," from 1966's *Live in San Francisco*, provided another harrowing portrait of street life, documenting a woman giving birth on the floor of a church. "Those were, to some extent, influenced by Amiri Baraka," says Shepp, citing the late critic, author and poet. "I found that poetry allowed me to express things more directly vis-à-vis music. People can interpret a musical line or phrase however they want, but with poetry, it's specific and describes exactly what one wants to say. It cannot be misconstrued."

Then there was 1972's *Attica Blues*, a soul- and R&B-infused album that Shepp released in reaction to the 1971 slaughter of rioting inmates at a New York prison. Shepp felt he could reach more mainstream listeners by downplaying avant-garde elements in his music, meeting audiences halfway in terms of melody and groove. In a way, he's accomplishing a similar aim with *Ocean Bridges*, as well as with *Let My People Go*, a recent duet album of spirituals and ballads with pianist Jason Moran, neither of which compromises his artistic ambitions and both of which resonate in the Black Lives Matter era.

Like rap, Shepp's scabrous, politically charged music was denounced by American critics who felt threatened by both its form and content. Fortunately, it found audiences here and abroad who understood the medium and the message. "At the same time that an older generation was being turned off, a younger generation was beginning to get into that music and were inspired by it," he says. "It made some people nervous, but it turned on a generation of young people who were wide open and hungry for a new experience." ■

"I found that poetry allowed me to express things more directly vis-à-vis music. People can interpret a musical line or phrase however they want, but with poetry, it's specific."

The Loading Doc

David Zheng fills a prescription for groove with his genre-blurring debut album.

By Jonathan Widran

Having recently received his Master's in Jazz Piano Performance from Manhattan School of Music, David Zheng is fully aware that the more traditional-minded folks in the jazz community might hear the boundary-pushing, electronica-and-beats-based fusion he stirs up on his debut album *Loading ...* (Ropeadope) and wonder, as he muses, "What the hell is this?"

Just as the multi-talented Rhode Island native switched gears from his classical training when he discovered jazz in middle school, he's followed his passions wherever they've led him. For several years, his schedule was booked tight, attending school during the day and leading his New York City-based ensembles at night. He played straightahead acoustic jazz with a quartet in small clubs as well as more sonically adventurous hip-hop/neo-soul in residencies at Rockwood Music Hall and Arlene's Grocery.

And, when the COVID-19 lockdown hit, he embraced the opportunity to whip out his Ableton home-studio recording software. Merging jazz, R&B and hip-hop sensibilities, and featuring collaborations with and performances by top talents from a multitude of genres in the NYC music community, *Loading ...* finds Zheng floating his jazzy sensibilities atop a sophisticated blend of hard-hitting dance-floor grooves, intricately textured electronics and dreamy atmospheres. In many ways, the 10-track collection is the manifestation of his graduate thesis, which

explored the relationship between jazz and dance music.

Make no mistake, Zheng has serious jazz cred. The one-time trumpeter studied with Blue Note recording artist Kendrick Scott and MacArthur Genius Fellow Miguel Zenón. His mentor was gospel pianist, vocalist and music director Damien Sneed, who's worked with Aretha Franklin and Wynton Marsalis. During his undergrad years at Princeton, where he graduated magna cum laude in 2014, he was heavily involved in the *Downbeat*-award-winning jazz program there. And he's opened shows for Chris Potter, John Pizzarelli, Marc Cary and Terence Blanchard, among others.

Yet, as he honed his distinctly cosmopolitan sensibilities, Zheng found himself listening more and more to artists who were pushing the contemporary boundaries of jazz. It all started when a friend took him to a show by keyboardist BIGYUKI, who got the crowd up and dancing with his swirl of jazz, classical, hop-hop, soul, rock, dance and electronica. Zheng's vibe is also heavily influenced by a young generation of genre-blending innovators including KNOWER, GoldLink, Pomo, Young Franco, Channel Tres, Duckwrth and Tom Misch.

"The concept for *Loading ...* grew out of my extensive jazz background and heavy immersion in the beat music scene in New York," Zheng says. "For all the jazz I had been hearing

for the past 10 years, I felt like the one element that was missing was dance music. It had been largely ignored in the jazz community. Robert Glasper sparked the neo-soul/hip-hop jazz fusion movement, but for too long I felt that my love for jazz and the excitement I felt listening to dance music were totally separate worlds. Until I heard BIGYUKI and what some of these other great artists were doing, I wouldn't have had the courage to do an album like this.

"I think what makes it unique is that I'm not just experimenting with a mix of dance music and jazz, but incorporating strands from blues to hip-hop," he adds. "What is it that Nicholas Payton calls it, #BAM? I wanted this to be a dance-oriented album that incorporated different strands of Black American Music, from jazz and blues to R&B, neo-soul and hip-hop. It's a very different experience when I'm producing compared to the live jazz context, thinking more about the structure and sound quality as opposed to just notes. As a producer, with the help of my incredible mixer Joel Gardella, I was focused primarily on sound design and sound quality."

For Zheng, the artist moniker ZENG is not simply a culturally neutral appropriation of his Chinese surname. It's a way to establish his brand as the leader of an evolving musical collective that spotlights his dynamic collaborators as much as himself. Created mostly remotely during COVID, the project allowed his collaborators to create and record their parts at their own unhurried pace.

Jazz ensembles usually thrive on live interaction in a studio setting, but

"For too long I felt that my love for jazz and the excitement I felt listening to dance music were totally separate worlds."

Zheng found the lockdown-imposed file exchange/feedback process quite efficient. The result is an inspiring demonstration of the fact that, as he says, "when we're apart, we're still together. Music is the therapeutic anchor that comforted and uplifted us all during this difficult time. 'CNS.als' is a perfect example. I had performed it with my live band and wanted to create a dance production version. So I made a skeleton demo and sent it to [vocalist] J. Hoard, who sent back vocal tracks, and took liberties with the incredible lyrics. Then I sent what we had to Braxton Cook for some sax parts, and finally to [vocalist] Joy Elyse, who sang and wrote the bridge. Like all the tracks, a total collaborative effort."

In whatever way listeners choose to experience the music on *Loading ...*, they're sure to notice the quirky way the titles are presented, from the opening track "STARGAZING.als" to the closer "RED LIGHT.als." "The all caps and .als at the end of each song is the file format for Abelton, the program I created the beats in. I put them there because I want people to see the album as I saw it in my actual workflow when I was creating it. And the fact that they still have the file attachment at the end implies they are still works-in-progress, which is how I basically view all my music."

Zheng is a work in progress himself, releasing his new album while completing his medical training at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. His academic research at Princeton, MIT, Johns Hopkins, Yale and the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine explored the connections of music with cognitive neuroscience, psychiatry and neurology. Rather than choose music over medicine, he can envision a path for himself like that of Richard Kogan. A clinical professor of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical Center and the Artistic Director of the Weill Cornell Music and Medicine Program, Kogan's also a concert pianist.

"I always remember what [vibraphonist] Stefon Harris, former Associate Dean and Director of the

Jazz Arts program at MSM said: 'The heart of jazz is empathy,' " says Zheng. "Underlying both the cerebral and spontaneous, uninhibited creative side of jazz is the interpersonal relationship between band members and those musical conversations. To me, psychiatry and jazz are two sides of the same coin. My goal is to have my own practice and stay involved in the local music scene, while producing more albums like *Loading ...* that involve the great talents of that community." ■



Michael Lington
***Alone Together* (Peak)**

Early in the COVID-19 lockdown, veteran contemporary-jazz saxophonist Michael Lington hooked up with the StageIt platform for a weekly state-of-the-art livestream from his home studio. Performances included split-screen duets with fellow smooth jazz artists (Dave Koz, Nick Colionne, Brian Culbertson, Boney James) and an array of genre-crossing vocalists (Sy Smith, Kenny Lattimore, Chris Walker, Javier Colon and Billy Dean). This perfectly and poignantly titled collection, which features the audio portion of some of Lington's most compelling duets, offers longtime fans an opportunity to experience choice tracks from his two-decade-plus career in a fresh, inspiring and technologically of-the-moment setting.

NOW PLAYING

When Biggie Met **Big Chief**

Donald Harrison played a pivotal role in the development of a hip-hop legend.

By Larry Blumenfeld

Donald Harrison first met Biggie Smalls on a stoop in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn. Harrison, then in his early 20s, was playing alto saxophone in drummer Art Blakey's band at the time, having moved to New York City from his native New Orleans. His was the arc of a rising star, among a cadre of players that critics had dubbed "young lions" for their promise to revive jazz's former glory.

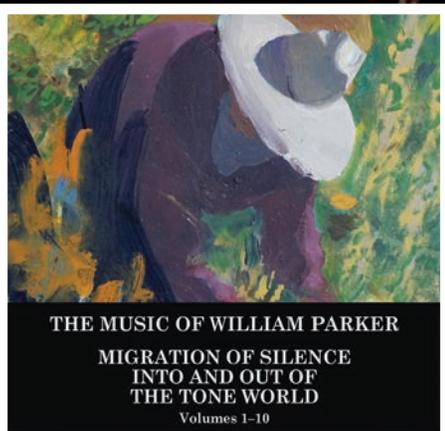
"Biggie was just Chris Wallace back then, maybe 13 or 14," Harrison says. It was nearly a decade before Wallace, as Notorious B.I.G., would release *Ready To Die*, establishing him as a rapper of singular force and presence, hip-hop royalty until he was shot to death in 1997. "But even then you could tell Chris was brilliant, that he was special," Harrison says, talking by phone from his home in New Orleans, to which he returned in 1990. "I was passing by, and he just said hello. We started talking, and it grew into a friendship. He was a lot younger, but he wanted to learn about music. And that was all I needed to hear."

Despite his "young lion" beginnings, Harrison, 60, was never a neo-traditionalist. Rather, he is among the most open-minded and freest-thinking of modern jazz musicians, with a breadth of experience that emboldens this attitude: He has played hard bop and bebop with Blakey and Roy Haynes; funk with the Headhunters; Afro-Caribbean jazz with Eddie Palmieri; and soul-jazz with Dr. Lonnie Smith, among others.

Shortly after that first meeting, Wallace was at Harrison's Fort Greene house nearly every day. Harrison gave Wallace homework. He had him listen to Charlie

Parker, to hear how he constructed phrases and how he created a new sense of rhythmic flow. He had him scat a Cannonball Adderley solo, listen to Ella Fitzgerald's vocals. "We worked on tonguing and speed and agility," Harrison says. "I loved rap, but wanted him to understand that it's important for listeners to hear every word, each note." They worked on enunciation. "It's such a simple thing, but it's powerful." In Wallace, he sensed the discipline that had facilitated his own mastery.

And maybe, in the power, boldness and confidence Wallace would soon project as Biggie Smalls, in the sense of community radiated by rappers in general, Harrison recognized something of his own roots in



William Parker

Migration of Silence Into and Out of the Tone Worlds, Volumes 1-10
(AUM Fidelity)

Bassist and composer Parker, a true father figure to New York's "creative music" community, releases a 10-disc boxed set that defies genre and involves 10 different musical configurations, from duets to a big band. This is no career retrospective or summary statement. It is a collection of new recordings of original compositions from a musician who has long defied category and now displays the full range of his abilities and vision; it is testimony to a boundless aesthetic from Parker and his ever-growing community.

NOW PLAYING

New Orleans. For all his acclaim as a jazz saxophonist, bandleader and educator, Harrison is best known to some in his hometown as a Big Chief, carrying on the legacy of his father, who was Big Chief of four different communities of what were then called Mardi Gras Indians and which Harrison now refers to as Afro New Orleans Cultural Groups. Dressed in 8-foot-tall, 6-foot-wide feathered and beaded suits and accompanied by "queens," "spy boys" and others, Big Chiefs are announced by drumbeats and chants; they bark out, with impeccable cadence, improvised lines that blend boasts, promises, threats and spiritual uplift. Little compares with the sight of a mass of colored feathers and sparkling beads, extending the whole of a man into a giant, walking soft sculpture, which is one big part of the ritual and pageantry of this tradition; it reveals little but two eyes aglow with purpose. "That glare in the eye, that look of supreme confidence," Harrison says. Much like rappers at the top of their game.

Harrison remembers a young Chris Wallace doing an approximation of a Lindy Hop in his Fort Greene home. "Because he knew what I know," Harrison says. "That jazz and hip-hop and all the music connected to these styles are dance music. It is meant to move our bodies as well as our minds and spirits. It's all part of transcendence." When Harrison performs at the annual Jazz and Heritage Festival in New Orleans, he moves easily from a bebop tune to funk, sometimes setting down his alto saxophone to grab the mic and sing or rap and to dance, "because it's all one thing," he says. Last year, at Manhattan's Zinc Bar, he led a quintet that included DJ Logic, who scratched on dual turntables and manipulated samples drawn from a library Harrison has compiled and composed.

"Jazz and hip-hop and all the music connected to these styles are dance music. It is meant to move our bodies as well as our minds and spirits. It's all part of transcendence."

So it should have come as no surprise when, in 2019, Harrison gathered his quartet in a studio and recorded his own version of "Old Town Road," with which rapper Lil Nas X topped the Billboard Hot 100 for a record-breaking 19 weeks. By then, Lil Nas X had already remade his own hit, this time joined by country-music star Billy Ray Cyrus.

"I was checking out jazz on YouTube, and this song popped up as one of the side video suggestions," Harrison says. "I was intrigued because I saw a brother with a cowboy hat. I was amazed at the creativity of how the music blended country and 'trap' music. I loved Lil Nas X's dancing, confidence, and swagger." He also heard some of his jazz colleagues calling the song "garbage." "I recorded a jazz version to show them that this song could be taken seriously, and to demonstrate how jazz is open-minded and inclusive," he explains. "And I knew my whole group would play to a new set of rules." He created an accompanying video, which he researched and edited himself, that traces the history of African-American dance styles.

"To get to where I am," Harrison says, "I first learned through playing with the innovative masters of every era of jazz. I played with New Orleans jazz masters who were playing in the '20s. I played with icons from the swing era. I played with bebop masters. I played with post-bop, modal, free, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Puerto Rican, Afro-Brazilian, fusion, smooth, organ, and jazz masters of many styles. I played with blues masters from Mississippi, Louisiana, Memphis and Chicago. I learned other styles of music from the master innovators of funk, soul, classical, and then started hearing those styles blended with jazz. And I found my sound, which is another hybrid swinging beat, because I took hip-hop seriously." ■



Jazz
Gener

re: ations

Five artists explore the intersections of jazz and hip-hop and point possible ways forward for Black American Music.

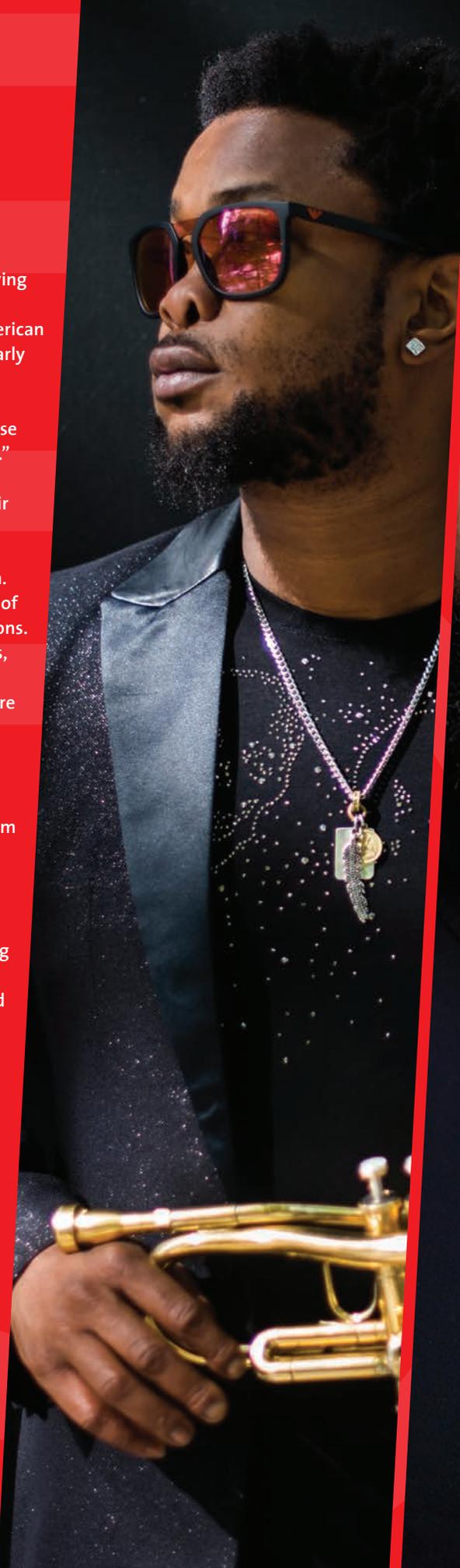
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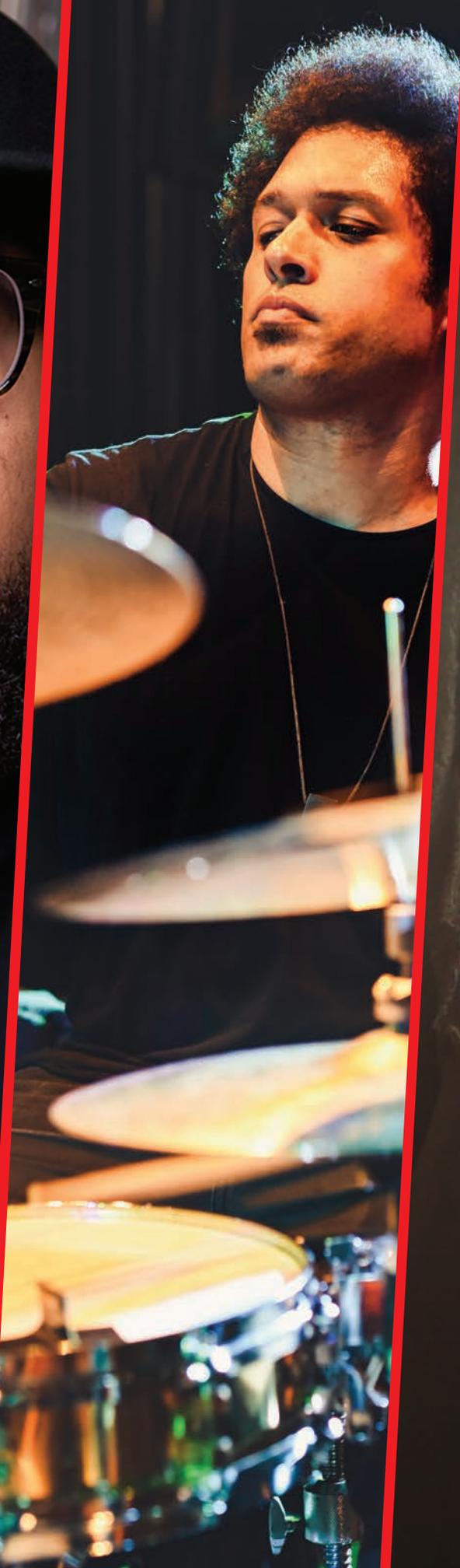
back around the turn of the 21st century, commentators trying to situate the hip-hop movement within American music — and particularly as part of the African-American timeline — came up with the phrase “from bebop to hip-hop.” It didn’t fare particularly well: Many hip-hop artists had yet to work their way back to bebop, and most jazz artists had a fair amount of disdain for hip-hop music and especially rap, its most conspicuous innovation.

But that was 20 years ago which, in terms of cultural evolution, represents several generations. While there are plenty of purists in both camps, younger musicians working today in either genre have proved much more forgiving. They’re anxious to incorporate a myriad of sounds and techniques from both camps, others as well. Stigmas have dropped away; moreover, these artists have worked to create organic fusions that go beyond merely superimposing one idiom on top of the other.

One reason is obvious: Jazz musicians under the age of 40 have grown up with hip-hop as the predominant popular music of their time. No surprise there. In the late 1960s, young jazz musicians such as Gary Burton, Herbie Hancock, John McLaughlin and Chick Corea had no issue bringing their jazz sensibilities to the rock music of their own day (even as their jazz elders similarly sneered at The Beatles and The Who). Out of that came fusion, the dominant jazz style of the 1970s.

Will the continually evolving jazz/hip-hop hybrid have the same effect on jazz in the 2020s? Some say it has already gone there, as indicated by the popularity of non-swing rhythms and the influential work of Kamasi Washington, Robert Glasper and Joel Ross, to name a few — many of them signed to Blue Note Records, which has cyclically captured and blazoned the jazz ethos. Whatever its shelf life, the intersection of jazz and hip-hop has become crowded with skillful and passionate artists who could well direct the musical traffic for years to come. We spoke with several of them.





"maurice" "mobbetta" brown

Trumpet player and Chicago-area native Maurice Brown moved to New Orleans to study with clarinetist Alvin Batiste. While there, he began conceptualizing his 2004 album *Hip to Bop*, among the most effective early mashups of jazz and hip-hop. Since then, Brown, 40, has collaborated on projects ranging from blues (Tedeschi Trucks Band) to neo-soul (Musiq Soulchild) to, increasingly, hip-hop (De La Soul, Talib Kweli). Before the pandemic, he toured widely with rapper-producer Anderson .Paak.

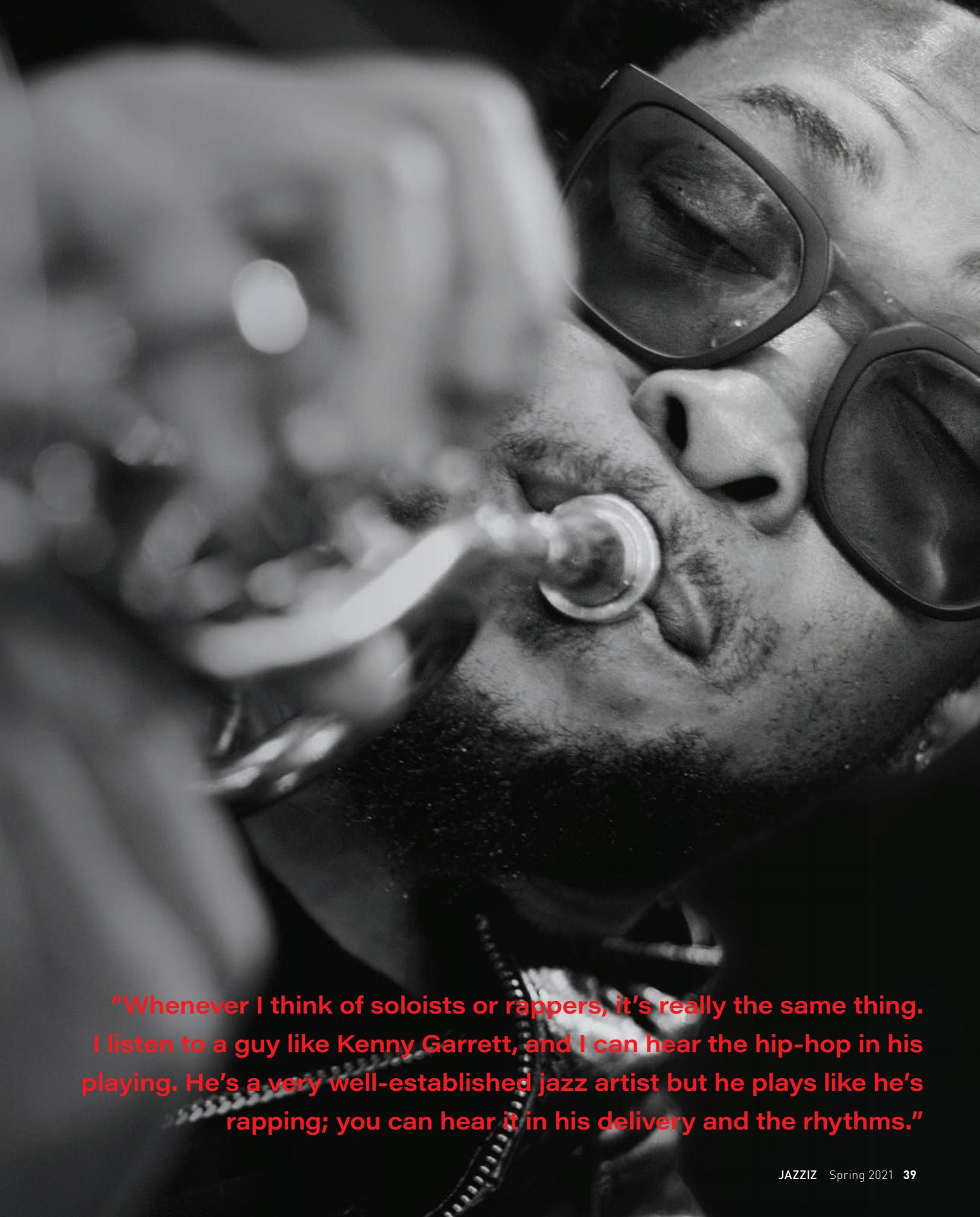
When I was making *Hip to Bop*, my whole process was to do a jazz record but I really wanted it to have an urban pulse. The biggest challenge was figuring out how to do that without watering it down. But from a composer's point of view, it was natural, because I loved hip-hop and I loved jazz. I think a lot of people tried to do it the opposite way. They wanted to be "relevant," so they were like, "Oh, let's do hip-hop jazz!" They had the jazz chops but they didn't know a lot about hip-hop; but I was already working with some of the best [hip-hop] producers in the game, doing horns, arrangements, some producing work.

One thing I did, I made sure that harmonically speaking, I wasn't limiting myself. A lot of hip-hop music is very sample-based; it'd probably be a couple bars looped, and that would be pretty much the gist of the sound. I was trying to stay away from that, to write melodies that were so catchy that if there were no words,

you would just hear the words already. I was trying to approach the music from a very vocal standpoint, so I wasn't looking at myself as a trumpet player anymore; I was looking at myself as a singer, or as a rapper, when I was improvising. Whenever I think of soloists or rappers, it's really the same thing. I listen to a guy like Kenny Garrett, and I can hear the hip-hop in his playing. He's a very well-established jazz artist but he plays like he's rapping; you can hear it in his delivery and the rhythms.

It's crazy to see how many cats now are all about this hip-hop/jazz movement, because at that time, it really wasn't that popular. There was definitely a lack of people who could do both. The closest you'd get would actually be some dope, very talented producers who just really loved jazz — and they played hip-hop. But most of the jazz cats wouldn't even touch [hip-hop]. Some of those cats thought it was disrespectful to jazz, but it was the exact opposite. They [hip-hop musicians] respected jazz so highly they wanted to make a tribute to it: "This is so beautiful, how can I change this around and flip it and give it a different feeling?"

It's the whole art form of sampling. You know, when I first started getting into producing, I was like [grouchy voice], "I don't want to sample, I don't think that's right." And then I saw the art form in sampling, and I thought, "Oh man, this is something else." That's why I look at [rapper] J Dilla in the same lens as I can look at Charlie Parker — because it's really that deep, the way that everything comes together to create a whole. You take so many different samples and different keys and different tempos and just make a whole cohesive piece. It's just mind-blowing, actually, when you really look at it.



"Whenever I think of soloists or rappers, it's really the same thing. I listen to a guy like Kenny Garrett, and I can hear the hip-hop in his playing. He's a very well-established jazz artist but he plays like he's rapping; you can hear it in his delivery and the rhythms."

om'mas keith

Om'Mas Keith, 44, grew up in a jazz household: Both his parents inhabited New York's avant-garde jazz scene of the 1970s and '80s. While studying drums with jazz icon Max Roach at UMass Amherst, Keith also scored an internship at RCA Records, which whetted his appetite for pop music and production. Well known as a songwriter, engineer and studio owner, he won a Grammy as one of the producers on singer Frank Ocean's breakthrough album in 2013, and has worked with Jay-Z, John Legend, Erykah Badu and a host of other top pop artists.

for me, the thing that jazz and hip-hop have in common is the attitude — the willingness to break rules and push the boundaries. Another thing, and it's related, is that musicians from both genres historically come from nothing. Nothing. You were lucky to have had any instruments, anything, to learn how to play — unless you were like a pastor's kid; those were the kids who would have pianos in the house. Only by the grace of our parents, ancestors and mentors were we able to get any insight. That's a common thread.

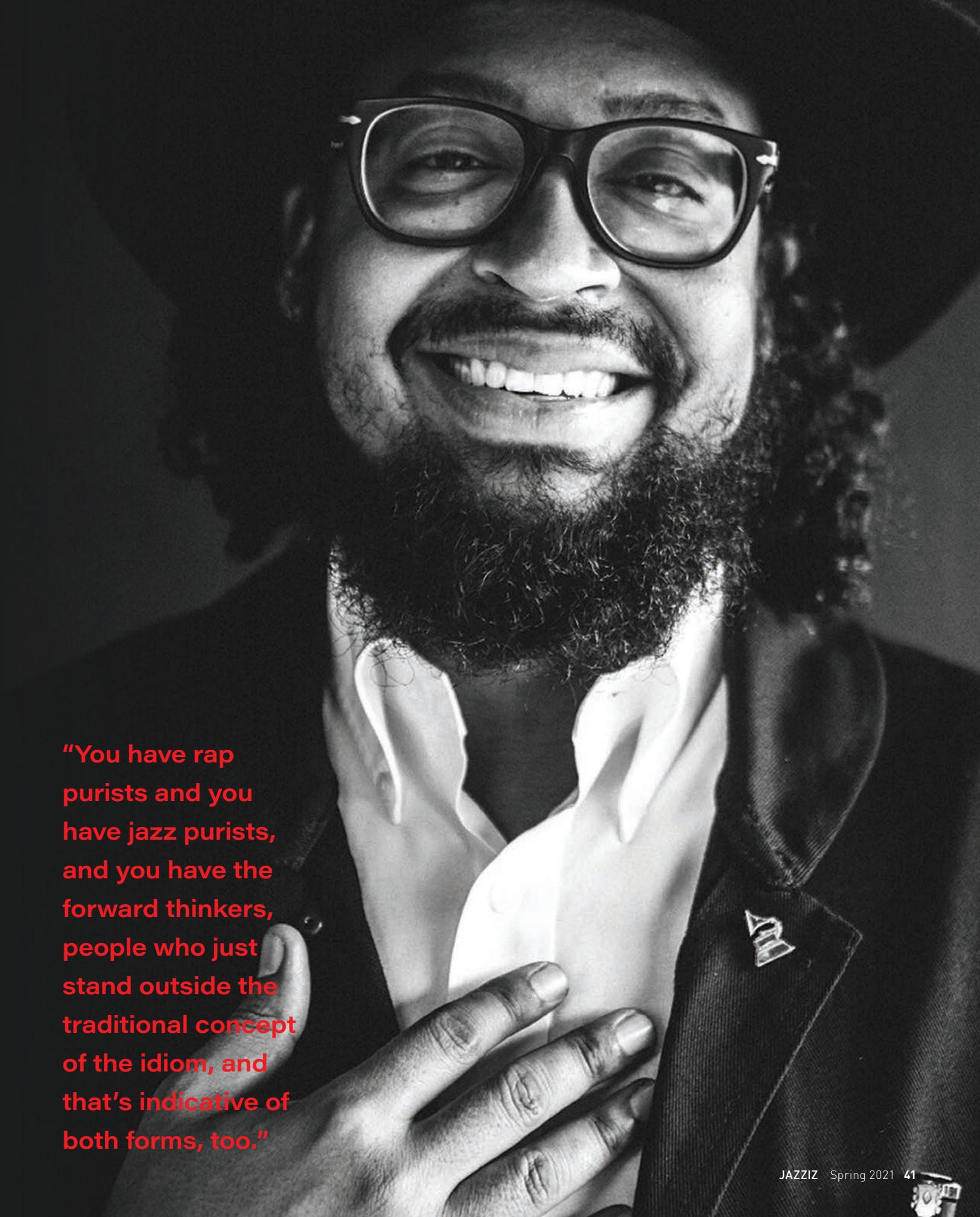
So imagine the attitude that you have as a human being when you come from a disadvantaged place, and the whole odds are against you. That is definitely something that bridges us together, that mindset of "gotta make it happen" and necessity being the mother of invention. That's why there's so much invention; that's why Grandmaster Flash invented his techniques — because those

things weren't there for him. John Coltrane had to devise his own theory and write it down.

You have concepts that ring true in both genres. You have rap purists and you have jazz purists, and you have the forward thinkers, people who just stand outside the traditional concept of the idiom, and that's indicative of both forms, too. It's almost like people think jazz musicians and hip-hop producers are so different and outside the scope of society. But then they become part of the mainstream culture. I mean, cats were dissing Bob James records, and now, as we all know, they sound great, and everyone samples them. That happens in hip-hop, too.

Ageism is a real thing in both worlds; that's a not-so-positive thing that's similar. I mean, we always have those who exalt the elders, but then you have cats saying, "Man, I'm not on that old shit. I'm getting onto that new shit." But if you're trying to demonstrate what's inside you, and if it's old school, you shouldn't be criticized for it.

You can't have hip-hop without jazz: It's all taken from that, sonically and rhythmically. Really, all that matters is what does it sound like? But obviously, cats also knew: "What does it look like?" Jazz musicians love being fly; hip-hoppers love being fly. [Trap music pioneer] Gucci Mane loves silk shirts — and so does Wayne Shorter; he wears fly silk shirts, too. It's all part of the swagger. And supreme swaggy rhythm, the desire to explore rhythm — that's the bridge between both worlds. That's why I always try to bridge the gap and make sure cats know what happened before, because more and more now, our people know less and less about our history. They know the image of Thelonious [Monk], but not the recording.



"You have rap purists and you have jazz purists, and you have the forward thinkers, people who just stand outside the traditional concept of the idiom, and that's indicative of both forms, too."



makaya mcCraven

Since releasing his 2015 album *In The Moment*, Chicago-based “beat scientist” Makaya McCraven’s heavily collaged mixtape albums have made him a worldwide sensation (while also putting the Chicago-based record label International Anthem on the map). His African-American father is a jazz drummer, his mother a Hungarian vocalist specializing in Eastern European folk music. And, while growing up in Massachusetts, McCraven, 37, was mentored by jazz legends Archie Shepp and Yusef Lateef. A powerhouse jazz drummer of notable sensitivity, he’s worked with artists from Kurt Elling to Jeff Parker. His most recent album, 2020’s *We’re New Again*, is a reimagining of music by Gil Scott-Heron, whom many artists rightfully consider a godfather of hip-hop.

think of jazz musicians as being quite studied, people who are interested in mastering their craft and taking part in the community of musicians that improvise — but also are really open to just finding new music to inspire them. Duke Ellington has a quote where he says that jazz is like a tree: You can follow it down to the roots, but if you go up to the branches, it incorporates a little bit of everything it touches.

There’s a direct lineage in the evolution of Black American music, and the many forms and attributes that are shared between these various genres, and how, in the progression of time, these influence each other. If you go through the record collection in a Black household through the last 80 years, you’ll find jazz, R & B, soul, funk and hip-hop, because it’s just generations of a diaspora. Hearing all this talk about, “Oh, they’re breaking boundaries by mixing jazz and hip-hop,” I feel like this is the history. It’s the relentless study and search for new music and new sound to put through the process of jazz

— the process of mastering your craft, taking part in the legacy of the music, not necessarily by emulating those before you, but by participating in the culture of those before you. I very much think hip-hop is like that.

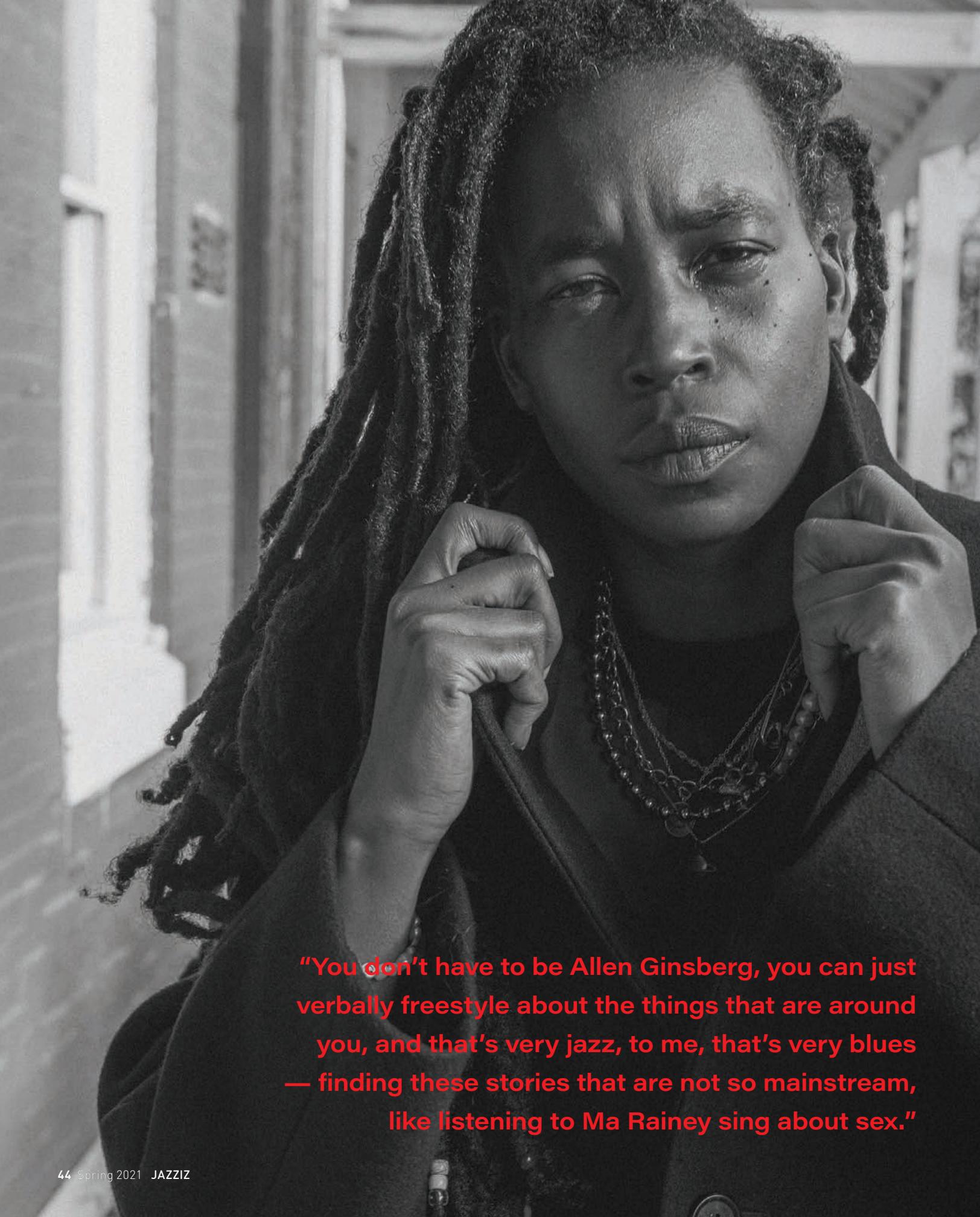
Stylistically, there’s other ways to see these connections. One of the things about hip-hop musicians was finding these old jazz records or listening to records they may have grown up with, and then repurposing them, you know, through modern techniques of sampling, chopping things up — a lot of what I do. But I find there’s a lot of similarities there with jazz, too. I think of all of this music in some regards as “loop” music. We’re dealing with smaller loops in hip-hop, [but] there is a kinship there with jazz. Jazz operates, in the classic mainstream model, as a longer loop, say, a recurring form such as AABA, and it goes over and over and over and over [with improvisations within that form].

Another thing you find in a lot of classic jazz is a kind of sampling. You go through all those old Blue Note records and you learn what we’ll call “the language.” And within that language, there are shared tags, right? There are licks. There are people writing contrafact melodies over existing changes; there are similar songs that have slight alterations that cats stole from each other, or just renamed; there are certain intros and outros to pieces that everybody knows. I think the idea of reusing ideas, and repurposing sound and flipping it, is part of the culture in the DNA of jazz — and of hip-hop.

So you take a rapper like Rakim, one of the greatest lyricists of our time, and he talks about listening to Coltrane, trying to understand the flow and to get that as part of his own flow. I could cite so many hip-hop artists that that really look to jazz as their inspiration — and vice versa, where young jazz musicians want to emulate the sounds they hear in hip-hop and incorporate that. And even that’s not new: Miles Davis was doing this in the ’80s.



"I think the idea of reusing ideas, and repurposing sound and flipping it, is part of the culture in the DNA of jazz — and of hip-hop."



“You don’t have to be Allen Ginsberg, you can just verbally freestyle about the things that are around you, and that’s very jazz, to me, that’s very blues — finding these stories that are not so mainstream, like listening to Ma Rainey sing about sex.”

moor mother

Camae Ayewa, working under the persona Moor Mother since 2012, has drawn raves for her powerful poetry and equally dynamic presentation; for her indefatigable attention to social activism; and for her take-no-prisoners truth-bound aesthetic. Originally part of the Philadelphia punk scene, she soon gravitated to increasingly experimental hip-hop, documented on dozens of EPs. Her group Black Quantum Futurism taps into the Afrofuturist tradition of Sun Ra and the Afrocentric leanings of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, with whom she toured in 2019. Her work with the free-jazz collective Irreversible Entanglements has showcased her fierce charisma and her strong connection to the jazz tradition, as well as its potential to embrace spoken-word hip-hop.

In my work there are certain pillars that have to be interjected into the music, and that's jazz, that's gospel, and that's blues — because I feel those are important to get the story across, that you need these elements, or to me, it's not a full story. For me, the blues, or free jazz, is not just something you listen to. It's a tool. And the further you go into the roots of it, you see how powerful it can be.

In my opinion, free jazz is an African-American classical tradition, and one reason is that it's a liberation technology. The second reason is all the rhythms that can be interjected within jazz and especially free jazz; there's no genre that free jazz cannot touch, because it's pulling from the unknown, it's pulling from spirit. It's an energy conductor, meaning that it creates its own waves, with or without intention — especially if someone is a master of their work. I'm talking

about Sun Ra, I'm talking about the Art Ensemble of Chicago; the unknown possibilities that come from that are just incredible.

People don't really classify me in one particular genre, and one reason is because my work has this jazz element that's not coming to you as the corporate jazz world wants it to be; it's kind of like the technology that's needed for me to put my point across. And when I was touring with the Art Ensemble, that taught me to understand that colors are also intermingling along with the music. Most of us don't understand that the energy is a multitude of vibrations. There's healing vibrations, there's protection vibrations, there's vibrations to bring out liberation, within you, waking you out of the slumber that the world works so hard to provide — the other energetic realities. Time is not linear. We are not disconnected from our past and our future. So believing that jazz is the first original African-American classical music, how can we not reflect back to that? How can we not honor that? If we don't, I don't believe that we're able to tell full stories.

I'm just trying to work towards honoring the heart of hip-hop — the tradition that came up with it: the idea of poetry; the idea of community. You don't have to be [Allen] Ginsberg or whoever, you can just verbally freestyle about the things that are around you, and that's very jazz, to me, that's very blues — finding these stories that are not so mainstream, like listening to Ma Rainey sing about sex. In her time, you would think every song was about Reconstruction or something, but it's like, "Hey, there's a life of sex, there's a life of love, there's a life of broken hearts, there's a life of wanting my no-good man back" — these everyday stories that allow us to see what goes on in our communities, besides what people are writing in history books and on timelines. It's about being so open to understanding that all of these people and their histories play an important role.

"mike blaque adunamite" mitchell

Percussion prodigy Mike Mitchell, 26, exemplifies his generation's willingness to embrace almost any idiom and genre. His credits extend from mainstreamers Christian McBride and Bob Mintzer, to modern fusion avatars Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah and Kamasi Washington, to a spectrum of pop artists including Michael McDonald and Talib Kweli. While still in high school, Mitchell was tapped by Herbie Hancock for the 2012 International Jazz Day Celebration, and before graduation, he had already toured with Stanley Clarke. He is a member of keyboardist Greg Spero's smartly blended jazz/hip-hop band Spirit Fingers, and he almost steals the show on bass star Derrick Hodge's 2020 Blue Note album *Color of Noize*. His fourth album, due in 2021, will feature his own vocals.

□ came to music from church. My dad is a drummer, my mom was a singer, and my mom's dad was pastor of the church where I was born. Hip-hop was something I had to kind of gravitate toward, because I was so used to playing R&B, which was the music my parents listened to, like Earth, Wind & Fire. But at Booker T. Washington High School [in Dallas], which is a performing-arts high school, I was exposed to the jazz program, and I went through a huge phase of trying to figure out the swing era, bebop, hard bop — all the history. And then on the flip side, I was exposed to hip-hop by my friends, because being raised in church, I just didn't naturally listen to much music outside of the gospel realm. My friends were the ones who showed me who J Dilla was

and Flying Lotus, all these different producers. I wasn't aware there were producers putting out albums.

I'm trying to figure out how to combine music in general, not necessarily trying to limit it to anything specific. It's more of a modern approach versus looking to fuse hip-hop and jazz specifically. Being a person of the hip-hop generation, I'm naturally drawn towards those beats. But because I also study and appreciate jazz history, I love being able to improvise and explore different rhythmic patterns and melodic patterns with different people. I just like to play with people that are fluent — people that are aware of the gospel language, aware of the jazz language, rock and roll, Latin music or Brazilian music or whatever it is, because that means that we can play anything. I think hip-hop is as important as any of those languages, because there's an art form to it that makes people move and dance and feel a certain way. It's the same thing with jazz, with that element of creativity and improvisation that people get excited about 'cause it's something that's new.

There's a lot of virtuosic instrumentalists that are terrible when they play music that's simple — they don't feel it. But me being a musician from Dallas, everybody's really big on feel. So even if you play, like, really fast or really loud or whatever, if you can't hop into a groove it will feel unnatural, it feels uneven, it feels awkward; no one's going to want to play with you. Most jazz musicians are really good and they solo fine, and they can play with people. And then there's a lot of musicians that solo really, really, *really* well, but play not well at all with people. So I'd rather have feel only than have technique only. Of course, it's amazing to have both. But feel is definitely more important than technique for me. ■



“Being a person of the hip-hop generation, I’m naturally drawn towards those beats. But because I also study and appreciate jazz history, I love being able to improvise and explore different rhythmic patterns and melodic patterns with different people.”



PLAYING

JAZZ

HIP-HOP

Morgan Guerin, Joel Ross and **Immanuel Wilkins** discuss how much – and how little – hip-hop has shaped their musical approaches.

B Y T E D P A N K E N



What was it like for a devoted jazz aspirant from Gen Y or Gen Z to grow up in a milieu where hip-hop culture — and hip-hop music — globally and intersectionally influenced the worlds of media, fashion, technology, education, art and entertainment?

To explore that question, *JAZZIZ* approached three ready-for-prime-time practitioners, individualists who have much in common. Each left his respective hometown for New York jazz conservatories and found space to workshop and exchange ideas with like-minded contemporaries at Manhattan's Jazz Gallery, among other venues. Each presents fresh, forward-thinking music that draws creatively on the entire jazz timeline — but not just jazz — for raw materials.

Morgan Guerin, 22, was raised in New Orleans and Atlanta. On three self-issued albums since 2017 (*The Saga*, *The Saga II* and *The Saga III*) he plays saxophones and electric wind instrument (EWI), various keyboards, electric bass, and drums, while also orchestrating and engineering. When not constructing these tour de force fantasias, Guerin played electric bass on Terri Lyne Carrington's 2020 Grammy-nominated *Waiting Game* and co-produced Esperanza Spalding's *12 Little Spells*. Playing tenor sax, he channeled late-era John Coltrane on Tyshawn Sorey's *Unfiltered*, and — as seen on a 2016 YouTube clip — swung deep in the cut alongside trumpeter Russell Gunn to the beats of Jimmy Cobb.

Vibraphonist Joel Ross, 25, grew up in Chicago. Even before Blue Note released *Kingmaker* and *Who Are You?*, both primarily comprising his original music, Ross' mature, virtuoso approach elicited comparisons to Olympian predecessors such as Milt Jackson, Bobby Hutcherson and Stefon Harris.

The original music of Immanuel Wilkins, 23, from Philadelphia, appears on his critically praised September release, *Omega*, also on Blue Note. Wilkins' keening alto saxophone evokes feelings stirred not only by Charlie Parker and Ornette Coleman, but also post-Boomer avatars like Miguel Zenón and Logan Richardson.

Two days before Christmas, these young masters convened on Zoom for a conversation.

Who are your contemporary lodestars, beacons, direction-setters?

Joel Ross (JR): Robert Glasper, who connected on his more or less acoustic music to the contemporary R&B sound that I grew up with through my mom, who listened to Jill Scott and Dre and a lot of old-school R&B, old-school gospel like James Cleveland, and groups like Chicago and the Eagles [were also played in the house]. I went to church every week for 18 years. I was completely immersed in that sound. I had to learn things by ear, pick things out, improvise, play without rehearsal, support vocalists, play with other musicians. I was introduced to jazz through jazz education, which was a more traditional environment than Chicago's actual jazz scene — the AACM, the more creative aspects, which I'm learning about now as an adult. There's the blues, too. I'm always trying to mold all those areas into one thing, and I always like something that's a little bit left, shifting some element about it.

I learned more modern, more contemporary jazz — Ambrose Akinmusire, Steve Coleman — through meeting peers like [trumpeter] Adam O'Farrill and [bassist] Daryl Johns. I like Ambrose for his sound on trumpet, the refinement of his concept, his freedom operating in a group. I've always liked trumpets and horns more than vibraphone, using your voice as part of your instrument. I like Steve for his interpretation of rhythm. He shifted my ideas about form, how I learn and think about music. I've only scratched the surface of the information he works with.

Immanuel Wilkins (IW): Jason Moran is number one. When I saw him play in Philly was the first time I felt someone had done what everybody talks about doing, which is one foot in the past, one foot in the present — to really deal with Fats Waller and Thelonious Monk, and really touch hip-hop. He and Glasper parallel each other in the ways they navigate hip-hop.

Tye Tribbett, the gospel artist, who I played with for a year or two. It was a profound spiritual experience, and I've modeled a lot of my writing on trying to reach certain things we got to. Philly has a big church music scene that spills over into popular music. A lot of church musicians get calls to play with, say, Jill Scott, or get hired for tours by Adam Blackstone who's a famous musical director. John Coltrane also had a great impact on the scene. At jam sessions at Chris' Jazz Café, they call "Resolution" or "Impressions" for 30-40 minutes, with everyone reaching for the same thing. In both cases, there's spiritual depth.

A portrait of a man with long, dark dreadlocks, a mustache, and a goatee. He is wearing a black beanie with a small white circle on top, clear-framed glasses, and a dark blue sweater with thin white vertical stripes. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a solid blue color. In the bottom left corner, there are overlapping circles in shades of orange, yellow, and red.

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Joel Ross

Photo by Lauren Desberg



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Immanuel Wilkins

In terms of Black aesthetics, the filmmaker Arthur Jafa, a profound thinker who reimagines the way we think about film, Black visibility and hyper-visibility. About four years ago, he changed my life in terms of how I navigate the world and navigate philosophy pertaining to jazz music and art in general.

Morgan Guerin (MG): First is Wayne Shorter. I'm a huge fan of his compositions, especially his orchestral writing. I try to go after that a bunch in my own stuff. Esperanza, too. I've always been drawn to the way she's able to have her own thing on the bass and dip in and out of genres. Georgia Anne Muldrow, who is one of the few who is cultivating a new sound that bridges the gaps between hip-hop and jazz.

In the press bio for *Omega*, Jason Moran observes that your generation is uniquely able to achieve full expression in all the different dialects you've stated.

IW: I feel this generation has a special relationship with the [jazz] canon. But the tradition is meant to be touched and molded and dealt with fully. We can cover the music; we played those songs over and over. Then we can take that spirit and manifest it into whatever lane we're doing at the time.

JR: I like that idea of dialects. That's how I think of styles. In jazz there's a language, and the area which you decide to play — to speak — is the dialect. We all have access to the same information. What makes it stand out is the ability to mold all the things into an original voice.

IW: Familiarizing yourself with dialects allows you to have musical conversations. For example, I can't converse on the bandstand with [drummer] Kenny Washington without an in-depth knowledge of bebop. Without the entire palette, you're not really choosing. I think we all realized that early on.

I don't think you assimilated all this information just as a practical matter, though. There has to be a love for jazz. What qualities spurred that attraction?

MG: The love started from being surrounded by it in my family. It's a beautiful art form. Growing up, I was set on what I wanted, to be done with high school, move to New York and venture off. I'm inspired by my peers, seeing what they're doing, who they're listening to.

JR: It's the communication that's apparent when it's played at the highest level — rhythm, groove, freedom, exploration. When cats are connected, you hear that magic. That is enticing. Also, the ability to express yourself through composition — either spontaneous or pre-planned in a written composition — and the ability to compose on the spot. The way you can show expression and emotion. The more I play, the more I live this music, the more I see different ways to think about it. I guess the short answer would be: It's deep!

IW: When I started playing jazz, I was in programs with other young people who were my friends. The idea of community — communal listening, communal playing together — was super-important to my development and my love for the music.

I've been thinking about how mystical jazz can be. There's no way really to describe swing or the blues, which are foundational — everyone has their own definition. When you talk to Joel about swing, it's going to be vastly different than when you talk to Wynton Marsalis. I promise you! Jazz is like a fugitive code that everyone is trying to figure out, constantly, over a hundred years.

"Black Codes From the Underground" is one of Marsalis' great mantras, along with "All jazz is modern," which I think you each embody. So what does "swing" mean in 2021?

JR: For me, something is swinging if the groove is intact with a certain fluidity.

MG: Joel hit the nail on the head. Fluidity. It does feel good. Something being swinging doesn't have to always be talked about. It's a thing where you don't know the exact definition, but you're taught to understand it growing up. I'm still trying to understand what that is.

IW: When I think of swing, as the short answer, I like to say it grooves and dances, but there's no backbeat. My long answer is that it parallels the blues; it accesses the tangible and the intangible. Which, in a lot of ways, codifies all of Black music; we could say it codifies all of Black culture. The Blues is a form. It could be 12 bars, or 16 bars, or eight bars. The Blues involves the I, the IV and the V. But the intangibles are: What is Mahalia Jackson doing that's making me feel like that? When I listen to those Alan Lomax recordings, Otha Turner playing

flute and singing, why am I crying? That's also the blues. And that accesses some intangibles that we can't explain. It's the same with swing. Swing is *ting, ting-ta-ting, ting-ta-ting*. That's swing.

JR: You can say "this is swinging," just like you can say "that's the blues." We can point out what it is, or how it's in this or that. But you can't say swing or the blues "is when you do this."

IW: That's what Morgan was hitting on. It's an orbit. You have to live in the orbit or you won't learn the dialect. Living in that orbit for years and understanding the intangibles also allows us now to liberate ourselves from the blues form or the swing rhythm.

Jason Moran, Robert Glasper, Ambrose Akinmusire and Steve Coleman were mentioned as lodestar figures. Morgan cited Flying Lotus in another published interview. They're all refracting elements of hip-hop. How does what you do — or what you DON'T do — reference hip-hop?

JR: I strongly dislike backbeats. I don't like to feel locked up rhythmically. The only thing I'm taking from hip-hop is the way we present rhythm through our voices improvisationally relates to the groove.

Has it impacted production values or presentation, the arc of an album?

JR: I can't say how many hip-hop albums I've listened to from top to finish. My concept of arcing a storyline through an album comes from contemporary artists like Ambrose. I prefer keeping it as acoustic as possible while making sure everything is clear in the mix.

IW: The main revelation I've found between hip-hop and jazz music is how it all still feels ancestral. It still feels like oral tradition. There's a lot of this old-school, un-institutionalized thing, like jazz has. When I listen to [rapper] Meek Mill, the strong beats are the same as the bass drum that Elvin [Jones]'s playing in the Trane quartet. That's in no way a stretch. That encourages me. Even though it feels so far removed, especially to the jazz purist, we can't escape it. Like bebop, hip-hop was a new mode of radical resistance. It shook things up and commented on what was happening socially. I think of that when I look at Run-DMC or Mos Def or Talib Kweli,

or Amil or G Herbo today. I think we all try to present new ways of resisting in our music

In terms of production values, jazz musicians need more money. You'll see videos for 5-6 songs off Jay-Z's album, each costing \$50,000 to make. That's a rabbit hole, because people are selling pornography — sex is selling, drugs are selling, guns are selling. It's not art music. But then, the art world is monetarily thriving, too. Jazz music in general has this ceiling; \$15,000 is the most we'll get for a record rollout. I want access to find the money to dream bigger, crazier dreams.

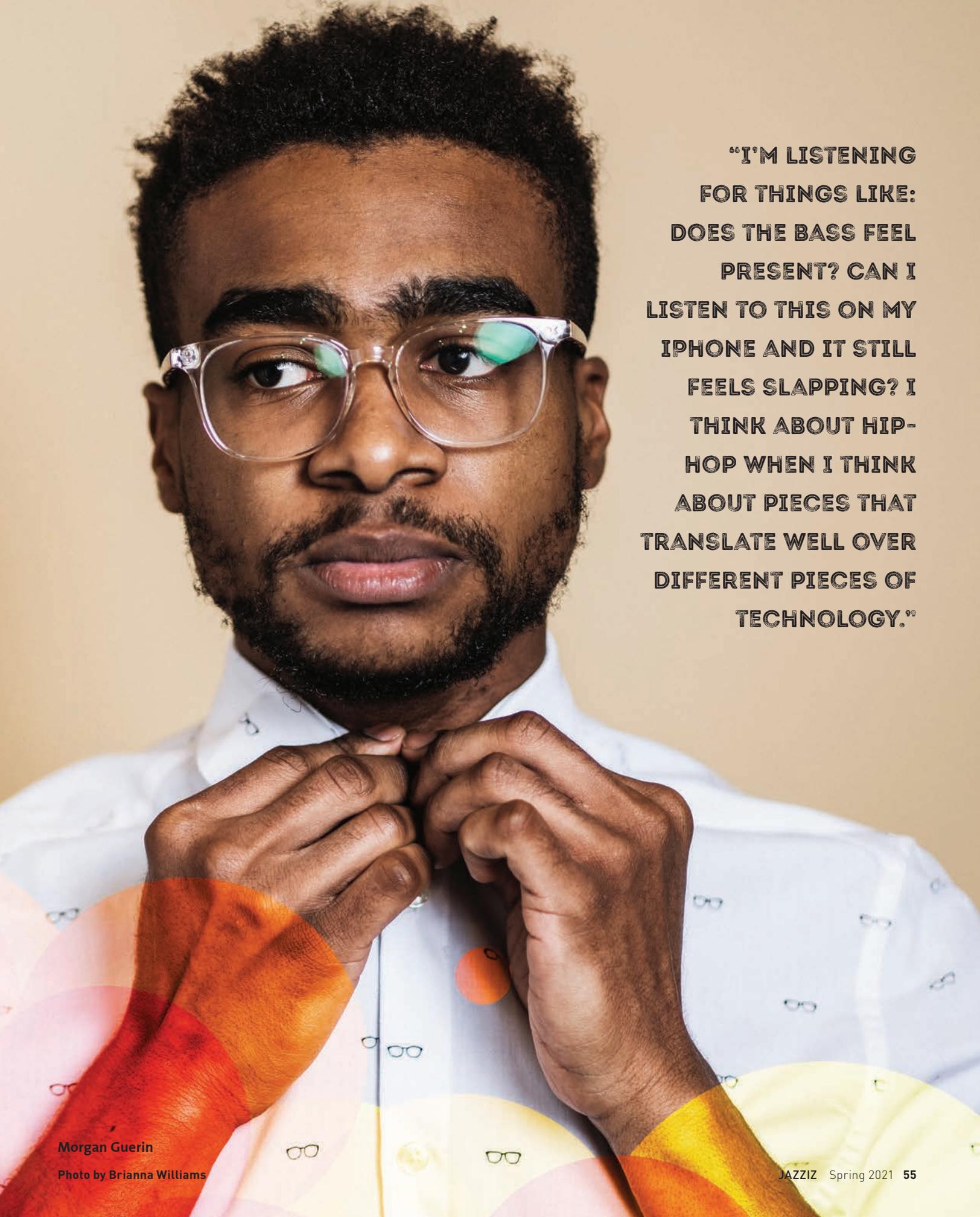
Morgan, your program notes for *Saga III* emphasize that you function not only as a multi-instrumentalist, but also a producer, mixer and engineer.

MG: Growing up, I always had access to instruments around the house. In school, people would ask if I could play a part, say, on oboe, and I'd develop an interest and then move on. Recently I got a bass clarinet for someone's recording; now that I have it, I'm going to practice more. I try to have that same approach to everything else I play. I'm not there yet with anything, though. It's a life-long process.

I mentioned Flying Lotus in the interview you mentioned because of the way he brings the listener into the producer's environment. His records are trying to hit all the senses. I'm drawn to records that have that aspect, and I try to bring it to my own music, the feeling of turning something up very loud. That comes from hip-hop. I'm listening for things like: Does the bass feel present? Can I listen to this on my iPhone and it still feels slapping? I think about hip-hop when I think about pieces that translate well over different pieces of technology. I'm trying to bring that over into this side. They're connected; both are Black art forms.

IW: Morgan, some primarily hip-hop engineers told me that when they're in the studio they track to super-loud volumes and the playback is super-loud. Have you explored that?

MG: Yes and no. Yes, because you want to make sure it still translates. Some people need to feel the energy physically within them. But personally, I mix quiet or mid-quiet 70-80 percent of the time, just to make sure I can hear everything at soft volumes — tracking, too. That way, when I bring it up, it's still present.



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Morgan Guerin

Photo by Brianna Williams

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IW: Also, we've all been locked down since March, so cats have been recording at the crib. Morgan's been doing this longer than us; he's a veteran in the home studio. Since I'm home, working within the parameters I have, I'm forced to look to hip-hop for its mobility, in a way, in terms of recording, and I think that's led sonically to some intersections. A lot of hip-hop stuff is home studio. Big dudes. Drake is tracking at home.

MG: Right. Or it's all on the laptop.

Can you say more about the impact of the pandemic on your artistic production?

IW: For me, it switched the process. Before the pandemic, I was playing the piano and doing voice memos. My writing process is way more tracking-based now when I create.

JR: I didn't really change up my writing process. What Immanuel said about the piano and the voice memos is still primarily what I do. Before the pandemic, sometimes I'd be home, playing drums for a couple of hours, working on ideas. I'm not doing that now because I decided to return to school, to finish my degree.

MG: My love and curiosity for classical music has been extremely heightened, partly due to a commission that I recently had to present. It's a nine-person thing, the first time I've arranged for more than four people. I've been able to focus without distractions — to write and challenge myself. It's opened my eyes to a lot more music that I knew existed but didn't really understand the value of until this chance to deep-dive. Stravinsky was a huge revelation. That's from trying to see where Wayne Shorter was getting his stuff from. Ravel, of course. Debussy.

A question about nomenclature. What should this music be called? Is "jazz" satisfactory? We've also heard "Black American Music" or "B.A.M." Immanuel referred to "art music." Miles Davis talked about "social music."

JR: I love that term, "social music." I think it describes it very well. I've been telling people "Black music," "improvised music" and "jazz." If I'm talking to somebody who doesn't even understand the conversation of why not to call it "jazz," I'll say "I play jazz, but inspired by improvised Black music." I'll never

just say "jazz" on its own any more. I'll try to give a little context. But I think more or less it's social music, built on language and communication.

MG: "Social music" is a great term. It definitely pertains to the feeling we get from listening to it, let alone playing it.

IW: I'll talk about my experience of losing romance for the word "jazz." I was in an elevator going to a rehearsal with [pianist] Michelle Rosewoman, and I ran into this amazing performance artist I'd been a fan of for a long time. He said, "What do you do?" I was like, "I play jazz." He was like, "Man, that's fun." I thought to myself, "A word that starts with a 'j' and ends with two 'z's' was never meant to be taken seriously." So I did some research on the word "jazz." The first usage was in a 1912 newspaper article about this pitcher who put some jazz on the ball. I realized that "jazz" always was used to marginalize, to make something magical and nonsensical. For me, the word "jazz" damaged the advancement of what Black musicians were doing. It's always been this happy-go-lucky, shuckin'-and-jivin' thing, kind of like what Miles said: "They think I just got the horn and I woke up with the blues." Or when the James Reese Europe cats went over to play in Europe, people thought they were playing with trick instruments.

JR: Not seen as a high art form.

IW: The undertone is this racist "yeah, it's got to be something else." That's why I end up resisting the word. But I don't have a name for it. I think all the names are flawed for certain reasons. Max Roach would say, "the music of Charlie Parker" or "the music of Bud Powell." I'll say "the music of" whoever. ■

"HE SAID, 'WHAT DO YOU DO?' I WAS LIKE, 'I PLAY JAZZ.' HE WAS LIKE, 'MAN, THAT'S FUN.' I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, 'A WORD THAT STARTS WITH A 'J' AND ENDS WITH TWO 'Z'S' WAS NEVER MEANT TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.'"

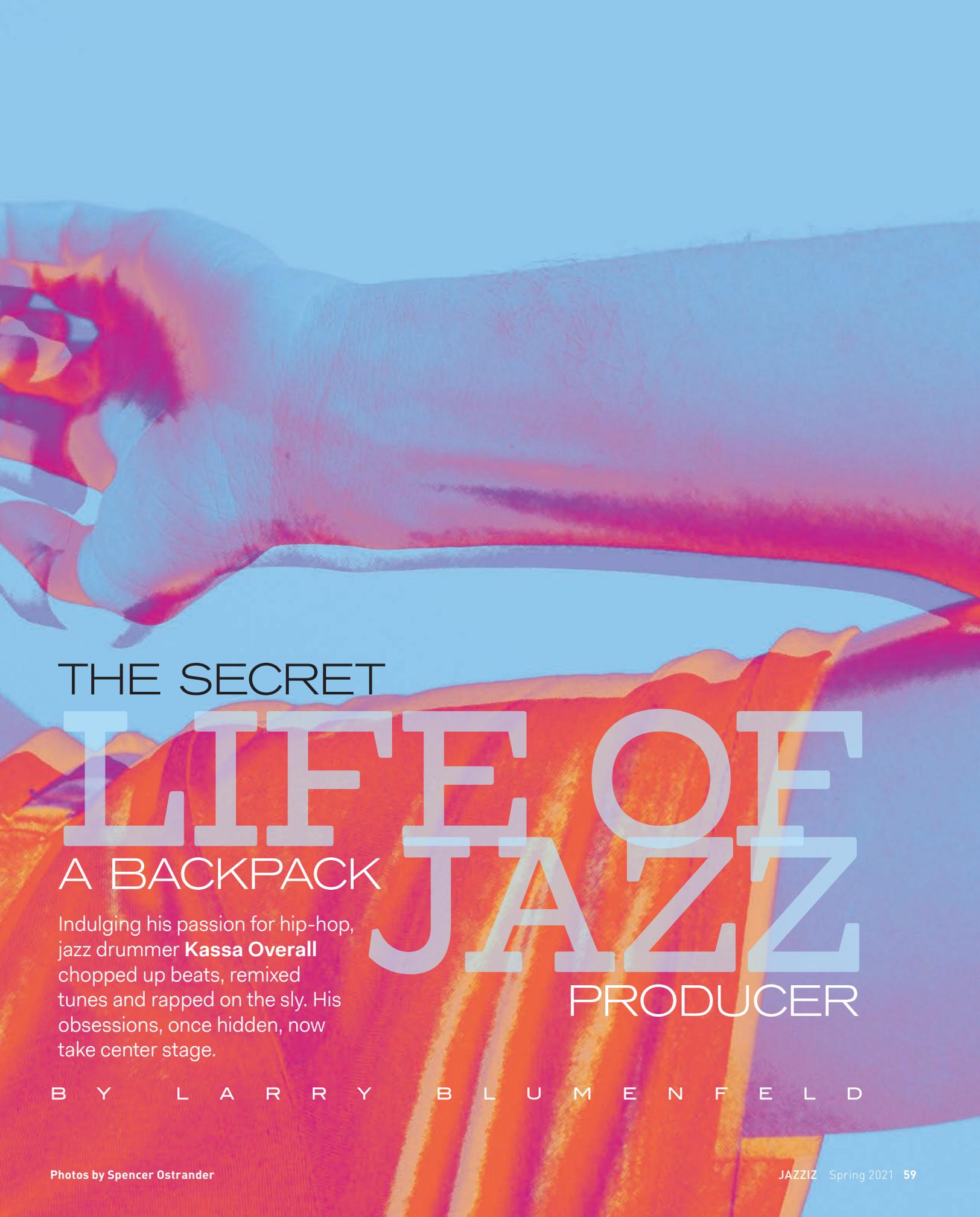


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A hand holding a rose against a sunset background. The image is a close-up of a hand holding a single red rose. The background is a soft, hazy sunset with warm orange and yellow tones. The overall mood is romantic and artistic.

THE SECRET

LIFE OF JAZZ PRODUCER

A BACKPACK

Indulging his passion for hip-hop, jazz drummer **Kassa Overall** chopped up beats, remixed tunes and rapped on the sly. His obsessions, once hidden, now take center stage.

B Y L A R R Y B L U M E N F E L D

When I catch up with Kassa Overall on the final day of 2020, he's holed up in Seattle, Washington. Both he and his girlfriend, the writer and scholar Lauren Du Graf, grew up there. Now they're back, riding out the pandemic, "laying low and keeping safe." That

gives Overall plenty of time to return to the house he grew up in, and to the basement where his father had the four-track Tascam Portastudio with which he first made his own music tracks. "He never learned to use it," says Overall, "but I did."

Overall's father was an avid jazz fan, his mother "a hippie who learned to play tabla drums." His older brother played saxophone. "I was learning how to walk and talk and swing all at the same time," he says of his upbringing. "In our living room, there was a drum set, a piano, a trumpet, a sax and an early beat machine. So, by the time I was 5, I knew how to sequence beats. By middle school, I spent days doing that." Back then, Overall soaked up Thelonious Monk's recordings at the same time he was rapping along to Public Enemy's "Fight the Power."

While Overall studied music at Oberlin College, he was gigging as a drummer at jazz clubs. At Oberlin, he confronted faculty that endorsed his jazz studies but disapproved of his passion for hip-hop beat-making. After he landed in New York City and made his way as an in-demand drummer — "even though I easily spent as much time chopping beats as I did practicing paradiddles," he says — he seemed to straddle two separate worlds, two sides of his own personality: displaying savvy technique and uncommon sensitivity as the drummer in pianist Geri Allen's band; as a rapper/producer, combining force and tenderness in collaboration with the hip-hop collective Das Racist; inserting his own long, weird drum solo into a cover of the rapper Drake's "Passion Fruit" on an early EP; flashing irrepressible charm alongside pianist Jon Batiste's band on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*; and rapping stark lyrics about societal ills as a member of drummer Terri Lyne Carrington's Social Science band.

Overall's 2019 release, *Go Get Ice Cream and Listen to Jazz*, furthered a jazz/hip-hop/neo-soul blend that trumpeter Roy Hargrove helped pioneer (and it featured Hargrove, recorded six months before his untimely death). The album was also, he says, "what I needed to destroy that divide within myself." Last year's *I Think I'm Good* even more forcefully reflected his identity as "a backpack jazz producer — something like a cross between a jazz musician, a backpack rapper and a bedroom producer." Some of the material was improvised on bandstands at jazz clubs, some in recording studios and some in the homes of his colleagues. All of it was chopped up and recombined using the skeletal music studio he carries in his backpack, whenever and wherever inspiration struck, including, yes, his bedroom.

Late last year, Overall, 41, released a new collection of tracks via Bandcamp, *Shades of Flu: Healthy Remixes for An Ill World*. On it, he reinterprets tracks from his former employer, Allen; his good friend, Batiste; and from jazz masters past and present, including Miles Davis, Archie Shepp and Vijay Iyer. Overall's combination of live performances, studio recordings and remixes and his bridging of jazz and hip-hop cultures are no longer new. Musicians such as Kendrick Lamar and Flying Lotus have made these approaches something of a *lingua franca*. Yet Overall possesses a rare balance of skills and experience on both sides of the equation that makes for a singularly compelling flow. During our conversation, he shares his rare perspective on the connections and disconnections between these cultures.

HAVE YOU GROWN WEARY OF TALKING ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JAZZ AND HIP-HOP?

I thought this was corny a while back, but after having the conversation a number of times I almost don't want to deal with the idea that they are two different things. I can break down how they're similar or different, but it starts to feel like it's taking away from the art. I'd rather just discuss whether you think it's good or not. Who cares what I'm blending? The real question is: Is it dope? If it's trash, then I didn't do it right.

BOTH JAZZ AND HIP-HOP REPRESENT POINTS ON A CONTINUUM OF BLACK MUSIC, RIGHT?

I feel like I've been saying "African rhythmic DNA" ever since I heard [trumpeter] Nick Payton say it. I went to Africa and to Cuba and I studied hand drums. I was able to take what I knew from listening to Elvin [Jones] and I could search for it and find it. I could apply it. It's all the same thing. But at the same time, I feel that to flatten everything and say simply "Black music" is also somewhat reactionary or reductive. Because the reality is you have hip-hop and jazz, both of which grew out of African-American experience, from Black people in the United States. But you also have the Africans in Haiti, who have their own history and their own way of chopping things up. In Brazil and in Cuba, they have their ways. Even though in the end I may want unity, I also want all these African diasporic traditions to identify with and seek each other out. I have to respect the Afro-Brazilians' particular approach. We're all the same and different.

Even though I suppose my main campaign has been "hip-hop and jazz, it's all the same thing," at the same time, I respect the traditional jazz lineage. I have played with straight-up jazz musicians. I respect people who go from Bird on down to JD Allen or Immanuel Wilkins. If you don't mess with beat machines or rapping, if you're zoomed in on one tradition or one slice of that tradition, I respect that, if you're good at it. I guess I don't have the answer.





YOU ARE BILINGUAL IN TERMS OF JAZZ AND HIP-HOP TO AN UNUSUAL DEGREE, THE WAY THAT, SAY, CERTAIN CUBAN MUSICIANS ARE BILINGUAL IN AFRO-CUBAN AND AMERICAN JAZZ TRADITIONS.

Yes, I can geek out on Elvin or I can geek out on Pharrell.

DOES EACH OF THOSE INCLINATIONS GIVE YOU A DIFFERENT SORT OF INSIGHT?

When it comes to playing the drums, I can approach an original jazz recording as the player, as how I would play behind Miles or Coltrane if I had that opportunity. I can listen to “Wise One,” for instance, and I can hear it from the drum set. Still, frankly, the reason a lot of these hip-hop producers are so deep is precisely because they may not know how to play it. They can come at it from a different perspective. Like a DJ, they can come at like it’s

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foreign. When you chop up a sample with a clear intention, you hear it as sonic material. You hear the air in the room. It’s just sound. You hear it in its pure state. You’re not thinking about “oh, that’s Herbie’s touch or that’s Tony’s ride cymbal.” You might not analyze it as “that’s a tom tom and that’s an acoustic bass and that’s a crash cymbal, and I know how they’re supposed to work together.” You’re hearing it as it’s actually meant to be heard, as a unified piece of energy.

I can get inside the music with a musical ear and mathematical perspective or I can turn that off and chop as a beat-maker, where the god lies in the chop — chopping samples and putting it on these buttons. With jazz, the knowledge and the connections can sometimes get in the way. You might love Miles so much you can’t imagine chopping him up and putting him on a pad.

YOU DO CHOP UP MILES’ VERSION OF “FREEDOM JAZZ DANCE” ON YOUR LATEST RELEASE *SHADES OF FLU*. HOW DID THAT PROJECT TAKE SHAPE?

When I was promoting the last release, *Go Get Ice Cream*, a few radio stations offered to do interviews and for me to do a guest mix, which means you just DJ and play songs. But as a producer, I thought, “Why don’t I use this as an opportunity to showcase my skills and to remix everything I play? Instead of playing a Miles

Davis song, I’ll play a Kassa Overall remix.” It morphed from playing someone’s song to sampling to remixing. As soon as the corona thing got crazy, I felt the need to get to work, but livestreaming didn’t feel like the right medium. During the pandemic, I turned these remixes into a real project.

THE VERY TITLE MAKES REFERENCE TO BOTH JAZZ AND HIP-HOP, VIA THE LEGACY OF MADLIB’S *SHADES OF BLUE*, FOR WHICH HE FAMOUSLY REMIXED CLASSIC BLUE NOTE RECORDS TRACKS.

First off, I have to say that the news just came out that [rapper-producer] MF Doom passed. And I want to acknowledge him. I am an MF Doom fan. I can’t think of one song of his that I didn’t enjoy. And that’s a way of getting to Madlib, because the album that I really used to listen to a lot was *Madvillainy*, the collaboration between Madlib and MF Doom. Just like in the jazz community, hip-hop had lineages too, passing the baton, especially among producers. And when J Dilla died, it became clear just how deep Madlib was. He understood Dilla like no one else, but he didn’t copy him. In my producer journey, I found that Madlib’s beats resonated more with me than even Dilla’s. That’s no criticism of Dilla. It’s just that Madlib is dealing with the jazz language more than even Dilla was. He is the closest one to making music that still feels super organic.

HOW DO YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN AESTHETIC AS A REMIX PRODUCER?

In a post hip-hop musical reality and industry, the difference between an original and a remix is almost a matter of intention. You can sample a very well-known song and create a new song just by recontextualizing the music, or putting a new message on top of it. At the same time, there is a whole world of remix culture. The intention of the remix isn’t to say this is a new song, but more so to add to the original thought. A remix is technically still the same song, even though it may sound nothing like the original.

Ultimately that creates this big grey area between “original” and “remix.” What if you could exploit that grey area and play between both musical identities? It opens up a whole world of possibility. The original can live, and be remixed, and then let go of to create a new original, all-in-one piece. On these new tracks of mine, I’m letting the originals breathe rather than just looping up a short sample. I’m letting the whole song breathe as is and adding to it. My ability to do that has to do with the fact that I speak that language of the originals. I speak the language of Miles Davis or Vijay Iyer. I can hear it from the drum chair.

HOW DID THAT APPROACH MANIFEST ON THIS NEW REMIX COLLECTION?

One of the last things I did for this project was to throw in a piece of Wallace Roney's ["Shadow Dance"], may he rest in peace. I chopped up Wallace's music and I dropped in some of my own drumming. I made it sound like we were trading phrases. When I superimposed my live drumming and my production onto Wallace, I reframed the original. And the original that I reframed was like this beautiful pure burst of energy. Wallace played those fast lines like no one else. You heard the fast line and the whole band, with Geri [Allen] comping, and it was like one unbreakable unit of energy. He had just died, but this felt so alive. I try to do that kind of thing a lot. When you're sampling a song, it's usually a finished master. The whole band is coming out of one channel. You have the ability to hear a whole band as one instrument.

OF COURSE, THE IDEA OF A BAND COHERING AS ONE ENTITY IS ESSENTIAL TO A LOT OF JAZZ.

Yes. And I think there's another way that hip-hop and jazz bridge. When you're dealing with sound as a hip-hop producer, you're willing to deal with non-harmonic tones, with chords that don't go together. One of the first things that struck me about Public Enemy's music, aside from the words and the attitude, was that there are a lot of rubs, of disharmony. You'd hear a tea kettle and you'd think, "What note in the scale is that?" There's actually some connection, I think, between that and the disharmony or discord in Ornette [Coleman] or Sun Ra. There's a certain danger, a certain courage in the mix.

YOU ALSO REMIX GERI ALLEN'S "UNCONDITIONAL LOVE." HOW DID YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH GERI AFFECT YOUR APPROACH TO THIS MUSIC?

In too many ways to do justice. I learned so many different things. Aside from purely musical elements, one thing I learned was something I originally resisted, or that at first caused me frustration. Geri would send us a bunch of music, and then we'd rehearse some other stuff. Then we'd go to a soundcheck and we'd play some completely other music. Once we had all that together, we'd get on stage and she'd play some entirely different stuff. The selfish egotistical side of me was like, "Man you put me out there. I had this stuff prepared, and I was going to sound good." But she was dealing with another approach — in the moment, reading the crowd or the situation and deciding what was right. I resented that at first, but now I realize that she was training us to feel the energy in the room and play what was needed, to be in that moment. Now I need to do that all the time, even when there's no audience. I need to be prepared so that I can be spontaneous.

"WHEN YOU CHOP UP A SAMPLE WITH A CLEAR INTENTION, YOU HEAR IT AS SONIC MATERIAL. YOU HEAR THE AIR IN THE ROOM. IT'S JUST SOUND. YOU HEAR IT IN ITS PURE STATE. YOU'RE NOT THINKING ABOUT 'OH, THAT'S HERBIE'S TOUCH OR THAT'S TONY'S RIDE CYMBAL.'"



“ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT STRUCK ME ABOUT PUBLIC ENEMY’S MUSIC, ASIDE FROM THE WORDS AND THE ATTITUDE, WAS THAT THERE ARE A LOT OF RUBS, OF DISHARMONY. YOU’D HEAR A TEA KETTLE AND YOU’D THINK, ‘WHAT NOTE IN THE SCALE IS THAT?’”

SOME TIME AGO, IN A COFFEE SHOP IN BROOKLYN, YOU PLAYED ME AN EARLY VERSION OF YOUR REMIX OF JON BATISTE’S VERSION OF “WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD.” JON HAD ALREADY SORT OF REINVENTED IT, BY FLOATING THE WELL-WORN BALLAD ON A DRONE. BUT YOUR REMIX, WITH ITS FUNKY BEAT, KIND OF CHANGES THE WHOLE THING UP.

For that one, I put in a classic breakbeat, from a song called “Impeach the President” [released by The Honey Drippers in 1973]. That breakbeat has its own lineage. You could look up that breakbeat to see just how many times that beat’s been used. Even though I didn’t use Jon’s full song, I used a bigger part than a typical hip-hop producer would use. Usually a producer would use a couple of bars. But I’m using a minute at a time, letting the music breathe a bit.

YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH BATISTE RUNS DEEP. HOW DID THAT EXTENDED APPEARANCE WITH HIS BAND ON *THE LATE SHOW WITH STEPHEN COLBERT* COME ABOUT?

When Jon realized what I was doing as a producer, he had his manager get in touch with mine. They asked me if I could DJ with turntables, if I could scratch. And I said, “No, but I can do something better. I can do what Jon actually wants but doesn’t know yet.” So I recorded him playing, I found samples and I just went wherever I wanted with the music. He invited me to come in for a day, to sit in. He liked it so much that I stayed for most of six months.

HOW IMPORTANT WAS ROY HARGROVE TO THE PLACE YOU’VE ARRIVED AT MUSICALLY?

When I first got to New York, he was the coolest cat who was actually around. He was there for us, he wanted to play with us. He wanted to teach us by example. And in terms of jazz and hip-hop or anything else, he was the gatekeeper on both sides of the equation. He was the dude on the boat showing us the way to dry land. But he didn’t talk a lot about that. He just did it.

ARE THERE ANY RAPPERS OR PRODUCERS MAKING NEW MUSIC THAT HAVE OPENED UP NEW IDEAS FOR YOU?

If you listen to the way some of the youngest rappers are rapping on the beat, it’s very interesting — there’s Soulja Boy, for instance, and Playboi Carti. These are not my favorite rappers. But they rap so far ahead of the beat, it’s crazy. If you listen to it, you’d think that they don’t know how to rap on the beat. But just like rapping behind the beat, it’s coded; it’s the new rhythmic code. I don’t think I’m inspired by their music or what they’re talking about, but their approach to the flow is very interesting. And that means the rhythm is evolving. These things always evolve in ways that are almost a secret. If you don’t know, it sounds wrong or useless. You think, “What is that? Turn that off.” But you need to listen to it.

WHEN YOU LOOK BACK AT THE START OF YOUR CAREER, DOES THE MUSIC YOU’RE MAKING NOW SEEM LIKE WHAT WAS ONCE JUST A HOBBY OR A SECRET?

For a long time, I felt like only one aspect, jazz drumming, was serious. That was my profession. I came to play the drums. But the truth is I was also getting lost in making beats and writing songs. It felt like just having fun. It felt like it lacked seriousness. It took some time to take it seriously. It turned out I like composing. I like writing lyrics. I like putting together song structures. At times, I’ve been frustrated while explaining who I am and what I do. I’ll say I’m a drummer or a rapper or a laptop artist. I like to create ideas, have musicians perform those ideas, take those ideas and chop them up, and have musicians play them again, you know? That is my culture and my version of composition.

MAYBE THE FACT THAT KENDRICK LAMAR’S *DAMN* WON A PULITZER PRIZE FOR MUSIC CHANGES THAT EQUATION A BIT.

Yeah, maybe I’m going to make a Kendrick Lamar cover. But it’s going to sound like Ornette. ■





JAZZ-RAP ESSENTIALS

Jazz and hip-hop are dialects of the same language. Put them together and the conversation can be sublime. From jazz artists with hip-hop sensibilities to rappers versed in the rhythms of jazz, here are 15 albums that bridge the gap.

B Y B R I A N Z I M M E R M A N





Phife Dawg from A Tribe Called Quest



THE LAST POETS

***The Last Poets* (Douglas), 1970**

The link between jazz and spoken-word poetry would lead to the inception of hip-hop. That link was reinforced by the New York-based Last Poets, who harnessed the rhythms of jazz and the politics of revolution to illuminate the Black urban experience in America, a cause that hip-hop would later adopt and spread throughout the world. The fact that some of the most impactful artists in rap — The Notorious B.I.G., N.W.A. — would go on to sample tracks from The Last Poets' debut album is evidence of its profound influence. Requisite track: "When the Revolution Comes"



HERBIE HANCOCK

***Future Shock* (Columbia), 1983**

Little surprise that Herbie Hancock's first foray into instrumental hip-hop would wind up as a genre classic. Hancock's playing is characteristically inventive and exhilarating, but it's the inclusion of turntable scratches (courtesy of rap pioneer GrandMixer DXT), programmed drum loops and bass synths that make this album an early entry into the jazz-rap canon. To this day, you can find breakdancers top-rocking to the album's lead-off track,

"Rockit." Requisite track: "Rockit"



QUINCY JONES

***Back on the Block* (Qwest/Warner Bros.), 1989**

Quincy Jones was among the first jazz artists to recognize the global impact of hip-hop, championing the careers of young rap artists before others in the jazz mainstream caught on. *Back on the Block* was one of the earliest excursions into jazz-rap fusion, and it's remarkable for its stylistic breadth. Artists spanning nearly four generations made appearances, from Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Ray Charles to Big Daddy Kane, Ice-T and Kool Moe Dee. For Jones, hip-hop wasn't a flash-in-the-pan — in 1993, he founded the hip-hop magazine *Vibe*. Requisite track: "Back on the Block"



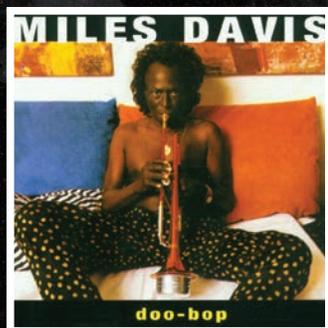
A TRIBE CALLED QUEST

***The Low End Theory* (Jive), 1991**

Any hip-hop album that features Ron Carter on bass is bound to pass the jazz-authenticity test, but that's just one reason *The Low End Theory* belongs in the jazz-rap Hall of Fame. Rapper/producer Q-Tip's beats nod to the language of jazz, sampling tunes by Gary Bartz, Weather Report, Eric Dolphy, Grant Green and Cannonball Adderley, and there is no shortage of lyrical references to jazz history: "You could find the Abstract listening to hip-hop/My pops used to say it reminded him of bebop," rhymes Q-Tip in the opening tune, "Excursions." Requisite track: "Check the Rhime"



Miles Davis

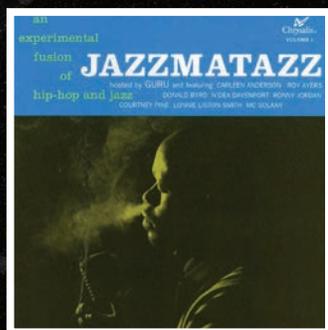


MILES DAVIS

***Doo-Bop* (Warner Bros.), 1992**

It's a testament to the cultural import of hip-hop that Miles Davis' final studio album was a hybrid of jazz and rap. A collaboration with MC Easy Mo Bee, *Doo-Bop* wasn't the pièce de résistance Miles fans might have been hoping for, but it was a powerful musical document nonetheless, if only because it made such a clear case for the musical similarities between

the jazz-fusion of Davis' later career and the harmonically advanced hip-hop emerging at the end of the millennium. Davis' career was defined by evolution, his ears seemingly always attuned to the next "new thing." It's fitting that his final album passes the torch to a genre that continues to captivate audiences worldwide. Requisite track: "Mystery"

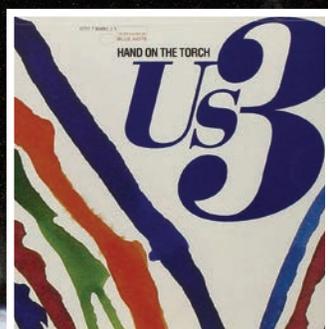


GURU

***Jazzmatazz Vol. 1* (Chrysalis), 1993**

Rapper Guru had proven himself a formidable force in jazz-rap with the release of 1989's *No More Mr. Nice Guy*, the debut album of Gang Starr, his duo project with producer DJ Premier. But it was 1992's *Jazzmatazz Vol. 1* that set him apart as one of the most jazz-versed rappers of all time. The album features Guru's vocals atop solos by Donald Byrd, Branford Marsalis, Roy

Ayers and Lonnie Liston Smith, and the result was as dynamic and free-flowing as an after-hours jam session. Requisite track: "Loungin'"



US3

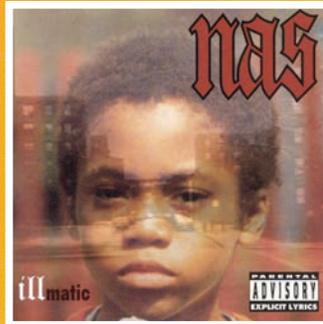
***Hand on the Torch* (Blue Note), 1993**

Hand on the Torch, by the British hip-hop trio Us3, is likely the most popular jazz-rap album of all time. Released on kingmaking jazz label Blue Note, the album brims with repurposed motifs from jazz giants, including Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, Lou Donaldson and Bobby Hutcherson. Trumpeter Gerard Persencer's slick and sophisticated solo on the Herbie Hancock-

sampling "Cantalooop (Flip Fantasia)" made the song a radio hit and a jazz-fan favorite. Requisite track: "Cantalooop (Flip Fantasia)"



Black Thought from The Roots

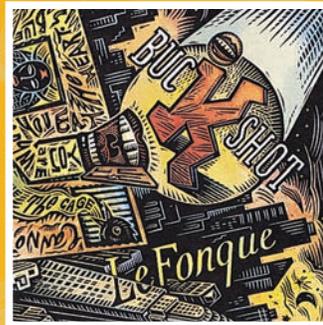


NAS

***Illmatic* (Columbia), 1994**

There's a reason this 1994 Nas masterpiece has been studied in poetry classes at Harvard. Few rappers — or artists of any stripe — have illuminated the experience of Black urban youth at the turn of the century with more clarity, beauty and truth. As for musical texture, *Illmatic* certainly leans toward jazz. Producers DJ Premier, Q-Tip, Large Professor, Pete Rock and L.E.S. enliven their beats with samples from the Heath Brothers, Donald Byrd and Ahmad Jamal, but the jazz nods don't end there. Nas (born

Nasir Jones) is the son of cornetist Olu Dara, whose muted horn can be heard on the standout track "Life's a Bitch." Requisite track: "The World Is Yours"



BUCKSHOT LEFONQUE

***Buckshot LeFonque* (Sony), 1994**

Given his jazz pedigree, saxophonist Branford Marsalis may seem an unlikely candidate for a jazz-rap trailblazer. But at the helm of the genre-defying group Buckshot LeFonque (named for an alias used by Cannonball Adderley on an off-label recording session), Marsalis made some of the most adventurous strides in jazz-rap experimentation. The group's debut album, which also featured Jeff "Tain" Watts, Kenny Kirkland, Greg Phillinganes, Victor Wooten and other jazz heavyweights, was

a brilliant patchwork of grooves that evoked the spirit of hip-hop through stance and attitude. Vocal contributions by poet Maya Angelou make the connection between rap, jazz, poetry and the Black American experience even clearer. Requisite track: "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"



THE ROOTS

***Do You Want More?!?!?!* (DGC Geffen), 1995**

Helmed by MC Black Thought and featuring arrangements by drummer-producer Questlove, The Roots were the original all-acoustic hip-hop group. This second studio album by the Philadelphia-based band made major waves upon its release, making a definitive statement that real instruments could interlace with rap vocals to produce music that was just as potent as anything concocted by loops and drum machines.

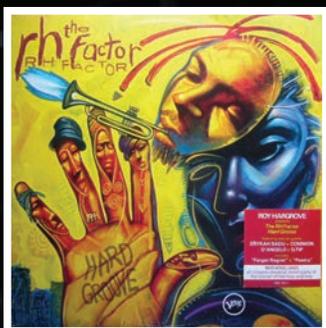


MADLIB

***Shades of Blue* (Blue Note), 2003**

For one of the most captivating jazz/hip-hop hybrids of the 2000s, California-based producer Madlib was handed the keys to the Blue Note Records vault and given permission to remix to his heart's content. The resulting album plays like a "Best of Blue Note" mixtape with rap DNA at its core. Songs from the label's iconic albums — Horace Silver's "Song for My Father," Wayne Shorter's "Footprints," Herbie Hancock's "Dolphin Dance" — are refracted through drum samples and DJ scratches, becoming

something else entirely without losing their jazz identity. Requisite track: "Mystic Bounce"

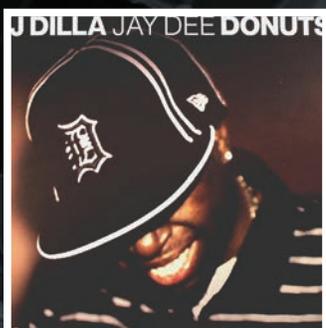


RH FACTOR

Hard Groove (Verve), 2003

Trumpet sensation Roy Hargrove was in the perfect place to ride the neo-soul wave that crested in the early 2000s. Well-versed in both jazz and hip-hop, he fit seamlessly into this musical movement that brought together grooves from modern jazz, contemporary R&B and vintage funk. Hargrove's 2003 album with his big band RH Factor is a neo-soul standout, pairing some of the genre's biggest names — Erykah Badu, D'Angelo, Common and Anthony Hamilton — with head-bobbing beats and some electrifying improvisation

from the trumpeter. Grooves don't get much deeper. Requisite track: "I'll Stay"



J DILLA

Donuts (Stones Throw), 2006

Detroit-based producer J Dilla had the musical know-how and improvisational savvy of any top-notch jazz musician — his instrument of choice just happened to be turntables and drum machines. *Donuts* is his crowning achievement, a program of instrumental beats that layer samples and loops with all the nuance, complexity and emotive power of a Duke Ellington suite. This album has become a benchmark for hip-hop producers everywhere. Requisite track: "Gobstopper"

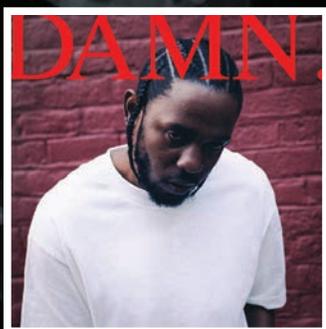


ROBERT GLASPER

Black Radio (Blue Note), 2012

"Rap - Lies = Hip-Hop": So goes an oft-repeated quote by keyboardist Robert Glasper. Known both for his straightahead jazz chops and his close partnership with hip-hop and neo-soul powerhouses, Glasper minted a masterpiece with *Black Radio*, merging his own silky acoustic piano with Casey Benjamin's slick vocoder riffs, Jahi Sundance's incisive turntables and the tenchant boom-bap beats of bassist Derrick Hodge and drummer Chris Dave. Vocal contributions from Erykah Badu, Bilal, Musiq Soulchild, Yassin

Bey (Mos Def), Ledisi and Lupe Fiasco take this album to another level. Requisite track: "Afro Blue"



KENDRICK LAMAR

DAMN. (TDE/Aftermath/Interscope), 2017

The release of Kendrick Lamar's *DAMN.* was a groundbreaking moment for West Coast hip-hop, both for its inclusion of jazz artists (Kamasi Washington, Terrace Martin, Thundercat) and for its impact on American culture. The album, which featured pointed lyrical takes on themes of love, violence and loyalty, was the first hip-hop recording to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music.

Requisite track: "Loyalty" ■



Robert Glasper

AUDITIONS



Analog Players Society at The Bridge Studio (from left), Orrin Evans, Ben Rubin, Eric McPherson and Dezron Douglas



Jazz Meets the Boom Bap

AMON DRUM AND BEN RUBIN DREAM UP A SOUNDTRACK FOR STRANGE TIMES.

One session yielding two completely different records from the same music: That was the plan when Jeffrey Amon and Ben Rubin — accomplished producers and engineers who came of age during the golden era of rap in the '80s and '90s— assembled an all-star jazz quartet to record the live session that resulted in the Analog Players Society's *Tilted*. Featuring saxophonist Donny McCaslin and pianist Orrin Evans, the album included a pair of radically reworked standards (Antônio Carlos Jobim's "One Note Samba" and Thelonious Monk's "Epistrophy") and one improvised original. Amon and Rubin then sampled and "chopped" (mixed) the music from *Tilted* to create *Soundtrack for a Nonexistent Film* (Ropeadope).

For the six tracks he produced, Amon (a.k.a. Amon Drum) tried to capture the surreal nature of the early days of the pandemic-induced lockdown in New York City. The constant Doppler effect of sirens from early evening through the next morning was the grim audio backdrop for many residents at that time; empty streets provided the eerie visuals.

"New York City was sort of this weird landscape that you had to traverse," Amon says during a conference call with his producing partner (a.k.a. Benny Cha Cha). "I would try to get out of the house and go on walks, and then you're like, 'Shit, I gotta stay away from other people.' It was all about the soundtrack of traveling across Gotham in a weird time."

The result is what Amon describes as "kind of a dirt dystopian thriller," even if the movie only existed in his mind. Indeed, the titles of Amon's contributions ("Chase," "Safe Place") suggest a thematic unity. "I had legit scenes," he says. "It's kind of like an odyssey of this person

trying to get away from whatever it is that's chasing him."

Rubin's intentions were more straightforward for his five tracks, aiming for what he calls a De La Soul-style recording session. "I was just looking for good beats. I wanted to make an old-schoolish boom bap record. I just love the freedom of bringing this live band in and keeping that live feel that is missing in a lot of hip-hop. And I liked the idea of just creating our own source materials, so there's no chance it's going to sound like something else, except in feel and zeitgeisty references."

Soundtrack delivers great pleasures on its own, but listeners will appreciate it even more when hearing it in the context of *Tilted*. Snippets of all three tracks from *Tilted* waft in like apparitions. Meanwhile, wobbly piano chords, reverberant sax lines and booming bass figures create a dreamlike haze. With beats, of course.

And about that band. It's a musically omnivorous bunch, comprising McCaslin, Evans and bassist Dezron Douglas. But it's drummer Eric McPherson who serves as the catalyst of the sound the producers wanted to capture. Amon and Rubin marvel at McPherson's expansive color palette and his ability to create his own sound effects while playing live. "There's so many contradictory feelings going on right now," Rubin says of people's reactions to life during COVID. "I don't know if it was conscious for me, but that's just kind of what I was hoping would come through in those beats and the hardcore [rapper-producer] J Dilla, jittery factor that just comes from Eric naturally."

The life of this theoretical soundtrack will continue. Rubin had always intended for MCs to use his tracks as a foundation to rap over, and a single of "Starry Night" featuring hip-hop legend Masta Ace was scheduled for a spring release. "I'm hoping it's a formula of some kind and we can make another record," Rubin says. "Maybe with the same band, maybe with a different band. But it doesn't matter. It's gonna get different results every single time." ■

B Y J O H N F R E D E R I C K M O O R E



Dezron Douglas & Brandee Younger

Force Majeure

(International Anthem)

In the history of jazz harp — from Casper Reardon and Adele Girard to Dorothy Ashby and Alice Coltrane — there have been occasional harp-bass-drums trios, but virtually no duet albums of harp and string bass. At least until now.

Bassist Dezron Douglas and harpist Brandee Younger, both of whom are normally rather busy in the New York area, made the most of the quarantine of 2020 by performing weekly live-streamed shows from their living room in Harlem each Friday morning. Ten of their best performances, complete with brief announcements and spoken interludes, have now been released on the album *Force Majeure*, also the title of their streaming jazz brunch.

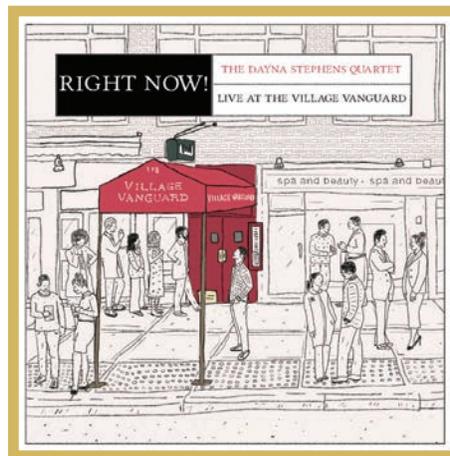
The set opens with a read of Alice Coltrane's "Gospel Trane," which shows that, in the right hands, a harp can swing. "Equinox," by Alice's husband John, presents the harpist playing the melody over catchy bass riffs. On the Pharoah Sanders/Leon Thomas hit "The Creator Has a Master Plan," Douglas plays the familiar bass pattern while Younger adds color. The joyful "Sing" features fine solos by both musicians.

One of the main reasons for *Force Majeure's* success, other than the obvious affection that the musicians (who met in 2001) have for one other, is the way that they shift roles from song to song

while blending together. On the pretty melody of "You Make Me Feel Brand New," they alternate the lead and the spotlight throughout. During "Never Can Say Goodbye," Younger plays the theme while Douglas makes musical comments and supplies countermelodies. Sting's "Inshallah" is presented as an unaccompanied bass feature, and the other selections comprise Kate Bush's melodic ballad "This Woman's Work," John Coltrane's "Wise One," and the duo's original which closes every set, "Toilet Paper Romance."

Uniqueness aside, *Force Majeure* is filled with beautiful and creative music.

— Scott Yanow



Dayna Stephens Quartet

Right Now! The Dayna Stephens Quartet Live at the Village Vanguard

(Contagious Music)

This uniformly satisfying two-CD set, recorded at Manhattan's famed nightclub in February 2019, showcases saxophonist Dayna Stephens in his lyrical wheelhouse. A thoughtful, serpentine improviser, Stephens flourishes in medium-tempo journeys where he can lead as much by implication as direction; the other members of the quartet — pianist Aaron Parks, bassist Ben Street and drummer Gregory Hutchinson — fully bolster such reveries.

Each disc opens well, the first with "Smoking Gun," based on Thelonious Monk's "Evidence" but with angular nails well manicured, and the second



Dezron Douglas and Brandee Younger

Photo by DenekaPeniston



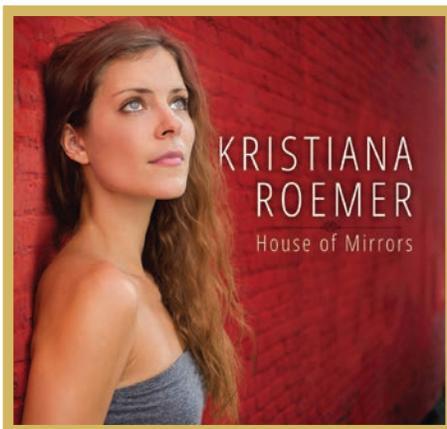
Dayna Stephens

with “Loosy Goosy,” another original the leader has recorded previously. The more peppery numbers, like “Contagious” and “JFK International,” owe much of their energy to Hutchinson, who not only provokes his bandmates but provides inspired, multifaceted solos of his own.

Known primarily for his tenor playing, Stephens mixes things up with a number on soprano (“Tarifa”) and, still better, alto (“Faith Leap” and “The Beginning of an Endless Happy Monday”). In an even greater departure, he performs two numbers (“Radio-Active Earworm” and “Blakonian Groove”) on an electric wind instrument (EWI), and those attracted to such electronics will be pleased to know that he plans more such adventures in the future with a band named Pluto Juice.

Stephens tends to perform like a gracious dinner host: You’re welcomed in, you’re shown around the expansive house, you’re fed well. Eventually, someone gently puts a coat on your shoulders just before you walk to your car. The parties are never uproarious, and in the morning the conversation may not be as memorable as one might expect. Still, one’s always left with a warm and sincere feeling of gratitude.

— Sascha Feinstein



Kristiana Roemer
House of Mirrors
(Sunnyside)

Some singers grab you as much — maybe more — through their music as their voice. Take Kristiana Roemer. Born in Germany, educated in Europe and the United States, and seasoned as a jazz singer in Brooklyn, Roemer has a warm, lovely voice, phrases intelligently and knows how to float a sustained, quiet high note without strain. But you’re as likely to be taken with her unusual arrangements, the room she makes for her superb players, and her eclectic material. Put it this way: How many singers would choose to end a song with a guitar solo?



Kristiana Roemer

Photo by Chris Drukke

WHEN GIANTS STRODE THE CONTINENT

Europeans embraced American jazz legends with open ears and open mics.

By James Rozzi

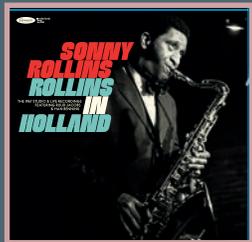
As stellar American jazz musicians traversed Europe, they often took their places onstage among boom mics strategically placed for recording. European audiences seemed unable to get enough, even with efficient overseas distribution of American record labels.

The two-CD **Bill Evans** *Live at Ronnie Scott's* is third in a series of Resonance recordings documenting the six-month, 1968 tenure of the lyrical pianist's trio featuring bassist Eddie Gomez and drummer Jack DeJohnette. While Gomez remained for 11 years, it is 25-year-old DeJohnette's abbreviated inclusion that elicits much



interest. Up until these discoveries, only one such recording had been released: the Grammy-winning *Live in Montreux*. This later London gig lasted an entire month, allowing for considerable coalescence. On a solo-laden repertoire of standards such as "Autumn Leaves" and "Yesterdays," and Evans originals including "Very Early" and "Waltz for Debby," DeJohnette's drumming is more assertive than the trio's predecessors (with the exception of Philly Joe Jones), foreshadowing a path that Evans would take throughout his remaining years — less introspective, more assured and more aggressively swinging.

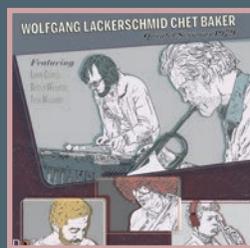
Saxophonist **Sonny Rollins** seldom produced a studio recording that measured up to his live dates. His previously unreleased, two-disc *Rollins in Holland* (Resonance), from 1967, opens with four studio cuts lacking the drive and intensity of the remaining seven concert tracks. Performing with Dutch stalwarts Ruud Jacobs on bass and Han Bennink on drums,



Rollins free-wheels his way through 11 tracks, three of which surpass the 19-minute mark ("Three Little Words," "Love Walked In," "Four"). Absence of a chordal instrument was advantageous to Rollins — truly a stream-of-consciousness player — allowing him considerable harmonic freedom. That Rollins was delighted to have this material finally released speaks volumes, and the sumptuous package contains a booklet of illuminating essays, interviews and photos.

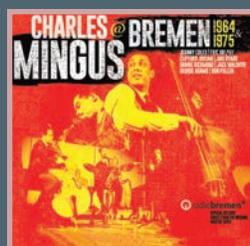
European jazz fans had an ongoing love affair with Chet Baker despite the trumpeter-vocalist's drug-related arrests

and deportations. Baker hit his musical peak during the 1950s, yet his discography is duly expansive throughout his final, Europe-based decade. One of his better latter-day releases, the single-disc **Wolfgang Lackerschmid-Chet Baker** *Quintet Sessions 1979* (Dot Time), features the excellent German vibraphonist Lackerschmid along with an American dream team: guitarist Larry Coryell, bassist Buster Williams and drummer Tony



Williams. More expressive than its predecessor, *Ballads for Two*, *Quintet Sessions* maintains Baker's rep as one of the quieter trumpeters. During a set list of originals and one standard ("Here's That Rainy Day"), even Williams' funky "Mr. Biko" finds Baker barely putting enough air through his horn to maintain pitch. Coryell's "Rue Gregoire du Tour" is a standout, a breezy 6/4 tune with Baker executing impressive double-time lines reminiscent of his younger days.

If one sideman was bassist-composer **Charles Mingus'** right-hand man, it was drummer Dannie Richmond, whose tenure provides the rhythmic impetus behind the four CDs of *Charles Mingus: Bremen 1964 & 1975* (Sunnyside). In author Brian Priestley's *Mingus: A Critical Biography*, Richmond deems Mingus' 1964 sextet "the first band," and his 1975 quintet, "the second band," heralding these two groups as Mingus' finest. The much rawer 1964 sextet is renowned, featuring saxophonists Eric Dolphy and Clifford Jordan, trumpeter Johnny Coles, pianist Jaki Byard and drummer Richmond. Four of six songs ("Hope So Eric," "Fables of Faubus," "Parkeriana," "Meditations on Integration") clock in at more than 20 electrifying minutes each. Mingus' more polished 1975 quintet highlights excellent improvisations by trumpeter Jack Walrath, saxophonist George Adams, pianist Don Pullen and Richmond. The leader manages group spontaneity throughout, especially on the 33-minute "Sue's Changes." The remaining nine songs are shorter, including "Free Cell Block F, 'Tis Nazi USA" (interesting song choice for Germany) and "Remember Rockefeller at Attica," both of which are straightahead blowing tunes. ■





Clifford Jordan and Charles Mingus

Photo by Jochen Mönch



Aaron Burnett

That's exactly what Roemer does on the title track to *House of Mirrors*, her debut album, with a coda by guitarist Gilad Hekselman. Other artistic choices make Roemer stand out. Though mostly sung in English, these nine tracks include two adaptations of German poems — one by Herman Hesse, the other by the German-Jewish Holocaust martyr Felice Schragenheim. Yet another is Roemer's interpretation of John of the Cross' "Dark Night of the Soul," which ends with a spoken-word delivery of Roemer's own poem, "Home."

All that said, this is clearly a jazz record. Schragenheim's "Deine Hände"

("Your Hands") is recognizably a jazz love ballad in any language, and it's a sure bet that few have ever imagined "Dark Night of the Soul" swinging like this — tastefully, with Addison Frei's gently propulsive piano figures, melodic embellishment from guitarist Ben Monder, and Roemer's short poem intoned over the closing music. The Hesse song, "Manchmal" ("Sometimes"), is another deftly turned jazz ballad, with bassist Alex Claffy and drummer Adam Arruda completing the core trio with Frei.

Other appealing idiosyncrasies appear throughout: the way Roemer weaves her voice wordlessly through the ensemble

on her "Lullaby for N.," the trip-hoppy beats of "Beauty Is a Wound," with bass-drum inflections by percussionist Rogerio Boccato; and her introspective lyrics, as on the title song ("My reflections are moving in nearer/As I stand here/In my house of mirrors"). But then there is the familiar medium-tempo Latin groove of "Virgin Soil" and Roemer's arrangement of Stanley Turrentine's "Sugar" — both with tenor saxophonist Dayna Stephens — and a version of the Charles Mingus beauty "Duke Ellington's Sound of Love" that would probably make its composer smile.

— Jon Garelick



Aaron Burnett and the Big Machine *Jupiter Conject*

(Fresh Sound/New Talent)

Space is the place many of us probably would have liked to have gone to escape the fresh hell of everything wrought by 2020. But the outer regions — in concept, at least — can also be a place to free our inner spirits, as saxophonist Aaron Burnett demonstrates on *Jupiter Conject*, the engaging, frequently hypnotic followup to *Anomaly*, the widely admired 2019 album from his Big Machine group.

Burnett's music is nothing if not focused on navigating the crevices and passageways between musical dimensions, as typified here by two versions of "Ganymede," a collaboration with superstar bassist Esperanza Spalding, with whom the saxophonist



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Archie Shepp and Jason Moran



has toured extensively. The careering unison lines of the leader's tenor and Spalding's wordless vocals are reminiscent of vintage fusion. Kush Abadey's hyperactive, scenery-chewing drums drive hip-hop grooves, and other elements and effects offer EDM colors. Burnett and trumpeter Adam O'Farrill, in particular, turn in exhilarating solos on both takes of the tune.

Burnett's latest compositions were inspired by his reflections on the forces that keep the solar system's largest planet connected to its four largest moons, each of which gets its own salute. In addition to "Ganymede," there's the haunting trumpet-tenor lines over the pulsating soundscapes of "Callisto," dedicated to Wayne Shorter; the bop-to-avant contours of "Io," lit by Joel Ross' conversational, questioning vibraphones; and the even trippier, EDM-soaked "Europa."

The varied textures and tonal temperatures of the opening "Color Durations" and "The Veil" feel like warmups for the more intense tracks to come. The ferocious "Ether," for example, is partly built on a relentless back-and-forth between the rhythm section's relentlessly serpentine lines and the horn players' brash, gritty response. It all builds toward a gripping maelstrom of sound. Best hold on tight.

— Philip Booth

Archie Shepp and Jason Moran

Let My People Go

(Archieball)

Given their compatible sensibilities and friendship of several years, a recording by Archie Shepp and Jason Moran may have been inevitable. Both have always honored tradition while seeking new forms of expression, and both have made stellar contributions to the saxophone-piano duo format: Shepp with pianists Horace Parlan and Mal Waldron, among others; Moran more recently with Charles Lloyd. And here they are now, Shepp, 83, Moran, 46 in January, with a moving set of standards and spirituals. But given the pair's devotion

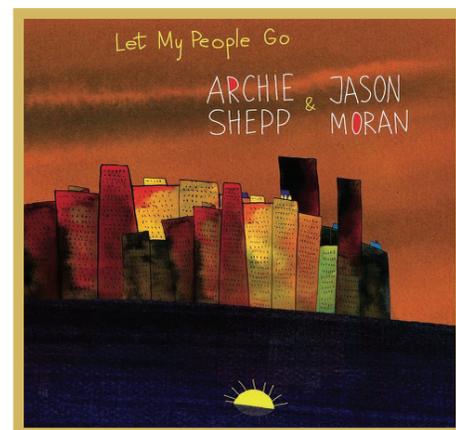
to all forms of African-American artistic expression, one could assume they're making the case that it's all spirit music.

There's a supportive contrast in their performances, as Shepp's often astringent tone is balanced by Moran's tendency toward sweetness in his chord voicings. It's immediately evident in how Moran's gentle opening on "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" leads into Shepp's more anguished cries on soprano sax, followed by Moran's gospel-drenched solo. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's "Isfahan" finds Shepp in a mellower mode on tenor, though at times he reaches for higher realms in his upper-register bursts.

The pair certainly treat John Coltrane's "Wise One" as a spiritual, heightening the tune's hymnal qualities before giving way to the middle section's loping gait, where the intensity of Shepp's probing tenor lines and Moran's lyrical chord runs produce several goosebump-inducing moments. The album's title is taken from a line in "Go Down Moses," and its meaning is particularly resonant right now. You can feel that urgency in this performance, as Moran's rumbling tones and Shepp's long phrases on soprano bring a sense of foreboding to the slave spiritual.

Shepp also contributes brief vocal turns on "Go Down Moses," "Motherless Child," and "Lush Life." It's a voice that's weathered, wise and — like everything on this record — full of soul.

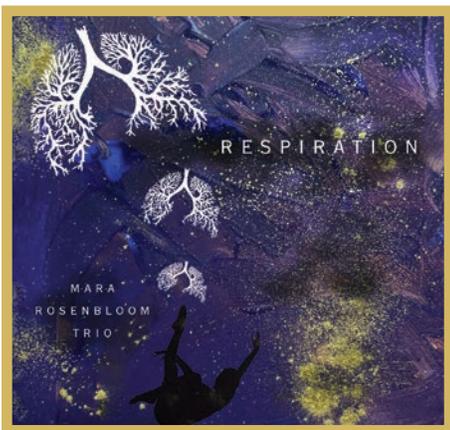
— John Frederick Moore



auditions



Mara Rosenbloom



Mara Rosenbloom Trio *Respiration*

(Fresh Sound/New Talent)

While it can often seem like the piano-trio format is all wrung-out, very occasionally a recording drops that introduces new dimensions. Mara Rosenbloom's *Respiration* does not reinvent the configuration so much as unsettle it.

For starters, the Wisconsin-raised, New York-based Rosenbloom shows a resolute fondness for her instrument's lower and middle registers, and no interest whatsoever in the fast, graceful lines and sparkling arpeggios that have been coins of the realm for trio-centric pianists through the decades.

Rosenbloom works the keys hard, repeating and developing knotty note clusters and clamorous chords, her right hand occasionally venturing up an octave or two for a quick, rugged foray. It's improvising that evolves from the tune's melody, unconcerned with playing over chord changes.

Rosenbloom's long-time bandmates — bassist Sean Conly and drummer Chad Taylor — are completely in synch with her idiosyncratic concept. They're partners in improvisation, not sidemen, intuitively reacting to the pianist's relentless probing while occasionally taking the wheel.

The album's rough beauty might take a few listens to insinuate itself. "The Choo," an uptempo original, provides an apt example. The song's innate melodic sweetness is at first disguised

by Rosenbloom's roughhouse attack, but soon enough reveals itself as something you could hear Laura Nyro singing. "The Ballad for Carolyn Trousers (Carol, in trousers)" begins with simple, forceful chords and then evolves into a stately, gospel-flavored tune. And the trio issues a frisky surprise with "Ramblin' on Her Mind (With Gratitude to Lightnin' Hopkins)," a riffy blues driven by a choppy New Orleans groove.

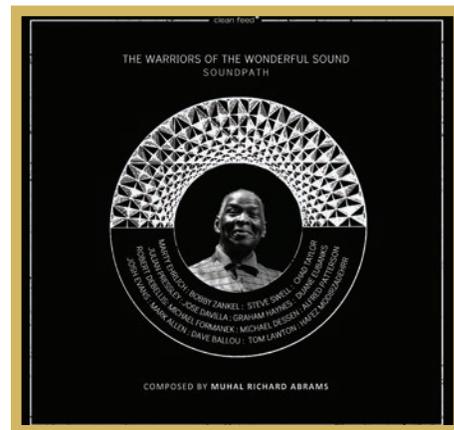
The album's most ambitious piece, "Caravan/Connie's Groove," blends a bold deconstruction of the Duke Ellington-Juan Tizol classic with an adapted version of Connie Crothers' "Ontology" over the course of nearly 10 minutes. Rosenbloom begins with rolling-thunder chords, then makes a series of hints at "Caravan." When the pianist first states the tune outright, she strikes the keys so hard it's as if she were mad at them. From there, the trio almost imperceptibly blends in elements of Crothers' composition and explores a series of motifs: from near-stillness to raucous pounding to short, discordant lines; from free rhythm to a throbbing, straight-four groove. This medley of sorts is thoroughly personal and unique — much like the rest of *Respiration*. — **Eric Snider**

The Warriors of the Wonderful Sound *SoundPath*

(Clean Feed)

Saxophonist Bobby Zankel first convened this Philadelphia-based big band almost 20 years ago, and here the lineup boasts a slew of heavy hitters. Only a handful would count as jazz-household names — among them trumpeter Josh Evans, cornetist Graham Haynes, trombonist Steve Swell, bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Chad Taylor — although the entire band plays with strength and even inspiration throughout.

But the band's new release, *SoundPath*, would also attract attention with lesser musicians, owing to the provenance of its single composition. In 2012, the Warriors of the Wonderful Sound commissioned this piece from Muhal Richard Abrams,



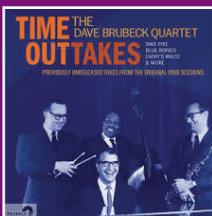
co-founder and guiding light of the AACM, whose work as a composer all but outstripped his spiky and distinctive piano praxis. Virtually no one got to hear *SoundPath*: It received only two public performances, in 2012 and in 2018, both for small audiences in the Philadelphia area. This recording, made a day after the latter concert with saxophonist Marty Ehrlich conducting, offers the first chance for the world at large to hear a "new" piece by a master innovator, and that alone would recommend it.

Abrams, who died in 2017, constructed *SoundPath* around a series of miniature cornerstones — mostly trio episodes linked and occasionally buoyed by tuneful ensemble sections that wax and wane in intensity. The first such vignette presents pianist Tom Lawton, flatteringly respectful of Abrams' own approach without slipping into parody; bassist Formanek also gets a solo spot, and later joins with Ehrlich (playing alto) for a duo interlude. But primarily, these meet-ups distill the horn sections of the jazz orchestra, with each group featuring one saxophonist, one trumpeter and one or two trombonists — as in the lovely pastoral woven by Robert DeBellis on soprano, Michael Dessen on trombone and Dave Ballou on trumpet. *SoundPath* becomes a sort of tour through these various "neighborhoods," enlivened by the street-corner dialogue among these intimate gatherings.

The work inhabits the genre-bridging "freebop" territory that Abrams all but discovered on his early small-band records.

SOUNDBITES

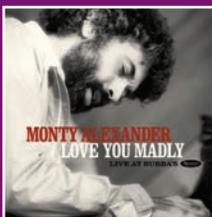
By Eric Snider



The Dave Brubeck Quartet

Time Outtakes: Previously Unreleased Takes From the Original 1959 Sessions (Brubeck Editions)

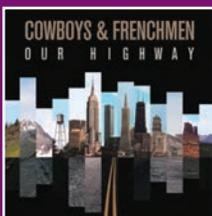
Regardless of how you regard *Time Out* on the masterpiece scale, it's illuminating — and fun — to hear these early versions of tunes that have become stamped into the jazz canon. Upon hearing the nervous, unfocused initial attempt at “Take Five,” you’d never guess it would become one of most recognizable jazz standards of all time. Make a comparison study if you like — or just enjoy. And raise a glass to Brubeck, whose centennial was celebrated in December.



Monty Alexander

Love You Madly: Live at Bubba's (Resonance)

Another valuable find for the vault-digging Resonance label, *Love You Madly* serves up 92 minutes of pianist Alexander at the peak of his powers and in frisky form at a 1982 South Florida club date. Percussionist Robert Thomas Jr. adds extra zing to the quartet. Impeccably recorded and mastered.



Cowboys and Frenchmen

Our Highway (Outside in Music)

While the band name hints at playful subversiveness, this New York City quintet, with a dual-saxophone frontline, serves up mostly strait-laced contemporary post-bop on its second album. Heaps of expert, scholarly playing and meticulously crafted arrangements do not make for a terribly compelling journey, but it's not a dead end either.



Ed Palermo Big Band

The Great Un-American Songbook Vol. III: Run For Your Life (Sky Cat)

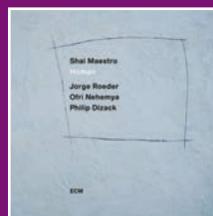
The 17-piece ensemble's lively renditions of British rock songs from the '60s and '70s (with Zappa segments sewn in here and there) walk a fine line between the sublime and the silly. The Beatles material fares best, especially “Within You Without You” and “Strawberry Fields.” Finishing with four vocal versions of songs by Jethro Tull, Procol Harum and The Moody Blues was a bad idea.



Leon Lee Dorsey

Thank You Mr. Mabern (Jazz Ave.)

This sturdy piano-trio date, led by bassist Dorsey and anchored by drummer Mike Clark, chronicles the last recording of hard-swinging, hard-bop pianist Harold Mabern, who died at age 83 last year, two months after the session. The soul-jazz numbers — “Rakin’ and Scrapin,’” “Watermelon Man,” “I’m Walkin’” — are the standouts in a largely appealing nine-song set.



Shai Maestro

Human (ECM)

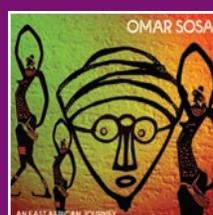
American trumpeter Philip Dizack joins Israeli pianist Maestro's trio, adding lush sonic texture to a collection of mostly placid originals with a neo-classical bent — like smoldering embers not meant to catch fire. A sleeky version of Ellington's “In a Sentimental Mood” adds a little spark, and the ballad “Hank and Charlie” is tenderly performed.



Ray Russell

Fluid Architecture (Cuneiform)

What sets this nine-song set a cut or two above other neo-fusion albums is the wide scope of 73-year-old British guitarist Russell's compositions and playing: smoldering electro-jazz, crunchy rock riffs, spiky acoustic picking, washes of sheer texture, manic note clusters, slurs, slides and warbles, as well as the all-too-familiar echoey wail. This six-string showcase is about more than just flash.



Omar Sosa

An East African Journey (Otá)

This ambitious project — on which Cuban pianist Sosa melds field recordings he made during an African tour with subtle piano, bass and drums — is rife with percolating beats, indigenous string instruments and vocals by African collaborators sung in native languages. The music is breezily enjoyable but ultimately lacks heat or edge. Call it world-music lite. ■



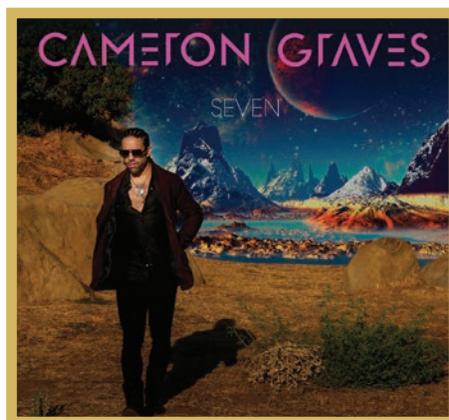
Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond and Eugene Wright



Tino Contreras

And while the term has become widespread since then, his own pursuit of the idiom into large-ensemble formats constitutes a significant portion of his legacy — as *SoundPath* winningly reminds us.

— Neil Tesser



Cameron Graves

Seven

(Mack Avenue/Artistry Music)

Pianist Cameron Graves, who gained notoriety as a central member of Kamasi Washington's West Coast Get Down collective, identifies his current musical style as "thrash jazz." His sophomore release, *Seven*, consists of 11 original tracks that rarely exceed three minutes. They are predominantly (and densely) through-composed, built in song form around a series of furious riffs that guitarist Colin Cook beefs up with a compact fuzz tone. Graves plays an acoustic piano, but plays it hard. (Why use a synth when the big strings are so thorny with overtones?) Where jazz beckons, thrash jazz shoves. It is music for mosh pits.

In fact, the group's jazz background is hardly evident outside of their attention to syncopation and harmony. Cook spits atonal lines like a flamethrower throughout the spare solo space allotted on "Master Spirits" and the title track, but drummer Mike Mitchell seems to account for about 90 percent of the improvisation on the record. Playing over such fixed content, he is able to rattle off propulsive fills at any given moment. His kit is produced to sound snappy but engulfing,

as if the listener were sitting in his lap.

Though the band matches the sonic heaviness of certain metal genres, its emotional palette could not be farther from the rage and negativity that they often impart. Instead, with its shreddy maximalism and cosmic cover art — Graves sometimes goes by "The Planetary Prince" — *Seven* channels a vibe of proud dorkiness similar to that epitomized by the bandleader's long-standing collaborator Thundercat. Tracks like "Sons of Creation" and "Super Universes" come off as hi-fi adaptations of video game battle music. "Mansion Worlds" sounds like a dragon having a seizure.

Seven's defiant lack of restraint might have been an issue if the group's airtight barrage weren't so fundamentally pleasing. No doubt the crew of hard rock cosmonauts accomplished exactly what they set out to do. — Asher Wolf



Tino Contreras

La Noche de los Dioses

(Brownswood)

At 96, drummer Tino Contreras is finally basking in the glow of accolades long overdue as one of Mexico's most innovative and inexhaustible jazzmen. Known for an eclectic, decadent style not easily defined, the iconic bandleader-composer has maintained a decades-long career recording and performing a steady stream of music that is transcendent, forward-looking, steeped in mysticism and brimming with sex appeal. *La Noche de los Dioses*, the latest

Elina Duni

in a rich oeuvre comprising more than 50 albums, is no exception.

Contreras' new album is an extension and a deepening of his expansive approach. The music is elevated by a stellar band that features Valentino Contreras on electric bass, Carlos Icaza on synthesizers and percussion, Jaime Reyes on piano and keyboard, Emmanuel Laboriel on electric guitar, Luis Calatayud on soprano and tenor sax, Eduardo Flores on bongos, and Marco Gallegos on acoustic guitar. They coalesce around Contreras' interplanetary vision, propelling him to delve deeper and range farther afield as he conjures sublime moods, lush atmospheric and cosmic vibes.

Seven original cuts are rooted in life-long explorations of themes originating in Aztec mythology, as well as ruminations on humanity and spirituality, as Contreras utilizes a vast palette of sounds across jazz idioms, eras and cultures. The album's title track sets the luxuriant tone. A sinuously seductive melody draws inspiration from the Aztec god and goddess that represent the sun and war and life and death. The ritualistic "Máscaras Blues" is drenched in dark undertones driven by Calatayud's lyrically flowing, granular sax infused by Reyes' Latin *tumbao* on piano. "Malinche" is an ode to the interpreter who bridged the language divide between Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and

Aztec emperor Moctezuma II. Goaded by a vibrant piano vamp and layers of instrumentation, it swings and sways in a modal framework.

"El Sacrificio" is the essence of Contreras. Polyrhythmic swirls exuding Middle Eastern flair and a bluesy hard-bop groove envelop and saturate the senses. Contreras' sublime, all-encompassing gaze — both earthy and otherworldly — has claimed its place as a vital, pulsating force in the Latin jazz canon.

— **Lisette Corsa**

Elina Duni/Rob Luft

Lost Ships
(ECM)

The lovely, twilight-moody Elina Duni/Rob Luft album *Lost Ships* is a wanderer — in spirit, lyrical reference and geo-cultural terms. Albanian-Swiss vocalist Duni, empathetically abetted by British guitarist Luft, freely traverses cultures and languages, from her native tongue to English, Italian and French songs. Stylistically, as well, the landscape shifts from haunting folk fare from Italy, Albania and beyond to atmospheric originals, and a quick trip to the great American songbook — the Sinatra staple "I'm a Fool To Want You." Tellingly, on an album rife with themes of exile, displacement and mercurial love, Duni also presents a wise new rendition of the traditional American



folk ballad "The Wayfaring Stranger."

Not incidentally, Duni's aesthetic is well-suited to the diversity-minded global reach — not to mention the introspection-ready climate and pristine sonics — of the venerable ECM label, for which she has now recorded a handful of distinctive albums. And yet, despite the shifting terrains, the carefully sequenced and measured *Lost Ships* is unified by the centering force of Duni's assured, understated vocal powers. She interpretively owns the songs she sings and resists temptation to oversell them. Balancing nuance and richness is her métier.

Guests do fly in, with delicate support from pianist Fred Thomas and tasteful flights by flugelhornist Matthieu Michel. But the album's core identity is the creative alliance of Duni and Luft. The pair's original songs stand out, particularly the bittersweet title track and the album's highlight, the sophisticated yet compact folk-pop art song "Flying Kites."

Duni's exit strategy is a thing of hushed poetry, as she closes the album with a spare take of Charles Aznavour's haunting "Hier Encore." The song gains wistfulness via the sonic embrace of Duni's subtle phrases and an acoustic guitar approach flecked with harmonics. And so this special song set ends on a note of repose and longing.

— **Josef Woodard**



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The Torch Bearer



Geoff Wilkinson may not have been the first producer to combine jazz and hip-hop, but he certainly was among the most successful. Based in London, Wilkinson had been experimenting with the genre hybrid in the early '90s when he reached the ears of Blue Note Records president Bruce Lundvall. Lundvall signed Wilkinson's band, Us3, and opened the vaults of the legendary label for sampling. The resulting 1993 release Hand on the Torch, with its hit single "Cantaloope (Flip Fantasia)" sampling Herbie Hancock's "Cantaloupe Island," gave Blue Note its first platinum record. Us3 would record one more album for the label before moving on, its style evolving over the course of another seven releases. Wilkinson spoke with JAZZIZ in 2011 on the release of the Us3 album Lie, Cheat & Steal. Following are unpublished excerpts from that conversation.

What made Us3 a bit different was that the stuff that happened before us was mainly producers sampling '70s jazz-funk, rather than going back to the classic '60s hard-bop and soul-jazz that Blue Note was famous for. It was really perfect for Us3 to be with Blue Note because that's the type of music that I really like. So when I met [Blue Note president Bruce Lundvall and other label reps] and talked to them about their music, they quickly realized that I knew what I was talking about.

The idea of Us3 was to acknowledge the past, be rooted in the present but look forward to the future. The musicians I worked with were British jazzers — there was a booming jazz-dance scene in England at the time that was bringing a lot of jazz musicians to the fore — and I was always intrigued to see what they would do next.

When I look back on it now, the tracks that I sampled for *Hand on the Torch* were a bit obvious. It wasn't exactly Blue Note's greatest hits, but there were quite a few well-known tracks that I used — although I don't think "Cantaloupe Island" was seen as a jazz standard at the time in the way that it is now.

I went a bit deeper [into the Blue Note catalogue] on the second album, and I'm not sure that's exactly what they wanted me to do. So, after I left the label, I sampled all sorts of things on the third album, because I'd been let off the the leash a bit. It was probably a good thing for the longevity of Us3 not to be tied to just sampling Blue Note cuts. That would have become very restrictive very quickly. I still think sampling is an art when it's done in the right way, but now the cost of clearing samples has made it prohibitive.

Initially, we were met with a healthy degree of skepticism. We got accused of tearing pages from the Bible. But I developed a stock-in-trade answer: "Well, if we're tearing pages out of the Bible, we've been sanctioned by God, because we're on Blue

Note." I think the fact that we were on the label and that there was some great playing on there, as well as samples, deflected the criticism. Even jazz fans who didn't like the music could see where we were coming from and what we were trying to do.

Us3 is maybe viewed in the U.S. as a '90s band or a one-hit wonder, which is ironic, because *Hand on the Torch* sold more copies than the single ["Cantaloope"] did. Bruce actually had a space on the wall of his office before it had gone platinum, when it had gotten up to about 700,000-800,000 in sales. He said, "That's going to be Blue Note's first platinum album. I've made a space for it already." That made me nervous, but we got there.

When I started Us3, one of my driving forces was getting jazz across to a younger audience, because jazz had become a bit too high-brow, in terms of its image. People thought that it was an old man's music, when obviously its roots were in dancing. Coming out of that dance scene in London, it was obvious to me that people could and would dance to jazz if they were exposed to it. And it's worked both ways — there have been some older jazz fans that have been exposed to hip-hop, as well. I'm absolutely convinced that there's a bigger audience still for jazz amongst younger people, but they're just not exposed to enough of it. ■



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