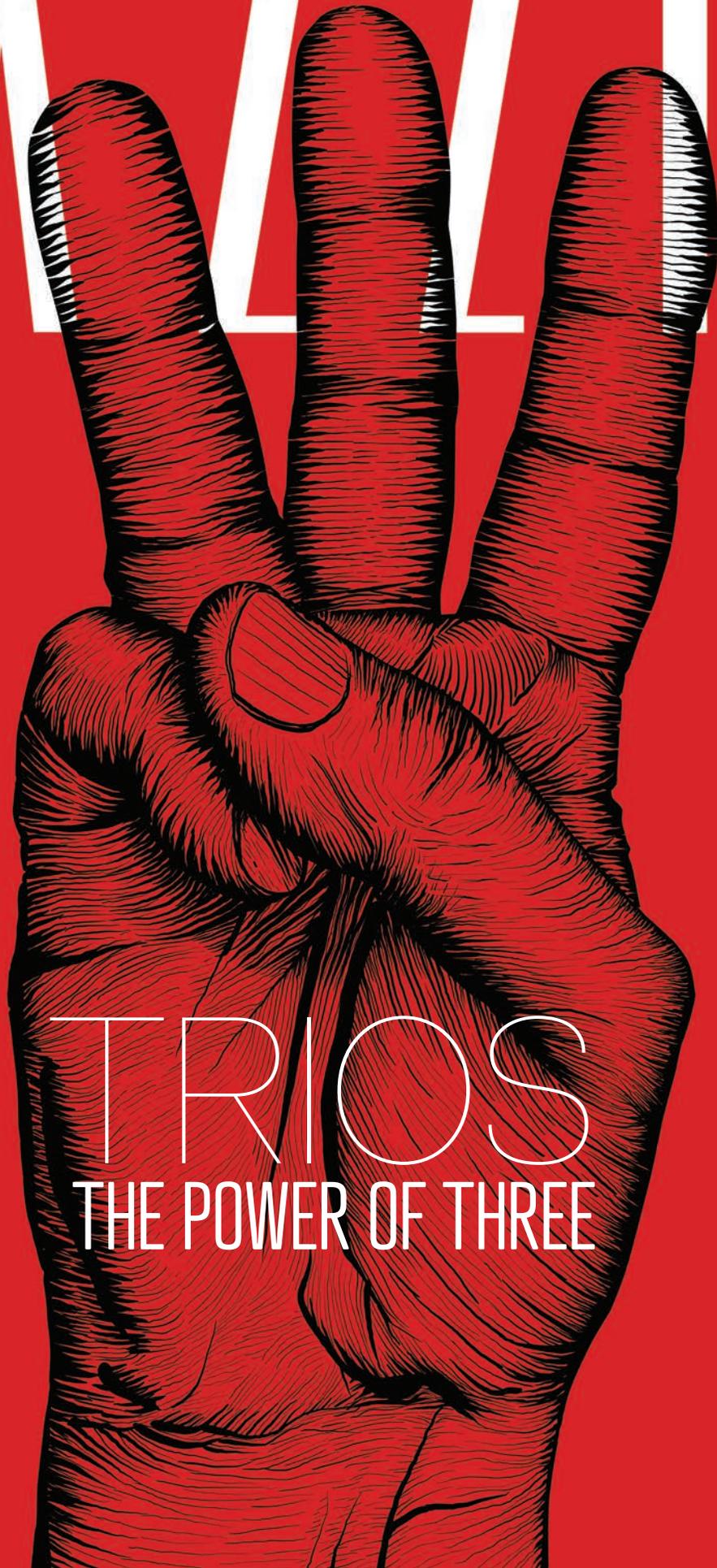


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A portrait of Chick Corea, a jazz pianist, sitting at a piano. He is wearing a white button-down shirt under a dark jacket. The background is dark with bokeh light effects. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

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# stolen moment





During his long career, Chick Corea helmed several memorable trios, including his Akoustic Band with bassist John Patitucci and drummer Dave Weckl (pictured here). Initially formed in 1987, the trio reunited in January of 2018 at the SPC Music Hall in St. Petersburg, Florida. Fortunately, that performance was documented on the two-CD set *LIVE* (Concord Jazz), which is slated for release in July. Corea, who died in February, received two posthumous Grammys for another trio recording, last year's *Trilogy 2*. For more about Corea's trio legacy, check out Bill Milkowski's Coda on page 98.

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**Jeff Dalton:** acoustic bass, electric bass, vocal

**Jon Krosnick:** drums

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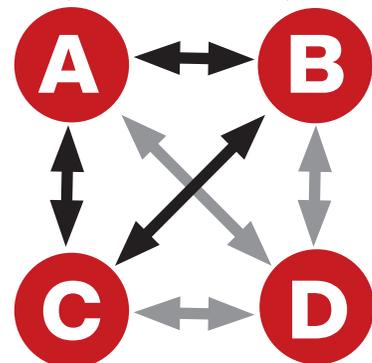


# The Power of Three

It's commonplace to say that "the third time's the charm," as we've all experienced the baffling beauty of things that take place in threes.

Call it mathematical, cultural, spiritual, mythological, geometrical, architectural or cerebral, our existence can be delineated in threes. We live in the past, present and future; everything has a beginning, middle and end; our Earth is the third rock from the sun; and we express our souls in body, mind and spirit. Even Freud's theory — right or wrong — was based on the id, ego and superego. We have the Holy Trinity of Christianity, the Hindu Trimurti, and the three jewels of Buddhism; the Hebrew letter for three stands for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and in Islam, the ablution before prayer and rituals during prayer are frequently in threes. In Chinese culture, the Great Triad signifies Earth, human and heaven; and the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras based his entire theory of perfect harmony on the triangle. Which brings me to jazz trios.

From a purely mathematical perspective, in a three-musician ensemble, there are only three relationships that need to be maintained (see



diagrams). A and B need to understand how to play together, as do A and C, and B and C. But if a fourth player is added there are now three additional relationships to consider as A, B and C need to integrate D into their playing. Adding more musicians, increases the complexity exponentially.

Just as our brains quickly grasp threes at an early age — Goldilocks and the Three Bears, three blind mice and three little pigs, featured in books made up of primary colors of red, yellow and blue — there's a neuroscientific reason why artists enjoy making trio music as much as people enjoy listening. From a logistical perspective, in this smaller ensemble, each musician has more space for musical possibilities, choices, expression and responsibility. On one hand, there is a limitation in timbre and on the other, each instrument can explore more sonic texture and a variety of sounds and phrases alternating with the other two musicians taking an ever-present supportive role.

Without getting too neurological, different parts of the brain are recruited to process music. It's also known that there is a relationship between music and early brain development, and that music can prove quite effective therapy for cognitive decline in older age. At any age, our brains are "wired" to respond to stories, and a great trio creates a musical conversation that tells a story that our brain can more easily understand.

Over the years, I've noticed that of all the different formats of jazz, people respond most favorably to trio music. It's likely that the communication and structure is complex enough to hold listeners' attention yet simple enough to take it all in. I hope you enjoy our issue dedicated to jazz trios and check out some of the great trios of yesterday and today.

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—Michael Fagien

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prelude





# Sweet Sistine

Michelangelo's masterpiece fired the creative passion of pianist **Yoonmi Choi**.

**Pianist and composer Yoonmi Choi traces the roots of *7 Days*** (Next Level), her majestic, genre-bending new trio album, back more than seven years, to an Italian vacation that included a visit to the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. Before her arrival at the famous church, she had no plans to pen and perform a musical variation on the Biblical story of the Earth's creation. But the moment she looked up at the ceiling and saw the portion of Michelangelo's fresco devoted to this theme, inspiration struck as if she'd been touched by the finger of God.

"It was amazing," she recalls. "And at that moment — right at that moment — I thought, 'I have to do this.'"

Choi, who was born in the city of Incheon and grew up in South Korea, has combined faith and music for much of her life. "I'm Christian, and my mom is very religious," she says. "We went to church every single Sunday, and when I was older, I played piano in the church."

Choi began studying the piano when she was just 3 years old, beginning an educational journey that would take her to Sookmyung Women's University and the Dong-ah Institute of Media and Arts College prior to her attendance at the Prince Claus Conservatoire in the Netherlands. And while

her initial focus was on classical music, jazz entered the picture in dramatic fashion during a subway ride when she was 24.

"I didn't know anything about jazz at all, but then I heard 'All the Things You Are,'" she says. The Jimmy Heath Quintet's rendition of the Jerome

Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II chestnut features Wynton Kelly on piano, and his playing floored her. In her words, "I listened to the music and cried. It was just so beautiful. I was a classical musician, and what I could do was read the music and then play the music. But jazz musicians could play with chords and progressions, and I thought, 'Wow.' It made me want to find out how they did what they did."

In 2015, Choi moved to New York and subsequently earned a Master of Music in Jazz Performance from Queens College. But rather than rejecting classical music, she found ways of incorporating it into her writing and playing while still allowing herself the freedom for more spontaneous exploration. "Every song has some improvisation," she stresses.

The composing process for Choi's Michelangelo-inspired recording found her following the master's lead. "It took him a long time on those paintings — more than three years," she notes. "So I thought, 'I don't want to make the music in one or two months. Maybe I have to do more thinking. I have to give it more time.' That's why it took me five years to make *7 Days*."

The approach paid off. The first track, "1st Day," subtitled "Let There Be Light," features a series of grand flourishes worthy of a magnum opus, with Choi thundering across the keyboard as drummer Samvel Sarkisyan and bassist Myles Sloniker add colorful accents. But cuts such as the tricky, quick-fingered "5th Day (Let Them Swim, Let Them Fly)" swing with abandon prior to "7th Day (It Was Good)," a Choi solo excursion that's the equivalent of a blissful sigh after a job well done.

In Choi's view, fealty to the Christian version of divinity isn't a requirement for enjoying *7 Days* — or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. "Everybody loves Michelangelo's paintings whether they believe in God nor not," she says. "These are not only religion things. These are art things." — **Michael Roberts**



# Of Art and Algorithm

Jorn Swart explores the prospects of creating and consuming art in an automated age.

***Hello Future* (Outside In Music), the sophomore album from** pianist-composer Jorn Swart's forward-looking trio, Malnoia, is rooted in the deep conversations shared by Swart and bandmates Benni von Gutzeit (viola) and Lucas Pino (bass clarinet) about the crossroads between artificial intelligence (AI), humanity, technology and the arts. Inspired by the oeuvre of science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov, Swart tasked three authors, as well as himself, to craft short, delicate yet emotionally stirring narrative vignettes corresponding to each of the album's 11 tracks, the only guideline being that their theme center around the future of humanity in a world increasingly reliant on AI.

Swart recorded *Hello Future* two years ago in Amsterdam, and composed most of the tracks the year before. The one exception is the beautifully haunting "Tears in Rain," a rendering of the score from the film *Blade Runner*'s final scene, illustrating an emotional moment of convergence between human and machine. The bandleader describes his story-centered approach to making music that inspires a narrative, and not the opposite, as reverse film score writing. "People would tell us often that they thought our music sounded cinematic," Swart says. "I thought, 'How can I use this idea?' In the end, to me, it comes down to telling a story. Even though I'm drawn to complexity and finding ways to make music really interesting, I wanted to retain this element of storytelling or at least to have there be a concept, something that the listener can hold on to."

Malnoia's unconventional trio formation of piano, bass clarinet and viola proves an apt vehicle with which to transcend the boundaries between jazz and chamber music, as well as to smudge the limits that define narrative, the visual arts and the labels others might impose. Swart was also determined

to dismantle how the music industry promotes and streams a musician's output by adding a third interactive element to his album. He cut out the middle man and created a free, six-day, online virtual experience that explores the album, the stories shaped by the music, and the people behind them. "I get to build a relationship with the listener where it's not like a black box where I don't know who's listening to my music on Spotify," he says. "I get to try to create a community around my music."

In so doing, Swart answers the existential question posed by the album: What role will humans play in the creation and consumption of art in a not-so-distant world run by AI? It's a query poignantly addressed near the close of the album on "Prelude to Singularity." Inhabited by wistful piano, von Gutzeit's foreboding viola and Pino's contemplative woodwinds, the track accompanies the story of a man who is faced with the unfathomable reality that a concert that had made an indelible impact on his life had been created by an algorithm.

"I think for humans it's very important that we know that there's a human on the other side who's trying to communicate something with us," Swart says. "I think that's why maybe art and music will be the last to remain standing in this sort of automation revolution, because of the fact that we want to feel that we're experiencing something that's made by a human."

— Lissette Corsa





From left, Benni von Gutzeit, Jorn Swart and Lucas Pino

prelude



# Giving It Another Whirl

Having once rejected them, **Mehmet Ali Sanlikol** embraces his roots with vigor. And a new trio.

The three big-band records from Turkish-born composer Mehmet Ali Sanlikol feature little of his piano playing, but it makes sense that this side of the former prodigy would eventually emerge on record. On *An Elegant Ritual* (Dünya), he not only goes back to his first instrument, he also digs deeper into his roots, part of a continuing and career-altering process.

Sanlikol's mother, a classical music teacher, had busts of Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart on the piano; his father, an avid opera fan, championed Western polyphony and derided the monophony at the heart of Turkey's native music. "There was no trace of Turkish music," he explains. "No one talked about its microtonal richness. We were very Western-facing, idealizing everything about Western culture. In some ways this was great," he adds, as it provided the foundation for his career as a jazz pianist and composer. "But it also alienates you from the culture of your home country."

When Sanlikol headed to Berklee College of Music in Boston in the early '90s, he knew next to nothing of traditional Turkish music; he regarded the genre's "simple" sounds and exotic folk costumes with condescending amusement.

But one day in 2000, he encountered a piece of music that literally made him change his tune. "There was this short [Turkish] folksong, and I couldn't tell where the tonic was," he says. "I had graduated Berklee as the best composition student in the jazz department, I had just completed my master's degree at New England Conservatory, I was accepted to the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop — I was kind of full of myself. And this little folksong threw me off! It's only eight measures long — and it is from the place I grew up! It was like someone pulling

the carpet from under my feet. I had no idea I was headed into a period of reconstructing my identity" — which he'd spend the next dozen years doing. Sanlikol dropped almost all his Western studies, including jazz, to investigate his closeted musical heritage.

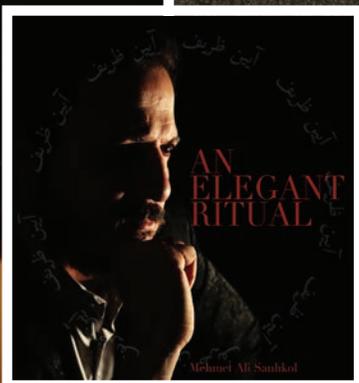
He co-founded Dünya, a nonprofit that produced concerts and then albums of Turkish music. After a decade of immersion in that world, Sanlikol determined to unite his old love, jazz, with his hard-won knowledge of his roots. He formed a jazz orchestra to record the 2014 album *What's Next?*, and two years later, added Turkish instruments to the ensemble, now named *Whatsnext?* In 2020, he released the monumental *The Rise Up*, commissioned by saxophonist Dave Liebman.

*The Rise Up* employs a complicated structure to convey narratives of Middle Eastern history. Sanlikol's design for *An Elegant Ritual* is similarly rigorous but more aligned with his roots. Following the outline of *Mevlevi* (whirling dervish) rituals, it contains two introductory pieces, a central, four-movement composition, and then two up-tempo pieces separated by a postlude. For the album's finale, he chose a hard-blowing, mainstream piano-trio version of the Bronislaw Kaper standard "Invitation."

Wanting the album to communicate "the kind of mystical, spiritual quality of these 'elegant rituals,'" he also drew from Coltrane's prayerful four-movement composition *A Love Supreme*.

*An Elegant Ritual* extends the piano-trio format, with Sanlikol's voice and use of the *ney* (end-blown flute). He's had plenty of practice leading trios in pre-pandemic Boston and overseas; he also handled keyboard parts on his big-band albums. But this is the first piano-trio recording of his career, and long overdue. After all, he points out, "I've been playing piano since I was 5. I can't stop now."

— Neil Tesser





REQUISITE

**The Ornette Coleman Trio**

*At the Golden Circle, Stockholm, Volume One* (Blue Note)

Ornette Coleman had burst into the public consciousness with his quartet, but for his two-week stint at Stockholm’s Golden Circle club in November and December 1965, he pared down to just three pieces. (It was with this group that Coleman would bookend a three-year hiatus beginning in 1962.) Accompanied by bassist David Izenzon and drummer Charles Moffett, the saxophonist sounded joyful and confident performing for the Swedes, who had likely read the breathless media reports: “One of the great cultural events in Stockholm this fall,” one trumpeted. Fortunately, two of those shows were recorded and released on a pair of extraordinary albums.

The trio jumps from the gate on *Volume One* with an exuberant “Faces and Places,” the altoist in robust form after a year back on the concert stage. Coleman holds forth with bluesy, barwalking brio as Izenzon and Moffett churn up the excitement, the drummer letting loose with cries of exhortation as he urges Coleman on. The group follows with “European Echoes,” a wry (perhaps sardonic?) waltz in which the saxophonist practically bites into his staccato phrases.

Coleman’s boppish “Dee Dee” begins Side 2, his effulgent lines dancing gleefully atop the swift-moving rhythmic stream. The album concludes with the wistful “Dawn,” Izenzon’s arco and pizzicato phrases shadowing Coleman’s steps while Moffett offers sensitive, shimmering accents. The bassist’s bowed solo further underlines the mood of the piece, which undergoes yet another shift toward song’s end. The equally exciting *Volume Two* features Coleman on violin and trumpet on one track, and both records document an important period in the saxophonist’s development. — **Bob Weinberg**





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1. **John Patitucci Trio** "Irmão de Fé" *Irmãos de Fé* (Newvelle)
2. **Carmen Staaf** "Canons" *Woodland* (Newvelle)
3. **Rufus Reid Trio** "Time To Shout It Out" *Terrestrial Dance* (Newvelle)
4. **Ben Allison Trio** "All Across the City" *Quiet Revolution* (Newvelle)
5. **Andy Zimmerman** "Crossing Iowa" *Half Light* (Newvelle)
6. **Hank Roberts** "Evidence" *Congeries of Ethereal Phenomena* (Newvelle)
7. **Billy Lester** "I Surrender Dear" *From Scratch* (Newvelle)
8. **OWL Trio** "Perfectly Out of Place" *Life of the Party* (Newvelle)
9. **Chris Tordini** "What Reason Could I Give" *Midnight Sun* (Newvelle)
10. **Patrick Zimmerli** "Wedding Song" *Book of Dreams* (Newvelle)
11. **Don Friedman** "Man of Words" *Strength and Sanity* (Newvelle)

## DISC TWO: JAZZ NOUVEAU (VARIOUS ENSEMBLES)

1. **Mindi Abair** "April" *The Best of Mindi Abair* (Pretty Good for a Girl)
2. **Sarah Wilson** "Presence" *Kaleidoscope* (Brass Tonic)
3. **Clifton Anderson**  
"Been Down This Road Before" *Been Down This Road Before* (Ropeadope)
4. **Lunar Octet** "Samba Diabolico" *Convergence* (Summit)
5. **Kenney Polson** "Caravana (Caravan)" *Colors of Brazil* (Rosetta)
6. **Charnett Moffett** "New Love" *New Love* (Motéma Music)
7. **Ches Smith & We All Break**  
"Path of Seven Colors" *Path of Seven Colors* (Pyroclastic)
8. **Kari Kirkland**  
"Everybody Wants To Rule the World" *Wild Is the Wind* (Slea Head)
9. **Stephanie Spruill** "Sweet Control" *It's a Jazz Day* (La Pantera)
10. **Sy Joyner** "Special" *Drum Alarm* (Motionless)
11. **Lilan Kane** "TKMO" Single (Jazz Mafia)
12. **Trineice Robinson**, "Come Sunday" *All or Nothing* (self-release)

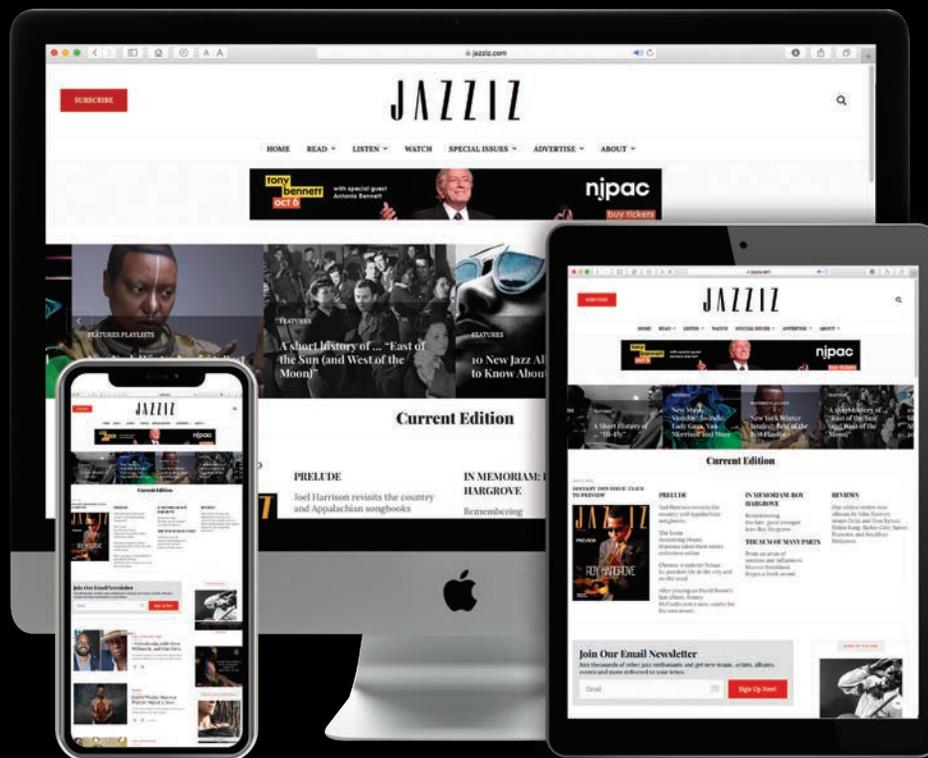


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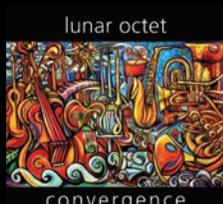
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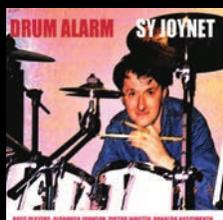
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# Chambers in Session

Joe Chambers returns to Blue Note, where he made his name and some indelible music.

By Bob Weinberg

Joe Chambers is the first to admit it: He messed up big. Having participated in recording sessions for some of Blue Note's most forward-looking artists of the 1960s — Freddie Hubbard, Wayne Shorter, Joe Henderson, Andrew Hill — the drummer-composer was offered a deal of his own with the venerable jazz label. He turned it down.

"I was spaced!" says the 78-year-old Chambers, a khaki baseball cap slung low over his bespectacled visage during a Zoom conversation in March from his home in Wilmington, North Carolina. "I didn't even follow up on it. I was recording all the time, I was touring, I had gigs playing around with other people. So I was content. I didn't have any business sense at all."

Although he built a solid discography on other labels, Chambers wouldn't record an album under his own name for Blue Note until 1998. More than 20 years would pass before he'd record another for the iconic imprint, his latest release, *Samba de Maracatu*. Featured in a trio with pianist Brad Merritt and bassist Steve Haines, Chambers plays drums and percussion, and overdubs vibraphone throughout. And while the roots of the rhythms are anchored in Brazilian soil — including the contemporary Bahian form known as *maracatu* — the music

imparts a flavor rather than aiming for cultural authenticity.

"It's not Brazilian jazz," Chambers affirms. "It's just an overlay. In fact, my *maracatu* is not really a strict *maracatu*; it's a variant. It has a little bit of Cuban *guaguancó* in it. But the *maracatu* rhythm is still there. So the idea was to hint at that, or infuse that, with the jazz."

Following the publication of a 2019 interview on [Udiscovermusic.com](http://Udiscovermusic.com) — a site that promotes Universal Music (and by extension, Blue Note) artists — detailing his extensive history, Chambers approached Don Was, the president of his former label, about releasing his next album. He'd already had the concept for *Samba de Maracatu*, although he says the proposed budget for the project steered him toward a trio rather than a larger ensemble. Initial plans to record in New York were thwarted by the pandemic. Instead, he opted to record in Wilmington and recruited area jazz standouts Merritt and Haines.

Chambers laid down his drum tracks on *Samba de Maracatu* with the rhythm section then went back and recorded his vibes parts. The method presents its own challenges, as the players must leave space for the missing instrumentation. "If I'm laying down trio tracks, OK, I know — since I'm

writing everything and making the arrangements — there's a fourth voice that's gonna be coming in, which will be me [on vibes]," he says. "So I play as if I'm playing with a fourth voice."

Extending his trap set, Chambers employs the *surdo*, a bass-drum-like instrument, and the *repinique*, a two-headed drum similar to a tom-tom, both of which are used in Brazilian music. The distinctive percussion lends a Carnavalesque feel to Chambers' composition "Circles," as well as to a read of Wayne Shorter's "Rio," which briefly dips into a bossa nova rhythm.

Chambers' ear became attuned to Latin music at an early age. Growing up just outside Philadelphia, he remembers hearing pianist Joe Looco, who had a huge hit with a bongo-driven read of "Tenderly" in 1952. "There was always Latin music being played [on the radio], because there were Latinos in Philly and especially in New York," he says. "Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans. I had heard Afro-Cuban music from very young, and I always liked it, I always connected with it. The Brazilian music came later. It has the same connection."

But his real education in Latin rhythms began during his tenure with Max Roach's percussion ensemble, M'Boom, in the '70s. Percussionists Ray Mantilla and Steve Berrios schooled the other members on how to play the music authentically. This was also where Chambers picked up the vibraphone. And, quite naturally, he had absorbed plenty of information about the instrument's dynamics during his association with another Blue Note legend, Bobby Hutcherson, who provided generous space for the drummer's compositions on a string of recordings. The drummer honors the late vibes master on *Samba de Maracatu* with a version of his composition "Visions."

Chambers nods to another major influence with Horace Silver's "Ecaroh," which he introduces with a shiver-inducing vibes solo. "To me, Horace Silver's one of the great arranger-composers in any idiom," Chambers says. "Horace wrote a lot of what I call

## "If I'm laying down trio tracks, OK, I know there's a fourth voice that's gonna be coming in, which will be me on vibes. So I play as if I'm playing with a fourth voice."

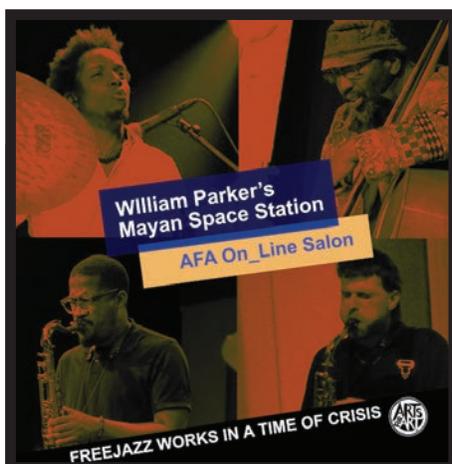
'juke box hits.' But he also wrote these extremely [complex pieces]. If you slowed 'Ecaroh' down, it would be like playing a Chopin sonata."

The drummer holds Shorter and Henderson in similar esteem. "It got pretty far out with Wayne Shorter," he says, citing 1967's *Schizophrenia*. "No juke box potential at all."

Same could be said for the challenging music he recorded with Sam Rivers, Andrew Hill and a young piano player, who, like himself, was making a name for himself in the mid-'60s. "I had been seeing and hearing Chick from when I first came to New York [in '63]," Chambers says of Chick Corea, who died in February and with whom he played in trumpeter Blue Mitchell's band. Corea invited Chambers to participate on the 1966 sessions for *Tones for Joan's Bones*; displaying great drive and sensitivity, he proved the perfect drummer for an album that still sounds startlingly fresh.

Chambers continues to inhabit a territory that straddles modernity and tradition. He likes using vocalists, and Stephanie Jordan offers a haunting version of "Never Let Me Go" on *Samba de Maracatu*. He also contracted rapper MC Parrain — like Jordan, out of New Orleans — to perform on "New York State of Mind Rain." This was at the urging of his son, Fenton Chambers, who wrote lyrics to the track, which has a complicated history. In 1994, the rapper Nas had sampled Chambers' composition "Mind Rain" for his track "New York State of Mind." Chambers reclaims it with the "so-called sequel," his vibes and the rhythm section holding the line for deep jazz expression. "I don't have too much respect for sampling," he says, still rankled by what he perceives as token payment for his intellectual property. "I have a guy who's working the hip-hop market for me and he says ["New York State of Mind Rain"] is taking off; they like it. Chuck D likes it, buh-buh-buh-buh. Yeah, OK."

What would really excite him is another shot at bringing M'Boom back to the stage or studio. A 2019 concert at the Kennedy Center, with a full orchestra, whet his appetite. "And I still envision that concept," he says. "But things have to open up." ■



**William Parker**  
*Mayan Space Station* (AUM Fidelity)  
 Bassist William Parker and drummer Gerald Cleaver add rhythmic muscle and ingenuity to the raunchy textures and deft ministrations of guitarist Ava Mendoza on the aptly titled *Mayan Space Station*. (If such a thing existed, Parker's music is surely what it sounded like.) A disciple of Fred Frith with a penchant for Sonny Sharrock and Ornette Coleman, Mendoza exhibits a startling command of effects, somehow managing to make them sound completely organic as she sculpts tones that reference avant predecessors as well as surf and garage rock. Parker and Cleaver supply atavistic beats that race the pulse, conjuring ancient ritual and primal menace.

**NOW PLAYING**

# No Jackets Required

**Russell Ferrante** steps out of his Yellowjackets role with a trio debut.

By Jonathan Widran

At some point while they were recording *Inflexion*, the long-in-the-making debut album by the Russell Ferrante Trio, drummer Steve Schaeffer reminded the pianist and Yellowjackets co-founder about the first session they ever did together.

It was in the early-'80s, some years after they first met through mutual friend and original Jackets guitarist Robben Ford. Both showed up outside Mama Jo's studio in North Hollywood for a studio date with John Klemmer. Just as Ferrante was unloading the electric piano from his truck with Schaeffer's assistance, a guy in a wheelchair appeared randomly, crashed into the vehicle and asked him for a ride.

Figuring he had time for a quick drive, the keyboardist lifted the guy and his chair into his truck and took off. Ferrante was instructed to keep going for several miles, and by the time he dropped the man off at a park and got back to the studio, he was half an hour late for the session. "I later learned this guy lived in a local group home and escaped and staged crashes like this all the time," Ferrante says. "Quite a chaotic origin story for what has now blossomed into this incredible collaboration. My original meeting with bassist Mike Valerio, my other cohort in the new trio, was a bit less eventful." And caper-free. The two first vibed at a session for singer Lorraine Feather about a dozen years ago.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the formation of the

Russell Ferrante Trio and the recording of *Inflexion* — a title which the pianist explains as coming "from the Latin root 'inflexionem,' meaning to bend in, to change direction" — is the organic, slow-simmering way it evolved. The project was not a matter of a leader of a classic ensemble deciding on the spur of the moment to stretch his wings, make a few calls and set up some rehearsals.

In fact, as Ferrante explains, "I don't think we would have done anything beyond recording some demos or playing a few gigs but for Steve's urging us to take it further and create a bona fide recording. I give him credit for spearheading everything and taking us to fruition. He believed people needed to hear what we were creating and urged me to get it out there. I was reluctant for a while because I am still pretty fulfilled writing and playing with the Yellowjackets, which have been the center of my musical activity for over 40 years."

**"As the pianist in the trio, I have greater responsibility for the melody than I do in the Jackets where Bob Mintzer often takes that role."**

The trio's foundations were laid 10 years ago, when longtime Jackets recording engineer Rich Breen was helping Schaeffer put together his home studio in the L.A. suburb of Toluca Lake. Breen suggested that Ferrante, Valerio and engineer Aaron Walk — who would end up as *Inflexion's* co-producer and mixer — would be ideal candidates to troubleshoot and, as the pianist says, “kick the tires.” Ferrante had a few compositions that fell outside the Jackets' usual repertoire that he wanted to try, as well. The three musicians started jamming and quickly realized they shared a natural rapport and dynamic chemistry.

Over the years, when Ferrante had a free moment from his Jackets commitments and his teaching gig at USC's Thornton School of Music, and Schaeffer and Valerio were available, the three gigged at prominent SoCal venues, including the Jazz Vesper series at All Saints Episcopal Church in Pasadena and at Café Stritch in Ferrante's hometown of San Jose.

“We started recording material in rehearsals 10 years ago, but most of the final versions on *Inflexion* came from the little push Steve gave us at the beginning of 2020 before COVID,” Ferrante says. “We had already recorded almost everything we would use for the album but weren't happy with five or six songs, so we re-cut them the way we wanted. A few of the standards, including Duke Ellington's ‘Isfahan’ and ‘How Deep Is the Ocean,’ resided on a hard drive until we re-listened to and then completed them. Our approach was very much like one of my favorite trios of all time, Keith Jarrett's group with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette. I love how they played standards that sounded so fresh and in the moment, not worn and beaten in any way.”

Beyond the standards — which include the bustling Monk classic “Rhythm-a-Ning” and a meditative stroll through “We Shall Overcome,” a subtle homage to the traditional and modern civil rights movements — Ferrante fashions an eclectic set that includes two originals intrinsic to the theme of the album, a bright and swinging romp through a 30-year-old tune he wrote for Eric Marienthal (“Spoons”),



**Mark Winkler & David Benoit  
*Old Friends* (Cafe Pacific)**

Vocalist Mark Winkler and pianist David Benoit found a hip, emotionally compelling yet elegant way around social distancing, conceiving of their new album while under COVID lockdown. Accompanied on half the tracks by guitar and rhythm section, the longtime pals and musical compadres collaborated on an intimate yet often whimsically swinging set of standards — some well-known, some obscure — and originals. The production, by longtime Winkler associate Barbara Brighton, is sheer exquisite coolness and includes Stefanie Fife's haunting cello on three tunes, most prominently on the playfully poetic “Dragonfly” and a sweetly heartbreaking rendition of Simon & Garfunkel's “Old Friends/ Bookends.”

**NOW PLAYING**

and four re-imagined gems from the Jackets' vast repertoire.

On the elegant and increasingly whimsical “Inflexion D,” built around a hypnotic five-note left-hand phrase, Ferrante challenged himself to a tricky exercise in “hand independence,” during which he keeps a motif going in one hand while improvising with the other. The later mid-tempo ballad “Inflexion A” matches that intriguing duality but is crafted around a seven-note right-hand phrase. Both tunes, like the intricate and

adventurous revamp of the Jackets' “57 Chevy” (from 2005's *Altered State*), find Ferrante experimenting with rhythmic mathematics, creating symmetrical sounds via overlapping (what he calls) “asymmetric” odd numbers from one bar to the next. The title “57 Chevy” alludes not only to the classic auto but to the five- and seven-note groupings in the melody and accompaniment.

The other Jackets pieces include the buoyant, percussively dense “Stick-to-it-iveness” (from 1998's *Club Nocturne*), featuring Schaeffer on hadphoon (a unique percussion instrument designed by percussionist Jamey Haddad) and Valerio's bowed bass; the gently lyrical, then playfully swinging, MLK-inspired “Network Mutuality” (from 2018's *Raising Our Voice*); and “I Do,” a passionate and tender-hearted tribute to Ferrante's parents who were married for 60 years, written just after his mother's passing in 2011 (from *Timeline*, released that same year).

“Though our trio music is gentler, more introspective and utilizes more space than when I record with the Jackets, there is an interesting connection to them,” Ferrante says. “Both groups are democracies, with each member having equal input. As the pianist in the trio, I have greater responsibility for the melody than I do in the Jackets where Bob Mintzer often takes that role, but the collaborative sensibilities are the same. We all share the joys and burdens of the hard decision-making that goes into making a great recording.

“We were also blessed to have Aaron Walk, who created a beautiful sonic environment that made it comfortable and easy to record. He also weighed in on which takes were the strongest. It was invaluable having the perspective of a more objective listener to keep us on track. The thing I love most about playing and recording is hearing something that surprises me — patterns or chord voicings that come to me so quickly I don't even know what they are. The spontaneity of the trio allowed for many moments like this. It was all about substance, making the music the king and doing whatever was required to communicate the feeling of the songs.” ■

# Slow Burns and Raging Fires

**The trios of Paul Motian and Sam Rivers showcased their brilliance.**

**By Larry Blumenfeld**

Nothing in modern music has managed to sound quite like the trio drummer Paul Motian led with guitarist Bill Frisell and tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano for some 30 years. Little within the deep and brilliant catalogs of Lovano or Frisell — or of Motian himself, for that matter — embodies that trio's oddly entrancing logic, its wondrously disorienting yet sturdily anchored feeling. At least, not for me.

Motian was both a peaceful presence and a locus of swirling power. A few cymbal strikes were all he needed to indicate velocity and flow. He distilled jazz's pulses into pithy implication through personalized rhythmic phrases. By the time of his death, at 80, in 2011, he was both eminence and enigma. Everyone wanted to play with him. No one played like him.

At a memorial concert for Motian that gathered some three-dozen musicians at Manhattan's Symphony Space, Lovano and Frisell, who organized the event, provided its emotional highlight: a duet version of "It Should Have Happened a Long Time Ago," the folksy yet mysterious Motian composition that served as title track for the trio's 1985 debut album.

Motian had first gained notoriety more than two decades before that album, in a very different trio led by pianist Bill Evans, with, at its peak, bassist Scott LaFaro. "It wasn't a piano and rhythm section," Motian once told me. "It was three playing as one." Indeed, 1961's *Sunday at the Village Vanguard* is an enduring classic largely for that reason. (Motian, however, was partial to that trio's 1959 *Portrait in Jazz*.)

Important as it was, Motian's work with Evans gave little indication of where his playing was headed. His style transformed quickly into something far more abstract — free, for the most part, of jazz's technical conventions and often punctuated with

elongated silences — urged on especially through work with two other pianists, Paul Bley and Keith Jarrett. (Motian joined Jarrett's group in 1967, and stayed with him for nearly a decade.)

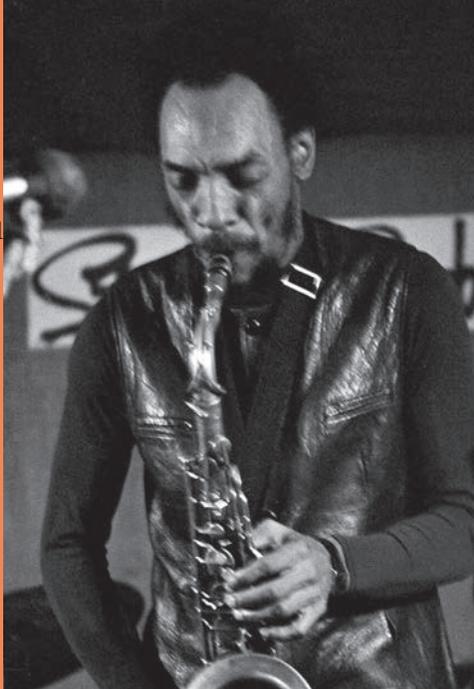
Motian didn't record as a leader until his forties. *Conception Vessel* (1973) announced the melodic charms and peculiar forms of his own compositions. By 1984, he'd distilled the trio with Lovano and Frisell from his working quintet. This piano-free group upended notions about the trio format, about song forms and improvisation in general. Their music was ephemeral, something like smoke from a distant and slow-burning fire, always just out of view. "That band taught me what it means to play ideas," Lovano said from the stage at that memorial concert. It also taught me how to hear them.

And then there's the power of a trio to ignite fires that would rage wildly out of control were it not for the ingenuity of musicians to shape it into something beautiful. One current example is Harriet Tubman, the plugged-in power trio of guitarist Brandon Ross, bassist Melvin Gibbs and drummer J.T. Lewis. I listen to them live and on recordings whenever I can; I urge you to do the same. Yet I'm getting to a different and no less powerful trio, one I didn't hear until decades after the fact.

Fierce but often funny, wild-eyed yet thoroughly organized, Sam Rivers blazed a singular trail through jazz for more than a half-century. Playing tenor and soprano saxophones, or flute, he sounded edgy, or warm, or both simultaneously, exuding authority yet never settling into anything conventional. His piano playing was equally distinctive and unbound. As bandleader or sideman, Rivers, who died in 2011 at age 88, suggested the fullest integration of compositional rigor and uninhibited exploration.

Following his arrival in New York to play with Miles Davis in 1964, Rivers moved quickly to the foreground of a creative movement anchored in bebop's revolution and bent on stretching the boundaries of form, style and instrumentation. At Studio Rivbea, the Downtown Manhattan space he and his wife, Beatrice, ran during the heyday of the loft jazz scene, his presence was commanding: A 1978 profile in *Downbeat* magazine bore the headline "Warlord of the Lofts."

Throughout the 1970s, Rivers developed ideas to which he'd devote the rest of his career: remarkably creative



in the series, documented Rivers in 1971, fresh off an important stint in pianist Cecil Taylor's quartet during which he had begun to solo at greater length and with heightened intensity. Leading a trio with bassist Cecil McBee and drummer Norman Connors at Boston's Jazz Workshop, Rivers was establishing an approach to extended small-group performances, without breaks, during which, as Hazell put it, "the music organized itself as it was played."

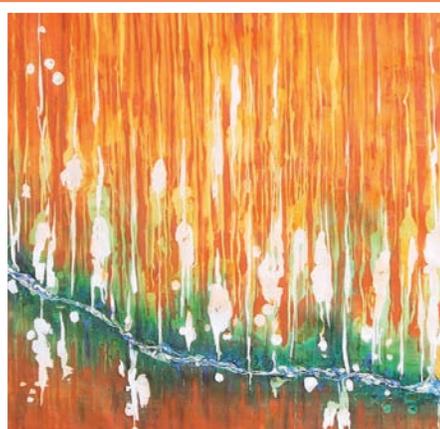
That approach is fully realized on *Ricochet*. By 1978, Rivers had established a sturdy rapport with Holland and Altschul spanning several projects, including, along with reedist Anthony Braxton, Holland's 1973 classic, *Conference of the Birds*. The 52 minutes and 14 seconds of continuous music on *Ricochet* begins like a fast-paced film already in progress. Rivers, on soprano saxophone, is clearly in the foreground, with Holland and Altschul building fast-paced rhythms that shift and shimmy in response to his every utterance. Rivers soon moves to the piano, playing with delicacy but also abandon. A calm suggests a pause that never arrives. Holland moves to cello. Rivers picks up his tenor saxophone, growing gradually more animated, his overtones sometimes choked with fury. Finally, near the end, with Rivers playing flute and Holland back on bass, a melody takes shape—bluesy, accessible and clearly stated—against a swinging rhythm, until the action slows into what feels like one collective exhale.

In 2007, this group reconvened for a concert at Columbia University's Miller Theater, which was documented on *Reunion: Live in New York*. The three hadn't performed together in 25 years, yet they sounded as if they had simply picked up where they left off and turned a page. *Ricochet* tells us more about how that story began. ■

big-band music, and an approach to small ensembles, especially trios, that was no less expansive and just as rich with intricately shifting parts. Beginning with his 1965 Blue Note debut, *Fuchsia Swing Song*, Rivers made many fine studio recordings. Yet his force was best beheld through live performances—especially during the 1970s, and most notably leading his most memorable trio, with bassist Dave Holland and drummer Barry Altschul. That group made only two relatively obscure recordings. "If one wasn't able to catch them in person, one might as well have hardly heard them at all," writer Clifford Allen states in a liner note to *Ricochet*, which documents the trio at San Francisco's Keystone Korner club in 1978 and was released on NoBusiness Records last year.

*Ricochet* is the third and most satisfying installment so far of *The Sam Rivers Archive*, a planned six-volume series documenting his small-group performances. Once complete, a five-LP boxed set will gather the best selections from all six releases according to writer Ed Hazell, who sorted through more than 50 storage bins of material while co-producing this series. *Emanation*, the first

**"Rivers, on soprano saxophone, is clearly in the foreground, with Holland and Altschul building fast-paced rhythms that shift and shimmy in response to his every utterance."**



#### Jen Shyu

##### **Zero Grasses: Ritual for the Losses (Pi)**

As a vocalist singing in 10 languages, a composer straddling genres and styles, a musician playing instruments whose histories span continents and centuries, and as a dancer and writer of compelling grace and power, Jen Shyu transforms wisdom from masters and stories gathered from communities around the world into original expressions. On this new release, which features some of the most creative musicians on today's scene (trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, violist Mat Maneri, bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Dan Weiss), Shyu considers love and loss in the wake of her father's death and in the midst of a global pandemic.

**NOW PLAYING**



# WEAVERS

**Joe Lovano, Marilyn Crispell** and **Carmen Castaldi** explore moody and meditative songscapes on Trio Tapestry's second recording.

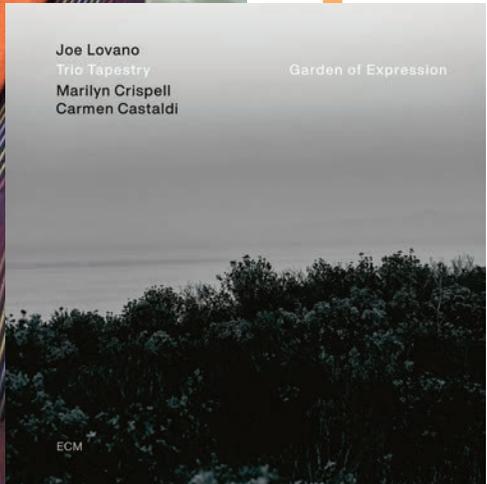
B Y N E I L T E S S E R

From left, Carmen Castaldi, Marilyn Crispell and Joe Lovano





oe Lovano's 2019 album, eponymously titled *Trio Tapestry*, opens with unhurried saxophone against an assortment of bells, gongs and cymbals, the tintinnabulations strewn with seeming randomness throughout the track. A Zen-temple duet, it immediately signals the outlier nature of this music within Lovano's discography. And that's saying something: A defining saxophonist of 21st-century jazz, he has ranged from pure energy music on one hand to lushly orchestrated operatic themes on the other. By contrast, this music — created by Lovano, pianist Marilyn Crispell and drummer Carmen Castaldi — meanders mindfully: a sharp but gentle left turn from Lovano's signature swagger and swing. It doesn't inspire toe-tapping or finger-snapping. Lovano himself has described the music as "songs of expression where rhythm doesn't dictate the flow. This is not a band that starts from the beat. The momentum is in the melody and the harmonic sequence, and rhythm evolves within each piece in a very free-flowing manner." (Perhaps not coincidentally, the critically adored *Trio Tapestry* marked Lovano's first recording as a leader for ECM Records.)



On the trio's follow-up album, this year's *Garden of Expression*, the compositions are a bit shapelier, more defined but no less spacious. The opening "Chapel Song" poses a haunting mystery that rises from the mists of spirituality, with sparse tenor, moody piano and drum colorations; the indelible title track rides harmonies perched somewhere between English madrigals and modern art-folk. The gossamer melody of "Night Creatures" wafts above Crispell's restless arpeggios, shadowed by Castaldi's expressionist percussion. The concluding "Zen Like," the album's longest track, returns to where

it all started, with temple blocks and bell jars, joined by plucked piano strings and eventually *tárogató* (an Eastern European wind instrument), in a quieting tone poem against an unfamiliar soundscape.

Guided by the most intimate playing of Lovano's career, *Garden of Expression* centers the listener, nudging us toward meditation without inducing sleep. It has a confounding ability to fire the intellect without disturbing the serene space it engenders.

"It's like a haiku," Castaldi says, "where you just touch on certain ideas — words, tones — that point to something. A good haiku is not shut, you know. It's not a definition. It's an observation. It's a moment in time; it's the eternal now."

When most of us hear the phrase “jazz trio,” we flash on the classic threesome of piano, bass and drums in an iconic equilibrium of melody, harmony and rhythm. Not coincidentally, this configuration has occupied the core of most bands, from quartets to jazz orchestras, for the past 75 years. The trios that don’t fall into that camp have mostly been close cousins led not by piano but by another chordophone, the guitar. Sonny Rollins opened up this concept with his chordless trios of the late 1950s and ’60s, but the bass and drums remained. In fact, the bass has been key. You have to look hard to find a fiddle-less mainstream trio — such as those led by Benny Goodman or Art Tatum (whose wizardry made almost any other musician superfluous) — and these have tended to reside in jazz antiquity.

Trio architecture changed dramatically in the 1960s when a handful of musicians began questioning this orthodoxy. On one hand, the swing era clarinetist and ongoing maverick Jimmy Giuffre formed a revered trio featuring pianist Paul Bley and bassist Steve Swallow (but no drums); even before that, in 1958, Giuffre led a less-heralded trio with trombonist Bob Brookmeyer and guitarist Jim Hall (with neither bass nor drums). Lovano remembers that trio’s recordings from the collection of his father, Tony “Big T” Lovano, a well-regarded part-time saxophonist in Cleveland (and offhand acquaintance of Hall during their college years). Such records, he says, gave him the confidence to form a band like Trio Tapestry.

On the other hand, you had members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, the groundbreaking Chicago collective, whose late-’60s experiments with “odd” combinations often eschewed piano, bass or drums — and sometimes all three. Crispell can speak to what motivated the creation of these unicorns, recalling that in the 1970s, “When I would play with people like [trumpeter] Leo Smith, or [saxophonists] Roscoe Mitchell and then Anthony Braxton” — all founding members of the AACM — “they would talk about how everybody had thought an improvising group had to have drums, or had to have bass or had to have this, and that it was really a limited concept. They thought it was kind of necessary to just get out of the box.”

When working out new music or giving weekly concerts, the AACM artists placed less emphasis on traditional instrumentation than on the chemistry among instrumentalists, a process similar to the one that led Lovano to form Trio Tapestry. “I think Joe chose me and Carmen because that was the music he heard,” Crispell continues. “I don’t think it was particularly due to not wanting a bass, or anything like that; it was more that it didn’t have to be a traditional jazz trio.”



In a Venn diagram of modern music, the intersection of the circles representing Lovano and Crispell is fairly tiny. Deeply ensconced in the jazz tradition, the saxophonist spent three years in Woody Herman’s big band; a decade later he joined Blue Note Records, the storied symbol of the post-bop era. Crispell first recorded with big bands too, but these were quite untraditional ensembles led by the AACM musicians mentioned earlier; she came to real prominence in the quartet led by Braxton, whose rigorous methodology stands apart from any tradition at all. Like Lovano, she can tap into a ferocious intensity without sacrificing the narrative. She ranks among the most distinctive and transcendent pianists in the free-jazz realm. But in this century, Crispell has surprised many longtime followers by revealing a softer, more contemplative side, notably on a handful of ECM titles.



"When I mentioned to Joe that Marilyn and I were playing together, I think I could sort of see the wheels turning, like he was thinking, 'Well, I like playing with both of them; I wonder how that would be as a trio ... .'"

She and Lovano first met in the 1980s in New York City, and encountered each other in a few ensembles over the years: In the mid-2000s, he sat in on a Village Vanguard set by Crispell's trio; later on, she subbed two nights in Lovano's quintet *Us Five*. Still, while they knew and admired each other's music, the Venn diagram would likely have remained vanishingly small — except for the fact that both live in the Hudson Valley of upstate New York, where they would occasionally run into each other as far-flung neighbors. And in 2018, when Lovano was asked to present a concert in Newburgh, not far from Crispell's home in Woodstock, he gave her a call.

After she agreed, Lovano contacted Castaldi, whose history with Lovano goes back a lot further: They first met and played together in high school. "It was like a soul connection," says the drummer, who shares Lovano's ecumenical taste in music. They

left Cleveland together for Berklee in the early '70s. After college, Lovano headed to New York and Castaldi went west, landing in Los Angeles before eventually returning to Cleveland in the '90s. But the two never lost touch. Although Castaldi appears on only one of Lovano's discs — *Viva Caruso*, from 2002 — he has toured with the saxophonist intermittently through the years, strengthening the bonds of a now half-century friendship.

As it turns out, Crispell already had her own connection with Castaldi. In 2016, he recalls, "I'd been listening to her trio with Paul Motian and Gary Peacock, and one day I thought, 'Man, I love the way she plays. I'm just going to send her a message on Facebook' — because sometimes it's nice for a musician to just hear that from someone." They had never met before. "I wrote a message saying how much I enjoyed that music, and that maybe we'd get to play sometime. And then she writes back, real sweet

and open and generous, saying she wanted to hear my playing, so I sent her something.”

Next thing he knew, a friend (and fellow fan of Crispell) had found a hall and arranged to fly Crispell to Cleveland for a duo concert — with a Steinway grand, no less — that both speak of glowingly. “And when I mentioned to Joe that Marilyn and I were playing together, I think I could sort of see the wheels turning, like he was thinking, ‘Well, I like playing with both of them; I wonder how that would be as a trio ...’”

For their concert in Newburgh, Castaldi drove from Cleveland and Crispell hopped over from Woodstock and, says Lovano, “We just improvised. I brought about five or six different horns, and the idea was every time I switched horns, it was like a different composition. We just flowed, and we ended up creating a through-composed set that was really magical. I sent some of it to Manfred [Eicher at ECM], and he really embraced it.” Within the year, Eicher had them in the studio in New York.

For that initial album, Lovano felt that he needed actual compositions; he didn’t really see ECM issuing an album-length set like the one they had just played. So he began writing material, including a piece called “Seeds of Change.” After the album came out, the piece took on a greater significance for all three musicians. Says Lovano, “That was a strong piece for us, as a trio on tour, and the idea of it — and the title — really led us into the *Garden of Expression*. It flowered.”

The songs for *Garden* developed in performance as the trio spent much of 2019 touring stateside and especially in Europe, where one of their three continental tours that year landed them in Lugano, an Italian-flavored lakeside town in southern Switzerland. There they had the great advantage of playing a concert the night before recording in the same hall, but without an audience. “The previous night, we played the same compositions, but with a different approach and attitude — because we were playing a concert,” Lovano explains. “So the pieces were stretched out and we got into many variations within those pieces.

“Then we came back the next day and played them really more concise,” he continues, “and we captured a mood that sustained throughout the whole session. And that was something special, to have played in that room and feel the sound, and then to come back the next morning and already be comfortable in that space.” The natural acoustics of the hall encouraged the trio to play more softly and with more introspection than would normally occur outside a recording studio, yet still achieve a majestic resonance. “The recital hall sound that Manfred captures in his recordings is usually done in post-production,” Lovano points out, “whereas in this case, we had that sound as we were playing, and that really added to the way the record feels.”

“We captured a mood that sustained throughout the whole session. And that was something special, to have played in that room and feel the sound, and then to come back the next morning and already be comfortable in that space.”



ovano easily fills a larger-than-life role in the personal as well as musical relationships he fosters. He sounds like he is: hearty, encouraging, with a hipster vibe (descended from '50s jazz, not latter-day Williamsburg). Thanks to his brainy/soulful musicianship and a grand generosity of spirit, he galvanizes his peers as well as laymen and fans. His revitalization of Crispell's career offers a telling example.

As exhilarated as the pianist felt after the concert in Newburgh, she blanched when Lovano suggested touring with the trio. To begin with, she didn't really want to travel anymore. Although she radiates an almost elfin agelessness, she had recently turned 70, and after spending years flying to and from Europe — where she has played most of her gigs for decades — she admits, "I had gotten really burned out from commuting overseas, with everything that entails."

More than that, she had begun to feel that her career was at a standstill. The trio she'd led in the early 2000s had begun to peter out even before the 2011 death of its drummer, the storied Paul Motian. She'd been forced to vacate the house she had rented for nearly two decades, which she considered a refuge, and the move contributed to a sense of rootlessness. Work was slow. "I didn't have a strong sense of direction," she says. "Much of my musical life has been involved with other musicians, and this was a period of that happening less, so that I felt less inspiration derived from that. I just kind of went into retreat; I went dormant. And then Joe got me out."

At Lovano's urging, Crispell reluctantly agreed to tour with Trio Tapestry throughout 2019. The tour restored her mojo. "It was such an incredible year," she says. "We played a lot, and I could feel my energy waking up again, and being transformed, and being so inspired, and just catching a kind of creative fire. And Joe and Carmen, as people, are wonderful to travel with; we all felt very comfortable with each other. It feels like a family. Being with them is one of the only times I've toured when I haven't felt alone in some, just, primal way that I really can't explain. By the end of 2019, I was raring to go again — like, bring it on. That's even carried over to invitations I've gotten from other people, where my first reaction might have been to say no." She makes it sound as if the trio has provided a lifeline, a description with which she enthusiastically agrees.

**M**any tenor saxophonists of the past half-century have embraced Sonny Rollins' "power trio" format of sax, bass and drums, and the context would seem to suit Lovano — with his commanding sound, harmonic ingenuity and emotional range — to a "T." Nonetheless, he's made only a handful of such



**"This music is very wide ranging, while still retaining Joe's character, which is kind of what I try to do in my music — to have my voice come through in all of it."**

recordings. More germane to the formation of Trio Tapestry was Lovano's work in Motian's 1980s trio, which also featured a chord instrument (Bill Frisell's guitar) and no bass. The instrumentation does not make it predictive: Crispell's entire approach to sound and improvisation differs markedly from Frisell's. But Lovano has called that experience foundational to his playing and writing, and it almost certainly supplied some musical muscle memory when he convened Trio Tapestry.

The trio's configuration of instruments and personalities offers a universe of possibility. As Lovano says, "Playing without a bass, it's the melodic invention and the harmonic rhythm that produce the momentum. And that gives the drummer freedom to play off the melody and the harmony, and interject his own feeling inside it." But eschewing the time-tested trio structure also means removing the safeguard



provided by established roles, which magnifies the need for trust and compatibility that jazz already requires.

“With Marilyn on piano,” Lovano explains, “it’s like she’s accompanying me, but she’s also playing with me, in a front-line kind of an attitude.” Castaldi brings a slightly different perspective to the trio. Freed of any timekeeping responsibilities, he references the spiritual author Eckhart Tolle’s *Stillness Speaks* to explain his role, saying, “I want to be an opening for what wants to happen with this music, just to be present, to be a facilitator. Let something greater than me do the playing.”

Crispell finds Trio Tapestry to be an adaptable gallery for many self-portraits, despite the fact that someone else (namely, Lovano) wrote the compositions. “There’s my abstract self, my romantic self — and these are not mutually exclusive — my wild-energy self, my contemplative self, the self that incorporates my influences.” In Trio Tapestry, she feels no need to tamp down

any of those personae. “This music is very wide ranging, while still retaining Joe’s character,” she says, “which is kind of what I try to do in my music — to have my voice come through in all of it, so that transitions between seemingly different aspects of expression are made in an organic way, where it’s not a jolt. And I feel I can relate to all of the stuff Joe does.”

To those still nonplussed by Trio Tapestry’s incongruity within his discography, Lovano points out that, “It’s not really a departure, because every time you play, you’re playing with your sounds and your feelings at that time. I was listening recently to ‘Miles Davis Radio’ on Sirius XM and hearing all these different moments in his music. And when he did *In a Silent Way*, that was a statement about something, how he was feeling, you know. In a way, these recordings are like my *In a Silent Way*, as I think about how people might perceive it,” he laughs. “But it’s really just a document of a moment trying to create music and sustain a mood.” ■



# THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

MATTHEW SHIPP DISCUSSES THE ALCHEMICAL EFFECTS OF BANDMATES  
AND INFLUENCES, AND THE MYSTERY AT THE HEART OF THE ARTISTIC PROCESS.

B Y T E D P A N K E N

“U

nderdocumented” is not an adjective that applies to pianist Matthew Shipp, who turned 60 last December. As an example, *The Unidentifiable*, a Fall 2020 release on ESP-Disk, is Shipp’s 14th date helming a piano-bass-drums trio since 1992, and his fourth with

bassist Michael Bisio and drummer Newman Taylor Baker since 2015. Since that unit’s previous album (2019’s *Signature*), Shipp’s other releases include the fourth album by his String Trio with bassist William Parker and violinist Mat Maneri; a telepathic encounter by the Shipp-Bisio-Baker trio with flutist Nicole Mitchell; and two solo albums.

On these presentations, Shipp shapes the flow with compositions that function at various levels of notated detail. Several other recent offerings display his skills at collegial navigation of the open space. *Then Now*, a *tabula rasa* duo with alto saxophonist Rob Brown, reprises their 1988 meeting, *Sonic Explorations*, which launched Shipp’s four-score leader/co-leader discography. On *Dark Matrix*, Shipp scratch-improvises with speculative improv stalwart Daniel Carter on trumpet and saxophone. Spontaneous composition is the watchword on duo encounters with magisterial saxophonists Evan Parker (*Leonine Aspects*) and Ivo Perelman; Shipp has made more than 30 albums with the latter since 1997, most recently *Garden of Jewels*, in trio with drummer Whit Dickey.

In each instance, Shipp responds to the dialogical dictates of the moment with his idiosyncratic language — a homegrown argot he culled from the canons of, in Shipp’s words, “Ellington, Monk, Lennie Tristano, Bill Evans, Bud Powell, Andrew Hill, Paul Bley and Cecil Taylor,” and deployed with a sensibility open to code-switching between “out” cat, post bop and Third Stream aesthetics. Shipp expresses himself in words as pungently as he does in the language of notes and tones, as was evident throughout our mid-March Zoom discussion.



From left, Matthew Shipp, Ivo Perelman and Whit Dickey

Photo by Enid Farber



“I HAVE NO DESIRE TO  
BE AN *ENFANT TERRIBLE*  
AT THIS POINT IN MY  
CAREER. I’M GOING DEEPER  
INTO MY JAZZ ROOTS.”



“I THREW VERY SUBTLE — AND SOMETIMES NOT SO SUBTLE — ROADBLOCKS FOR MIKE AND NEWMAN IN THE STUDIO, JUST TO FORCE THE DIFFERENCES I WANTED. I DIDN’T TALK IT THROUGH WITH THEM BECAUSE I DIDN’T WANT IT TO BE TOO CONSCIOUS.”

### HAS EACH CONFIGURATION OF YOUR TRIO EVOKED DIFFERENT ATTITUDES OR MENTALITIES IN YOUR PLAYING AND COMPOSING?

At the beginning of this century, my trio was William Parker and Gerald Cleaver, and then William and Guillermo E. Brown, who had played with us in the David S. Ware Quartet. After that, William got so busy as a leader that I decided to form another trio, with Whit Dickey and Joe Morris, the guitarist, who also plays double bass. After Joe left, I brought in Michael Bisio, who I'd met in the '90s. Then Whit was dealing with some health problems, and I wasn't sure he'd be able to tour — that's when Newman entered the group.

When you change personnel, it changes the trajectory of how the group sounds and what it does. How I relate to the bass player — the ongoing dialogue and wraparound — is fundamental to how I play and organize music. William and Bisio are completely different vibrations — you go with the flow of who they are and let the music develop from that standpoint. As far as drummers, Whit is a complete original. He operates in a kind of virgin space. He's very analytical. Newman has a really strong jazz pedigree. He's played with McCoy Tyner, Ahmad Jamal, Billy Harper, Henry Threadgill. He has a certain elegance like a fine wine with age, and that suits what I'm trying to do. I have no desire to be an *enfant terrible* at this point in my career. I'm going deeper into my jazz roots, and Newman is the perfect drummer to flesh that out.

Now, there are several aspects to my playing. I'm involved with a linear, post-Bud Powell-type of thing. I can be very jarring and spatially oriented, à la Monk. I'm also interested in a post-Ellington idea of elegance — voicing and sequencing chords in ways that define new harmonic spaces or explore new harmonic pathways, thinking of tone colors, resonance and placement in ways that can be jarring, but at the same time take people on a heavenly carpet ride.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT PUTTING TOGETHER *THE UNIDENTIFIABLE*, WHICH WAS RECORDED PRE-PANDEMIC.

I was concerned with honoring this trio's development — incorporating stuff that had developed on the road and differentiating this album from our previous three. On the first one, *Conduct of Jazz*, when the trio was new, I didn't have a narrative in mind other than a few compositions. By the second CD [*Piano Song*], I had an overall arc. This narrative is a certain cinematic thing, an imaginary film, though I don't know how listeners will perceive it or if they'll blow up the experience from tune to tune as I do. I threw very subtle — and sometimes not so subtle — roadblocks for Mike and Newman in the studio, just to force the differences I wanted. I didn't talk it through with them because I didn't want it to be too conscious. At the same time, I didn't want people falling into things we did on other CDs. Each piece had to fit its slot and be what it was supposed to be. I didn't have a section just function as, say, a free jazz section; specific gestural ideas needed to be realized each moment to make the whole work.

### YOUR FACEBOOK FEED REVEALS POLYMATH INTERESTS — YOU ADDRESS GENET, DANCE, BOXING, PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING, YOUR PIANISTIC INFLUENCES, POLITICS. HOW DO THESE PREOCCUPATIONS INFLECT THE NOTES AND TONES?

At the core of everything is cellular information of some sort. On a certain level, there's no difference between watching a boxing or professional wrestling match, reading *Finnegan's Wake*, which I read at 19, or a dream, which is a kind of pattern of electrical energy. I see boxing as modern dance. I see poetry as basic phrasing and rhythm. Everything goes into the pot, gets broken down to basic energy, and then all resurfaces however nature decrees, and somehow refocuses into a musical product. The mysterious element is that no matter how much control you try to exert as a composer, you do give over to natural forces, which are out of your control.

### WHEN YOU COMPOSE, DOES THE NARRATIVE IMPLY SOME CONSCIOUS SENSE OF INFLUENCE, HOWEVER REFRACTED? YOU'RE ALSO QUITE SPECIFIC ABOUT THE ANTECEDENT PIANISTS WHO'VE INFORMED YOU OVER THE YEARS.

I don't shy away from talking about my influences, or even referencing them, if it suits my purpose for a piece — or if I just feel like it! If you're bored with yourself, or feel a limitation on a certain day, there's something about somebody else's language that can give you inspiration and fecundate your own imagination. I'm sure of my language pretty much all the time. But if there is a break in concentration as to my language, there's a Monk thing, a McCoy Tyner thing, a Bill Evans thing, a Cecil Taylor thing that I can pull on for any second — and there's nothing wrong with that, because it's language and it's all out there. When you do that from the standpoint of already having an original style, you're basically embodying what Ralph Waldo Emerson talked about, that everything is a quotation. You're a quotation of your parents; their DNA is in you. Nobody is just coming out here as a completely original language, although there is unity in diversity and diversity in unity, and everybody has their distinct blueprint or fingerprint. That's all to say that I function as myself, an individual who is unique and original, and I also function as part of a family of people that play jazz piano. And if I want to give homage to the family — even if it's for a couple of seconds, as in I might play harmony and rhythm in a way that Monk might do it — so be it.

### CAN YOU OFFER A SUCCINCT IMPRESSION OF MONK?

I like Monk's fearless, laser-like focus on developing his own personality in the music. He cut a figure that encapsulated the archetype of a pianist-composer in such an easily seen package, in the way you think of Scott Joplin or Chopin as both a composer and a pianist. I also like the fact that Monk was a modernist who listened to everything and studied everything, who created music in an Afro-American idiom that was very distinctly American.

### BUD POWELL?

Bud Powell is beyond my comprehension. His sense of line is so profound. I have no idea how from linear fragments he can create this sense of light that he does. You can learn his solos and stuff, but how he got that resonance and balance and sound world out of the piano is elusive. I have no idea how he got where he got to. It's his realm. You've got to have something awfully distinct about your mind to develop that to that level. He was so profound, there's nowhere to really go with it. Nobody else can really do it. The original wave of bebop just happened in American culture; it was such an energy field of profound hip newness. A lot of great practitioners followed, but there's no getting to that initial vibration. Now, whenever I hear Tommy Flanagan on a linear thing, I get a big thrill from hearing how he connects his ideas, the sense of buoyancy and color in the line. It's also very profound.

### AHMAD JAMAL?

Ahmad Jamal was a hero of my mother, who was into jazz, but it wasn't like her *thing*. A bunch of other black males I know, around my age, all their mothers had his albums. Jamal can be a pianist's pianist, but I find it cool that in that period he chose to not play a lot of stuff that he could play if he wanted to — he was a blueprint for coolness, in some ways. Nobody comps like Jamal. I've often said that people like Jamal or Erroll Garner are as idiosyncratic as Monk is, but in a whole different way.

### SUN RA?

Sun Ra represents a very outward way of trying to forge mysticism with jazz language. I say outward because, say, with Coltrane, spirituality undergirded his music, and he talked about it a lot, but he didn't claim to be an Egyptian sun god! Sun Ra represents the idea of everything being information and language. He deals with a continuum from Fletcher Henderson to John Cage, as if he's coming from the same place with all of it. Each component is another part of the hologram. You can turn the gem over and see a different side of it. Sun Ra understood that this music has a deep American/Afro-American history. He understood that some of it might have been transmitted from forces outside the human realm, however you want to describe them — angels, aliens, vibrational photons somewhere in the cosmos. Even though Sun Ra is very Afrocentric, and his main thing is painting pictures of infinity with the orchestra, he's also a gifted pianist — at times you hear hints of Liszt and certain Romantic composers in his playing. He poses a lot of questions. Whether he answers them all the time ... that's not maybe the point. The point is to pose the questions and get your mind rolling.





### YOU WERE RAISED IN THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND HAD EARLY EXPERIENCE AS A CHURCH ORGANIST. HOW DID THAT IMPACT YOUR AESTHETICS?

When I was 10-11-12, I was the assistant organist when the church's regular organist couldn't make it. The ritualistic Episcopalian liturgy had a big influence on me as a kid. I was also an altar boy, and I could recite the Mass by memory by the time I was 6 or 7. As a kid, I basically memorized a big portion of the Protestant hymn book, which taught me a lot about four-part harmony. Just the actual resonance of Protestant hymns in general was big. I hear tons of hymns in my playing, the harmonic movement, though it might not be obvious to other people.

Without getting into psychoanalytic reasons, the head space from those formative things is massive. I could say it's an alchemy mindset. In the Episcopalian church and the Catholic church, you believe that a wafer and cheap wine actually alchemize into the real body and blood of Christ, actually transubstantiate to a godhead. The conversion of mundane factors to a sacred whole is a big influence on the way I think, and it comes out of that church thing. It's completely different than Gospel, which I learned about when I went to my grandmother's Baptist church as a teenager to get a taste of the music, which I was trying to learn as much about as I could. I ended up becoming the pianist in the youth choir at her church. I also played in a bunch of funk bands as a teenager.

### DOES YOUR PRESENTATION CONTAIN AN ELEMENT OF THAT KIND OF PAGEANTRY?

It can. My whole vibe is to close my eyes and just let the music take me wherever. But I'm a professional and I've been doing this my whole life, so I'm assuming I play into other aspects of it sometimes.

### DRUMMERLESS TRIOS, LIKE THE STRING TRIO WITH WILLIAM PARKER AND MAT MANERI, HAVE BEEN IMPORTANT FOR YOU. ANOTHER RECENT CONTEXT IS A TRIO ALBUM WITH DANIEL CARTER AND WILLIAM PARKER.

Those are two very interesting projects to juxtapose. They come from completely different places, even though William is on both.

First, the String Trio. The product of that group is actually very jazz and very who-we-are. But I have an intense classical background, and I delight in playing with timbres of strings and pretending that I'm a classical composer, orchestrating the piano parts in ways that might evoke a feeling of chamber music — which I love. I breathe and phrase differently. I'm free to go in a lot of directions I couldn't possibly go in with a drummer.

My current album with Daniel and William is a continuation of the Downtown school of music that Daniel and William have been part of since the early '70s, that I moved to New York in 1984 to be a part of. It's completely unpretentious New York free jazz. Add a piano to it and put it in a concert hall, it can also take on

a chamber music vibe, which is cool. That's just how elastic the language is. It's a certain way of dealing with the pulse, what you might call the breaking of the circle, if you look at it from a Renaissance point of view. When Cecil Taylor hired William and [drummer] Rashid Bakr around 1980, they'd already been doing this type of thing, already established a way of playing and a sound that was indicative of the East Village.

### I'D LIKE TO ADDRESS YOUR OPEN-ENDED IMPROVISING IN THE DUO SPACE.

I'll take four sax players I play duo with at this time: Rob Brown, Ivo Perelman, Evan Parker and Daniel Carter. That's their life. These guys are not dilettantes. They're not trying to do something different. They dedicate every waking moment to that particular art form — being able to go on a stage or into a studio and do that. Every time they listen to music, their subconscious mind is generating ways to get nourishment to do their own thing. When it's a discipline to that level, it's not really free improvisation at that point.

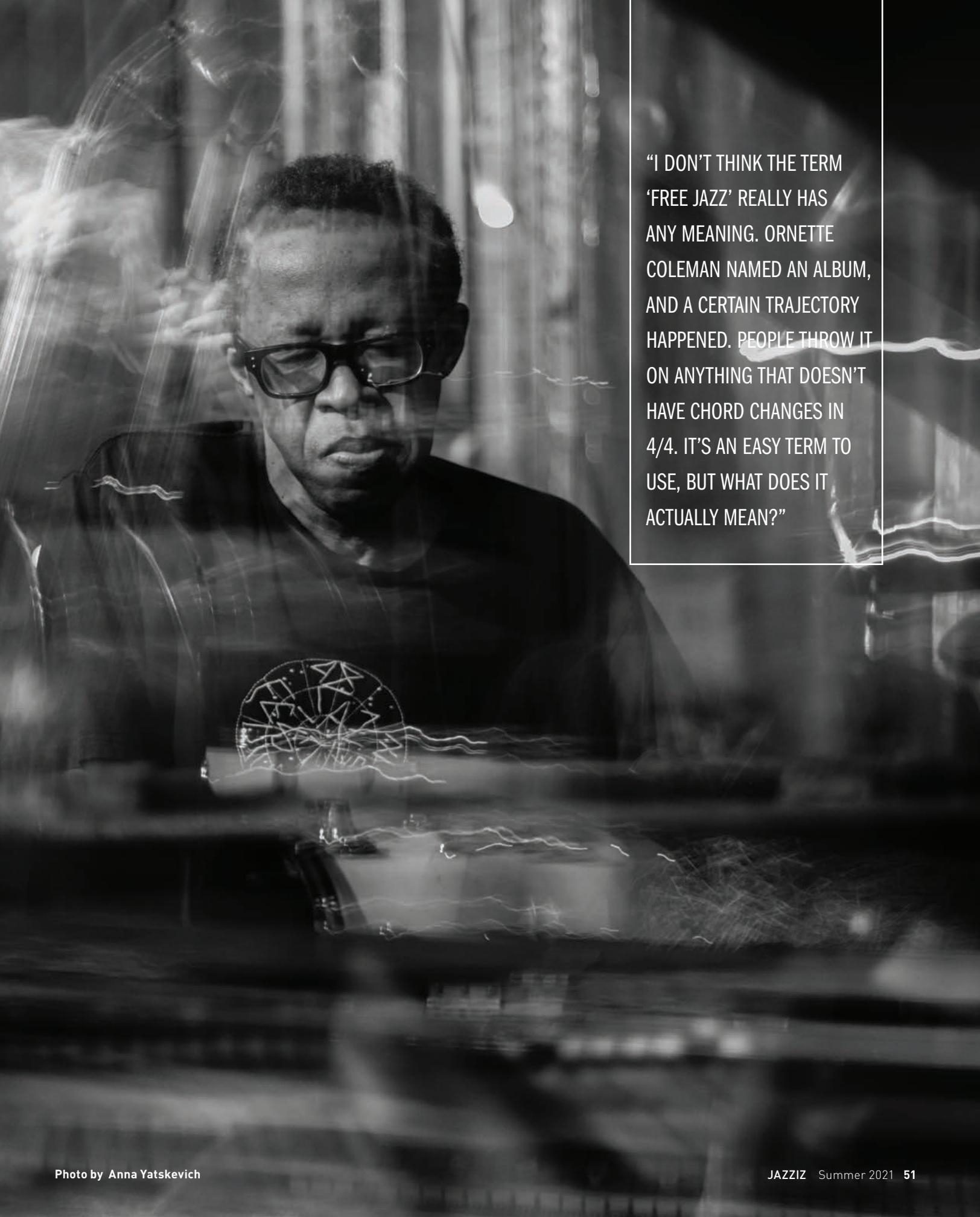
### DO YOU FEEL FULLY COMFORTABLE IN THE FULLY IMPROVISED SPACE, AS MUCH AS THE MORE RIGOROUS SPACE THAT YOU OCCUPY IN TRIO OR SOLO CONTEXTS?

Well, I'm a free jazz musician. That's how I've been defined. That's how people see me. That's the tradition I come out of.

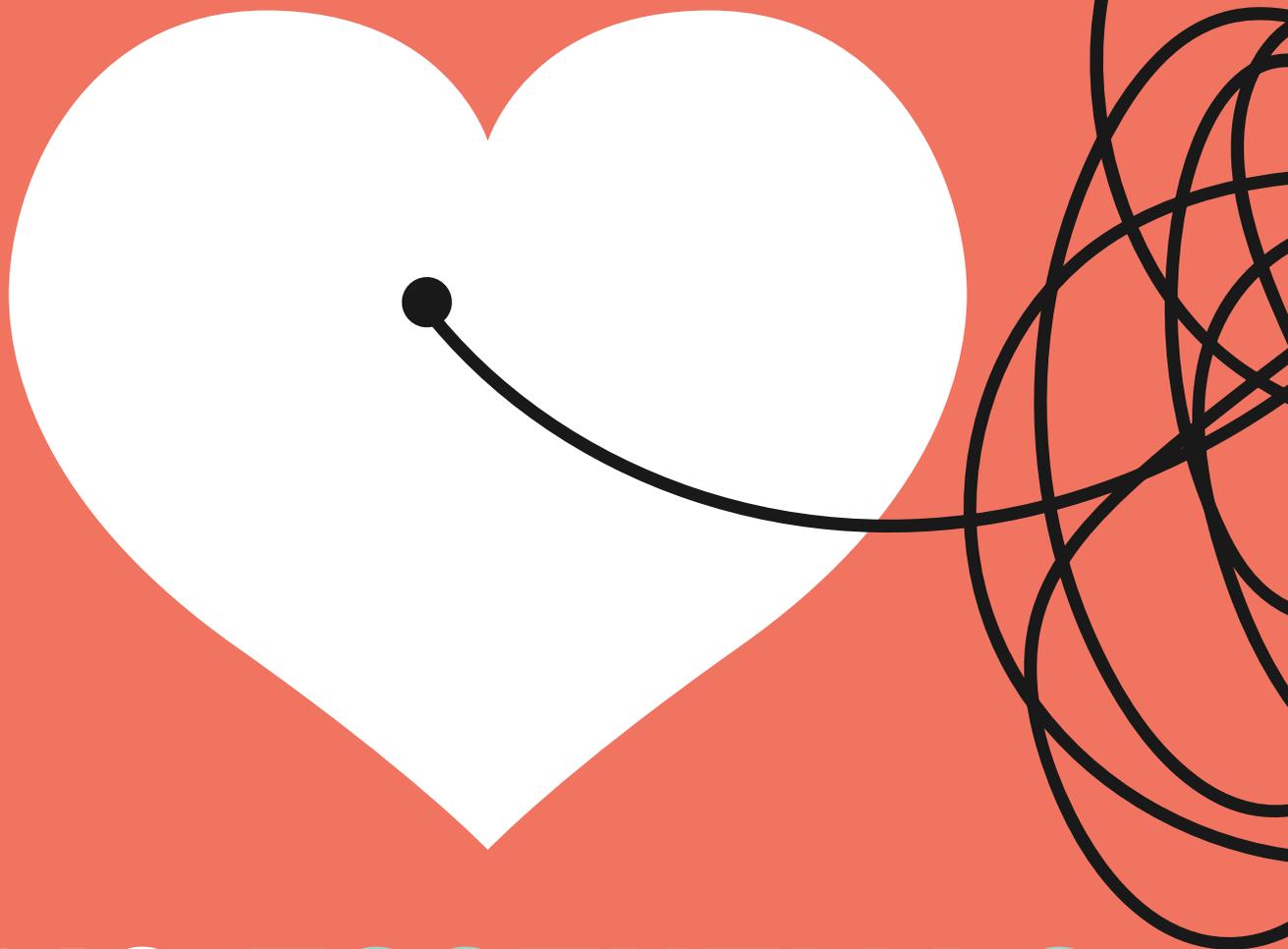
### I DON'T REALLY THINK OF WHAT YOU DO AS FREE JAZZ. IN THOSE CONTEXTS, I PERCEIVE YOU USING YOUR LANGUAGE TO SPONTANEOUSLY CREATE SHAPES, SOUNDS, COLORS TO SUIT THE MOMENT.

I like the fact that you don't think of me as a free jazz pianist. That makes me feel good. I'm my own idiom. Anyway, I don't think the term "free jazz" really has any meaning. Ornette Coleman named an album, and a certain trajectory happened. People throw it on anything that doesn't have chord changes in 4/4. It's an easy term to use, but what does it actually mean? I don't know. First of all, you're not free. Nobody is free. Everybody is constricted by whatever constraints their instrument has. There's physical limitations. And if you think you're playing something that's never been played or new, I guarantee that your nervous system is imposing a pattern on what you're playing, and if you think you're free, you're probably playing the same stuff over and over.

At the end of the day, it's not about being free. It's about taste and talent. If your imperative is to start from scratch, you develop a methodology to be able to do that. Somebody who plays really well with chord changes spends a lot of time learning how to play with chord changes. I don't think anybody knows where freedom starts or it ends, or where a form constrains you. Whether you think you're free or going by a form, whatever it is, it's a matter of praxis, discipline and openness all meeting somehow — and stuff just happens. Magic is not caught up in any of those things. It's all mysterious. ■



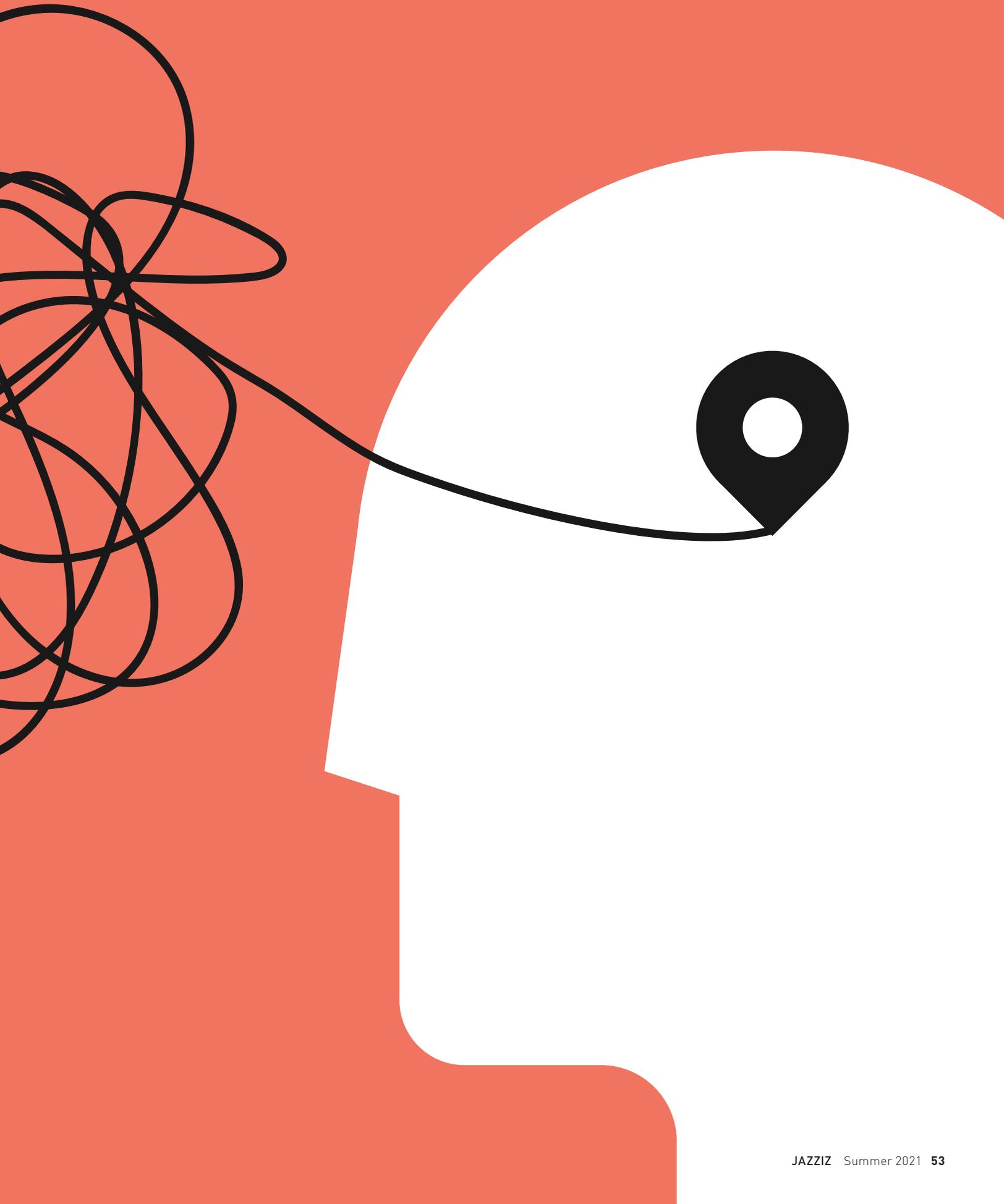
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# TRIO ESSENTIALS

THERE'S AN ARCHITECTURAL PRINCIPLE THAT THE TRIANGLE IS THE STRONGEST SHAPE: THREE SIDES AND THREE ANGLES BEAR WEIGHT EVENLY, DISPERSING COMPRESSION, SHARING TENSION, TRANSFERRING FORCE. THE SAME CAN BE SAID FOR THE JAZZ TRIO. THERE'S SOMETHING MAGICAL THAT HAPPENS AS SOON AS COMPANY BECOMES A CROWD. TRIOS HAVE BEEN BEHIND SOME OF THE GREATEST RECORDINGS IN JAZZ. HERE ARE A FEW ALBUMS THAT STAND THE TEST OF TIME.

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





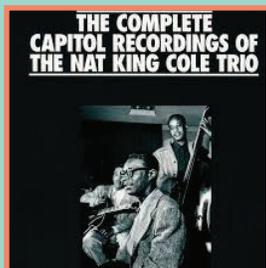
Oscar Moore, Nat King Cole and Johnny Miller



## BENNY GOODMAN TRIO

***After You've Gone: The Original Benny Goodman Trio and Quartet Sessions Vol. 1* (Bluebird), 1987**

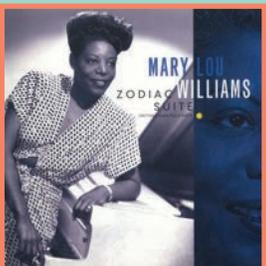
During the 1930s and '40s, clarinetist Benny Goodman was one of the most popular figures in American music, earning the title — out front of his big band — as the “King of Swing.” But his trio with Teddy Wilson on piano and Gene Krupa on drums etched into wax a number of seminal recordings that set a new course for small-group interplay and improvisation. Requisite track: “Body and Soul”



## NAT KING COLE TRIO

***The Complete Capitol Recordings of The Nat King Cole Trio* (Mosaic), 1991**

Beloved jazz vocalist Nat “King” Cole began his career at the helm of a peerless trio featuring Oscar Moore on guitar and Wesley Prince on bass. On a handful of recordings pressed in Los Angeles during the '30s and '40s, Cole (also a remarkable pianist) and crew revealed new possibilities for what a trio could accomplish, especially with regard to the interaction between vocals and guitar. Requisite track: “What’ll I Do?”



## MARY LOU WILLIAMS TRIO

***Zodiac Suite* (Smithsonian Folkways), 1945**

During the course of her career, pianist Mary Lou Williams constructed a durable bridge between jazz and classical music. In 1945, with a trio comprising Al Lucas on bass and Jack Parker on drums, she recorded the *Zodiac Suite*, an original composition dedicated to fellow musicians born under each astrological sign. The results are heavenly. Requisite track: “Taurus”



## SONNY ROLLINS

***Way Out West* (Contemporary), 1957**

Despite its cheeky Old West nature — or maybe because of it? — Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West* is a transcendent album that brims with profound musical ideas. It was the first of the saxophonist's forays into the pianoless trio format, this one featuring Ray Brown on bass and Shelly Manne on drums. On a program of jazz standards, Rollins and crew make the harmonic possibilities seem endless. Requisite track: “I'm an Old Cowhand”



## JIMMY SMITH

***Groovin' at Smalls' Paradise Volume 1* (Blue Note), 1957**

The organ trio — traditionally consisting of organ, drums and guitar — is an iconic sound in jazz, and few trios are as iconic as the ones helmed by Jimmy Smith. On *Groovin' at Smalls' Paradise Volume 1*, Smith serves up a showcase of soul alongside Eddie McFadden on guitar and Donald Bailey on drums. Indelibly funky. Requisite track: “The Champ”





## AHMAD JAMAL TRIO

***At the Pershing: But Not for Me* (Argo), 1958**

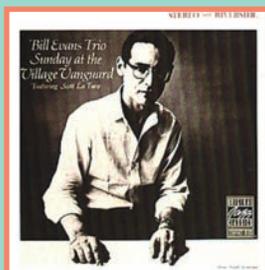
Few pianists in jazz can match Ahmad Jamal's mastery of dynamics and phrasing. This live set, captured in 1958 at the Pershing Hotel in Chicago, swings with easy precision, showing us why Jamal remains one of the greatest musical storytellers in jazz. Bassist Israel Crosby and drummer Vernel Fournier are exemplary. Requisite track: "Poinciana"



## THE JIMMY GIUFFRE 3

***Trav'lin' Light* (Atlantic), 1958**

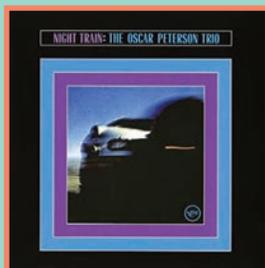
Reedist Jimmy Giuffre was an early — if overlooked — adopter of free improvisation, espousing an innovative model for jazz that was liberated from the constraints of traditional chord structures and rhythms. His namesake trio would take many forms over the years, but this project — with valved trombonist Bob Brookmeyer and guitarist Jim Hall — is his most probing and ambitious. Requisite track: "Trav'lin' Light"



## BILL EVANS TRIO

***Sunday at the Village Vanguard* (Riverside), 1961**

More than almost any other jazz artist, Bill Evans transformed the trio into a holistic unit, one in which three musicians speak with a single voice. To hear an Evans trio live, as on this 1961 set at New York's most famous jazz venue, is to hear his genius at work. Bassist Scott LaFaro and drummer Paul Motian rise to the occasion and then some. Requisite track: "Gloria's Step"



## OSCAR PETERSON TRIO

***Night Train* (Verve), 1963**

A technically gifted musician with a poetic ear to match, Oscar Peterson was as eloquent a pianist as they come. He commanded several outstanding trios throughout his career, but the outfit featured on 1963's *Night Train* — with drummer Ed Thigpen and bassist Ray Brown — crafted a masterpiece. Requisite track: "Georgia on My Mind"



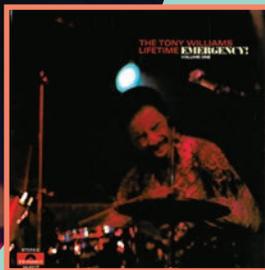
## CHICK COREA

***Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* (Solid State/Blue Note), 1968**

An undeniable current of joy runs through the hard-swinging *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs* by the brilliant pianist Chick Corea. As with everything Corea did, there's a sense of discovery and adventure packed into every note. The album — with Roy Haynes on drums and Miroslav Vitous on bass — is among the brightest stars in the post bop trio universe. Requisite track: "Matrix"



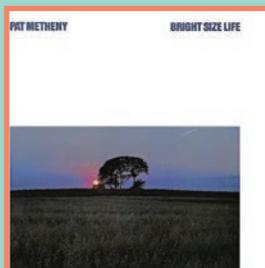
Geri Allen



## TONY WILLIAMS LIFETIME

### **Emergency!** (Polydor/PolyGram), 1969

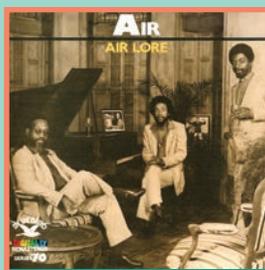
Few ensembles in jazz compressed so much energy into so small a space as Tony Williams Lifetime. The group's debut album is pure fire from beginning to end. But would you expect anything less from a group featuring Williams on drums, John McLaughlin on guitar and Larry Young on organ? Not even the sun gets this hot. Requisite track: "Emergency"



## PAT METHENY TRIO

### **Bright Size Life** (ECM), 1976

Pat Metheny's debut album, released in 1976, introduced the world to a guitarist of extraordinary versatility and a musician of unfathomable melodic depth. His trio included a pair of likeminded trailblazers in drummer Bob Moses and bassist Jaco Pastorius. Requisite track: "Unquity Road"

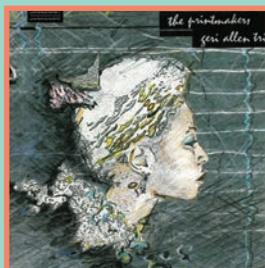


## AIR

### **Air Lore** (Arista Novus), 1979

Consisting of reedist Henry Threadgill, bassist Fred Hopkins and drummer Steve McCall — three visionary members of Chicago's freethinking Association for the Advancement of Creative Music — Air was a beacon of experimental jazz during the loft-scene era of the 1970s. Their album *Air Lore* filters compositions by Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton through an avant-garde prism. The past meets the future.

Requisite track: "King Porter Stomp"



## GERI ALLEN

### **The Printmakers** (Minor Music), 1984

The debut album by pianist Geri Allen was a major statement in the jazz trio form. It solidified her standing in what fellow pianist Matthew Shipp called the Black Mystery School, a cohort of iconoclastic musicians whose style defies easy imitation and academic codification. Allen, who died in 2017, is simply sublime on *The Printmakers*.

Drummer Andrew Cyrille and bassist Anthony Cox complete the

picture. Requisite track: "A Celebration of All Life"



## KEITH JARRETT STANDARDS TRIO

### **Standards, Vol. 2** (ECM), 1985

The Keith Jarrett Standards Trio — comprising pianist Jarrett, bassist Gary Peacock and drummer Jack DeJohnette — contributed an innovative perspective on the Great American Songbook when they laid down the tracks that would become *Standards Vols. 1 and 2*. Improvisation and spontaneous composition are the guiding lights of this trio, which continued to work together for more than 20 years.

Requisite track: "If I Should Lose You"



Brad Mehldau



## MEESKI, MARTIN & WOOD

***Shack-man* (Rykodisc/Gramavision), 1996**

The progenitors of avant-groove are in peak form on *Shack-man*, their second studio album and a cult favorite for fans of jazz fusion. Adding to the album's mystique is the fact that it was recorded in a remote shack in Hawaii, with equipment powered solely by generators. Pure magic. Requisite track: "Jelly Belly"



## BRAD MEHLDAU

***The Art of the Trio Vol. 3: Songs* (Warner Bros.), 1998**

Arguably the most resonant of Mehldau's Art of the Trio albums, *Songs* seeks to explore the qualities that make great compositions endure. Mehldau's improvisational vocabulary, while entirely his own, has influenced a generation of young pianists. Bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy share the vision. Requisite track: "Exit Music (For a Film)"



## ESBJÖRN SVENSSON TRIO (E.S.T.)

***From Gagarin's Point of View* (Sony), 1999**

The Esbjörn Svensson Trio set the mold for progressive European piano trios, and their influence continues to resonate even after the untimely passing of pianist Svensson, the group's namesake and leader, in 2008. *From Gagarin's Point of View* was the first album released by the trio outside of their native Sweden, and most clearly captures their mind-warping blend of jazz, pop and alternative rock.

Requisite track: "From Gagarin's Point of View"



## THE BAD PLUS

***These Are the Vistas* (Columbia), 2003**

Bristling originals. Covers of Nirvana, Blondie and Aphex Twin. The major-label debut by The Bad Plus ushered in a new era of trio playing, one that amplified the level of discourse both among its members and between genres of music. Requisite track: "Smells Like Teen Spirit" ■



From left, Mary Halvorson, Michael Formanek and Tomas Fujiwara



# The **Turn** of the **Screw**

Thumbscrew continues to hone its singular trio sound as its

members build on a sonic synergy that's been there from the start.

B Y S H A U N B R A D Y

Is there such a thing as “band at first sight?” The short but musically rich history of Thumbscrew begs for that sort of mythologizing. Ever since the day that bassist Michael Formanek subbed on a gig featuring guitarist Mary Halvorson and drummer Tomas Fujiwara, the three have been seemingly inseparable. Besides the six albums they’ve released as a trio, they’ve also doubled as the rhythm section for bands led by all three members.

But the reality isn’t quite that romantic. While all three felt an instant chemistry during that first performance, as with any band, it took work to achieve the singular identity they’ve now carved out for the trio.

“There’s so much that goes into being in a band,” Formanek explains during a group Zoom call with his bandmates from their respective homes in March. “There’s intimacy. There’s like-mindedness. There’s trust. There’s all these things that have to happen, but you have to create that. You’re sort of faking it in the beginning to try to see if you can make it into something. I think we did that really well for the first couple of years.”

There’s no faking the distinctive sound heard on Thumbscrew’s latest album, *Never Is Enough* (Cuneiform). Each member of the band, on their own, is among

the most unique voices in modern jazz: Halvorson’s wiry, warped guitar lines, the scrawled intentionality of a Cy Twombly painting translated into sound; Formanek’s burly yet elusive foundation, like something enormous and mysterious skulking in the shadows; Fujiwara’s multi-directional drumming providing unpredictable support, the breathtaking sensation of missing a step but landing safely, if shaken, on the ground below.

Something alchemical arises when these three personalities converge. It evades narrow description, ranging on their latest outing from the raveled musings of Fujiwara’s “Camp Easy” to the focused intensity of Halvorson’s “Sequel to Sadness” to the eyebrow-arched precision of Formanek’s “Emojis Have Consequences.” Daunting technical complexity pairs with wry humor in a way that’s nearly impossible to pull off but dazzling to witness, imbuing each piece with both exploratory verve and bold character.

“With this group, we can be in three really different places and still have a group sound,” Fujiwara says. “We all know this music, and as soon as someone hints at something, everyone knows where they are. Even if these two are doing something completely different than what I’m doing, there’s never any doubt that I’m still being heard. So we’re able to expand the picture because we can be in three very different places but still very together. That to me is a rare thing.”



# W

ell before Formanek entered the picture, Halvorson and Fujiwara shared a long-established connection. They'd first worked together in a group led by saxophonist Matana Roberts, extended their

relationship through their tenure in cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum's sextet and continued to collaborate throughout the early '00s in each other's groups as well as in ensembles with cellist Tomeka Reid, clarinetist Ben Goldberg and drummer Mike Reed.

It was on a recording date with Bynum that Formanek filled in and Thumbscrew was born. "The three of us just hit it off as a rhythm section," Halvorson says. "So we did one of those 'Hey, we should get together and play' things that usually doesn't happen. But in this case it did, and it took on its own momentum at that point."

"The first thing that happens when I really connect with people that I end up playing a lot with is not so much what I hear as what I feel — or what I don't feel," adds Formanek. "There's so many great [musicians] around, but there's a whole other intuitive quality that's not the norm with most people. I really trust that."

After a few performances to test the water, the trio quickly agreed to exclusively perform material composed expressly for Thumbscrew. The early experience of playing each other's pre-existing tunes did leave its mark, though — most explicitly on the opening track of the band's self-titled 2014 debut. Fujiwara so enjoyed playing one of the pieces from Formanek's quartet book that he wrote his own composition inspired by it, immortalized as "Cheap Knock Off."

"That was a way to get to know Mike, through his music," Fujiwara says. "Specifically, taking one of his compositions from another album and then saying, 'OK, what is that filtered through my ears? What does that make me want to bring to the group?'"

Halvorson expands that notion beyond the band to the extended scene of innovative artists from which Thumbscrew emerged. "People always ask, 'Who are your influences?' [The tendency is to] name somebody that's dead or somebody that we grew up listening to. But I think we're influenced by our peers and influenced by each other. This group is an example of that. 'Cheap Knock Off' doesn't sound anything like the piece of Mike's that it was a 'cheap knock off' of. But nevertheless, Mike's influence permeated that piece."

By the time of the release of their 2016 follow-up, *Convallaria*, Thumbscrew had not only evolved into one of the modern-jazz world's most



thrilling and adventurous trios but had been absorbed into both Fujiwara's quintet *The Hook Up* and Formanek's big band *Ensemble Kolossus*. Two years later, they'd also form the core of Halvorson's abstract song-based group *Code Girl*. As Formanek was quick to point out, there are plenty of precedents for self-contained rhythm sections that move in and out of disparate contexts together, throughout the history of jazz as well as in R&B, blues and rock.

Fujiwara picks up on that idea to indicate a rooting in tradition that may not seem immediately evident in a group with such exploratory instincts. "As obvious as it might sound," the drummer says, "the three of us really love what's called 'jazz music.' Some people that we play with might have an aversion to that, but we really love the totality and history of this music, the innovations, the creativity and the classics. For me, *The Hook Up* is a jazz quintet through my experience, my personality and my aesthetics. So the idea of a rhythm section anchoring an ensemble — Elvin Jones, Jimmy Garrison and McCoy Tyner or Butch Warren, Billy Higgins and Sonny Clark — was something I very much wanted to develop."

The trio's passion for the entirety of the jazz spectrum led to its most surprising venture to date. In the summer of 2018, Thumbscrew returned with two simultaneous releases: a third helping of original music titled *Ours*, paired with a collection of covers and standards aptly christened *Theirs*. Somewhat unexpectedly, devising their own takes on other composers'

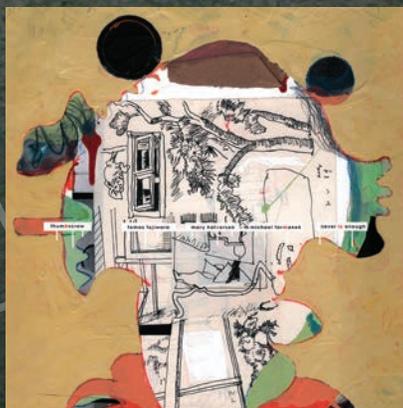
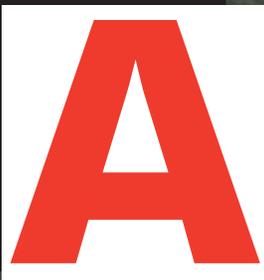


Photo by Brian Cohen

material, and thus shedding ownership of individual tunes, only added to the group's sense of shared mission.

The 10 selections ultimately chosen for *Theirs* were as eccentric and eclectic as the band itself. The album opens with a funhouse mirror rendition of Benny Golson's oft-recorded "Stablemates," an irreverent (though respectful) shot across the bow of jazz tradition. The band carves its own circuitous path through the traditions of Brazilian music with Jacob do Bandolim's "Benzinho" and bebop with Herbie Nichols' "House Party Starting." Thumbscrew's pantheon of composers is broad enough to encompass Wayne Shorter, Stanley Cowell and Misha Mengelberg, all of whom prove ripe for distinctive reinterpretation.

"Fundamentally, even without articulating it, the idea has always been for Thumbscrew to be a total collective," Formanek says. "Even though we're three equal voices, there are other considerations because the composer has the ultimate vision [for their own pieces]. But with these other tunes, they're just vehicles that we can do what we want with. They're songs that we love, but we don't necessarily have to be reverent to them. *Theirs* was important because it increased our ability to co-create in real time."



A key to the band's development has been their semi-regular residencies at the Pittsburgh nonprofit City of Asylum, where they've developed every album since *Convallaria*. "We really connected with City of Asylum, with the cofounders and with all the staff that work there," Fujiwara says. "Not only did we have a great time working on music every day

in this very rare and unique opportunity, but we also loved the neighborhood in which we were staying and were excited to continue it on a regular basis. It clicked very quickly and felt like home, and luckily we've been able to go home regularly."

"It's unusual these days for people to do band residencies," Halvorson adds. "It seems to be fairly common for musicians to go away on solo artist residencies, but to have this opportunity to just be with a band for a month, workshopping stuff every day — other than being in college and rehearsing every day with my band, I can't remember the last time that was a scheduling reality."

*Ours* and *Theirs* set a precedent for developing two separate projects concurrently, meaning that they could feed off of one another rather than standing in isolation. The band took the same approach to their 2019 residency, working on a new book of material along with a selection of largely unreleased Anthony Braxton compositions. This time, though, the results were released separately; *The Anthony Braxton Project* dropped in 2020 to coincide with Braxton's 75th birthday, leaving *Never Is Enough* fortuitously in reserve to be released this year, mid-pandemic.

*The Anthony Braxton Project* began at the invitation of the Tri-Centric Foundation, the nonprofit organization founded to

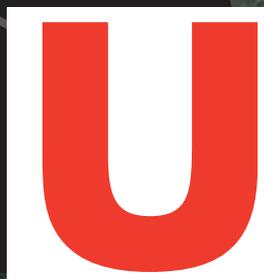
support and preserve the prolific composer's work. With Braxton approaching a landmark birthday, Tri-Centric turned to a number of artists to investigate his archives and interpret his prodigious output. Thumbscrew was a natural fit, Halvorson having studied with Braxton during her formative years at Wesleyan University, forging an enduring musical relationship.

Fujiwara's path had crossed Braxton's at various points over the years, from his visits with Bynum at Wesleyan to a 2013 opportunity to record with the master saxophonist in a two-drummer trio along with Tom Rainey. "Anyone that's ever talked to Braxton knows that he's completely inspiring," the drummer says. "He's such a generous spirit, so encouraging, so creative, so funny. Being around him is a reminder that anything is possible, to not limit yourself and to let your creativity flow. I've probably done some of my favorite writing after having spent an hour around him."

Formanek's direct experience with Braxton had been more limited, consisting of a sole performance as one of two bassists (with frequent Braxton sideman Joe Fonda) in a combination musical-theatrical production at the Knitting Factory during the late '90s. Being granted access to delve more deeply into the composer's body of work was a welcome opportunity. "Immersing myself in this stuff, it was just amazing how vast it is," Formanek says of the Braxton archives. "Not just in terms of quantity, but in the range. There are a few musical thinkers around, people that are constantly imagining what could be and what could happen. Braxton could put that into practice in a way that didn't seem to have real limits."

With a few exceptions, Thumbscrew opted to focus on a number of early Braxton compositions that had never been recorded and rarely if ever performed. Despite the architectural rigor and arcane fancy of Braxton's writing, the trio retains its own identity in a fascinating dialogue with the inventive composer. It's an intriguing insight in light of the perspective-shifting transformations of *Theirs* as well as in comparison with their own deeply personal originals.

"When I was studying with Braxton," Halvorson recalls, "he would share this very strong love of musical traditions and passion for all different types of music. But there was always the option to throw it all out the window. You never had to approach something exactly the way that the composer did. That's also something that we all share. So working on Braxton music and working on originals at the same time, everything mixed together."



Upon first listen, *Never Is Enough* seems like Thumbscrew's most accessible recording to date. However, the approachability of the music in no way reflects a compromise of its rigor. The trio's compositions are no less labyrinthine or knotty than in the past. Upon closer inspection, it's

the feel of the playing that makes it seem so inviting despite its considerable challenges. The connection is so intuitive by this point that on Formanek's title track, the airy atmospherics of its ethereal wanderings is as captivating as the blistering punk outburst that finally erupts from the haze. On Halvorson's "Heartdrop," the combination of Formanek's robust warmth and Fujiwara's insistently whispering brushwork buoy the composer's gnarled lyricism into something very close to an earnest ballad, albeit one determined to mar its own unmistakable beauty.

On "Through an Open Window," Fujiwara twists time through mind-bending convolutions, though the trio remains tautly interlocked even through its illusory, M.C. Escher-like torsions. Halvorson's "Fractured Sanity" is prime evidence of the together-while-apart qualities that Fujiwara described, as all three diverge into agitated scurrying before reconvening into a tense unity that exists under the perpetual threat of dissolution. The drummer's "Unsung Procession" slinks stealthily and serpent-like, while Formanek's closer, "Scam Likely," generates alien landscapes from the composer's processed electric bass, a new texture in the band's palette.

*The Anthony Braxton Project* and *Never Is Enough* are wildly different albums, though their kinship is evident when placed side by side. While it's difficult to draw one-to-one comparisons, traces of Braxton's precise angles and obscure construction can be felt in these new original tunes, while the trio's delight in one another's most daring swerves and leaps draws out the off-kilter whimsy of Braxton's audacious structures.

"If you're listening to a certain musician a lot, they're naturally going to influence your playing without being able to help it," Halvorson explains.

"I'm sure something about Braxton's aesthetic and the energy of his compositions seeped into our originals, though I don't know that I'd be able to pinpoint it specifically. It becomes more intuitive than a spoken thing."

A decade into Thumbscrew's lifespan, writing for one another — and for the collective — has also become integrally intuitive. "We just have more of a history," Fujiwara says. "The sound of the three of us together is burned into our brains and into our ears. But early on, I felt like I could write anything for this trio. So now it's as simple as what I feel like writing at that time. They're going to sound good doing anything, they're going to be prepared for anything I throw at them and they're going to be open. When you can do whatever you want, you don't think about it, you just do it."

Formanek and Halvorson both echo that sentiment, stressing the ability to experiment with the confidence that their bandmates will not only be able to execute the music but will share in the eagerness to venture into the unexplored. "Everyone in this group is going to be thoughtful and work on the music and come prepared," the guitarist says. "If you have some kind of crazy idea you want to try, this would be the group to try it with. Which is maybe why we've done so many different types of records — because we wanted to explore as much terrain as possible." ■



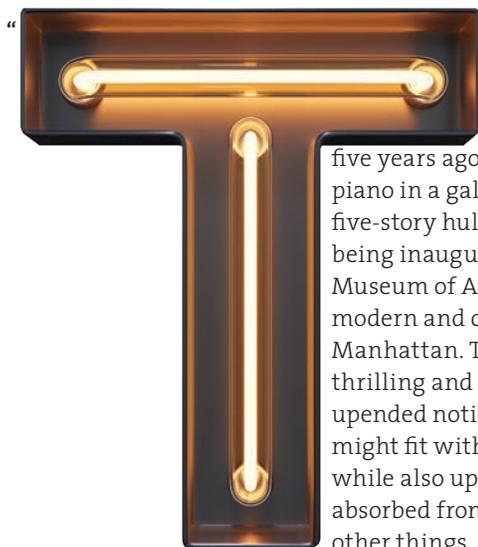


A FACTOR OF

With his new trio, Vijay Iyer addresses the shared trauma of troubled times with compassion and a glimmer of hope.

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





“The history of ‘creative music’ is kind of like the history of storming places,” Vijay Iyer told me five years ago. Then, he was seated at a piano in a gallery of the Met Breuer, a five-story hulk of a building that was being inaugurated as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new outpost for modern and contemporary art in Manhattan. There, through a series of thrilling and varied performances, Iyer upended notions of how modern music might fit within a visual arts space while also upholding traditions he’s absorbed from elder masters of, among other things, jazz.

Iyer, 49, has been a powerful and uncompromising presence, storming all sorts of venerable institutions — among others, the Village Vanguard, where he has extended and disrupted modern-jazz’s ongoing story, and Harvard University, where he directs a graduate program in Creative Practice and Critical Inquiry that one participant described to me as, “intended to create a space for things that didn’t exist before and to rethink what did exist before.”

Iyer is a singular thinker about music. He is also a master collaborator, with deep compassion and openness toward the desires of other musicians. The contexts for his own music have ranged widely. His close communion in duo with trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith led to the riveting 2016 release *A Cosmic Rhythm With Each Stroke*. His work with poet and rapper Mike Ladd yielded a trilogy of politically charged multimedia pieces. For his 2014 album *Mutations*, he paired piano and electronics with a string quartet. Yet the clearest and most popular distillation of his aesthetic to date has been his trio with bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Marcus Gilmore.

His latest recording, *UnEasy* (ECM), marks his studio return to the trio format for the first time since 2015, now with drummer Tyshawn Sorey and bassist Linda May Han Oh. Here, Iyer draws upon deep associations. He and Sorey began playing together roughly 20 years ago; they co-direct the annual workshop in Jazz and Creative Music at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, in Alberta, Canada, where Oh has served on the faculty. On the new release, these three make music that is in some moments meditative and at others startling for its interlaced streams of rhythm and harmony. The album was recorded in December 2019, before the pandemic, yet it seems in some ways to address the pent-up disorientation of a locked-down world as well as the tides of social unrest that have characterized that same period. These songs suggest tension and grief and yet also furtive hope — “a sense of ongoingness,” as Iyer puts it, “of endless possibility.”

During a phone conversation from his home in Harlem, Iyer talked about the role of trios in his own development, the bonds of understanding he shares with his trio partners, and the experiences that led to this new music.





From left, Tyshawn Sorey, Vijay Iyer and Linda May Han Oh



**SOME HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT THE TRIO FORMAT IN NEAR MYSTICAL TERMS — POWERS OF THREE, PYRAMIDS AND ALL THAT. YOU'VE CLEARLY THRIVED WITHIN TRIOS. WHY IS THAT FORMAT SO APPEALING?**

Well, it's not two, and it's not one. Two seems somehow more about contrast, about opposition. With three musicians, there are three possible pairs, right? If the components are strong enough, there are relationships

among the relationships, there is both complexity and balance.

**YOUR LATEST ALBUM MARKS YOUR FIRST RETURN TO THAT FORMAT IN THE STUDIO SINCE 2015, WITH A NEW GROUP. WHAT PROMPTED THAT DECISION?**

Well, I should start by stating that, to the extent that any band still exists right now, my trio with Stephan [Crump] and Marcus [Strickland] still very much exists. And what the records with them represented was a working group that toured a lot and played probably thousands of shows. That continues. This new release is something else.

**HOW DID THAT TRIO, WITH STEPHAN AND MARCUS, DEVELOP?**

In my earliest years as a music-maker out in public, I had a working trio that was a space for me to try out a lot of approaches. It's not that I invented these things. I was drawing from a lot of different existing models — from Ahmad Jamal, from the album *Money Jungle*, from Andrew Hill and Bud Powell and Herbie Hancock and Geri Allen, from Randy Weston and Cecil Taylor. And other things: the styles of great African-American drummers — studying their language, trying to transcribe some of that; hearing hip-hop as it existed in the 1990s and funk and soul; as well as different Indian rhythmic cycles and rhythmic techniques I was interested in. On my first couple of albums, *Memorophilia* and *Architextures*, there was a lot of trio music included that's very specific and very intricate.

When I came to New York, I formed a quartet with [saxophonist] Rudresh [Mahanthappa] and Stephan — it was Derrek Phillips on drums, and then Tyshawn [Sorey]. Also [*Your Life Flashes* by] Fieldwork came out in 2002, which was also this kind of exploratory three-member space, only the members [saxophonist Aaron Stewart and drummer Humberto Kavee] and the instrumentation were different. In the summer of 2003, I started working with Stephan and Marcus, when Tyshawn started doing more as a leader. But on all of the quartet albums, there was always some trio music. And with Marcus in it, it was a lot more trio music because I could really feel his presence.

**HOW DID THAT CONNECTION AFFECT YOUR IDEAS ABOUT TRIOS?**

When we first started playing together, we'd go see [Marcus'] grandfather [drummer Roy Haynes] play together and he'd sit on the floor, cross-legged, looking like a little kid. I was kind of in awe of Roy. And I would soak in what Roy played, and soak in Marcus soaking that in. It was just amazing to witness. I remember talking to Marcus a lot about that lineage, about his grandfather and these albums that I loved that his grandfather was on — with [pianist] Andrew Hill, who was my one of my idols and someone I got to know quite well. And so that was a point of context. I felt like there was a lot there that we could explore. I really cherish what we were able to build together. It was about sound in a very specific way.

**THAT CONCEPT SEEMED TO DEVELOP OR DISTILL THROUGH 2015'S *BREAK STUFF*.**

Yes, though I think of it as those five records — the two quartet albums and the three trio albums. That's the arc.

**IN YOUR NEW TRIO, YOU ALSO DRAW ON LONG COLLABORATIVE HISTORIES. YOU AND TYSHAWN HAVE BEEN WORKING TOGETHER FOR SOMETHING LIKE 20 YEARS.**

Something like that. By now, Tyshawn and I have this almost familial bond. We're in each other's lives in very important ways. It's more than being in a working band. It's more like just being in life together. This is the fifth album I've done with him, but then there are hundreds or thousands of other things we've done that are not on albums. Whenever we come back together and play, it's less like a band situation and more like, Here's what life has brought us to now. It has that sense of endless possibility. There are no habits.

Of course, Linda and I have also played together a ton over the last decade. She was in this working project that I've done for several years with [writer and photographer] Teju Cole called "Blind Spots," where he was reading and showing images. Linda has been up to Banff many different times, and there we've played together with all kinds of people. None of that is on any record, either. And a lot of that was with Tyshawn, actually.

**SO HOW DOES THIS TRIO ON THIS ALBUM DIFFER WITH YOUR PAST APPROACHES TO THE FORMAT?**

This album feels to me like some of the albums in the '50s and '60s that are blowing sessions — Let's see what we can do with this, let's try that. That includes *Money Jungle*, and it also includes *Inner Urge*, Joe Henderson's album that inspired my version of "Night and Day." The people on *Inner Urge* had played together a lot, so they have a vibe together. And a larger sense of community was being addressed — we have to all come together and make a record. There's a familiarity and a newness at the same time.





**THIS NEW ALBUM WAS RECORDED IN DECEMBER 2019. YET ITS MOOD AND ITS TITLE, *UNEASY*, SEEM TO ADDRESS ALL THAT WE ENDURED IN THE YEAR THAT FOLLOWED. HOW DO YOU ACCOUNT FOR THAT?**

Part of what spun it in that direction was that we assembled the album during the pandemic. It was a matter of looking in retrospect at what we had created through this new lens of enclosure and anxiety, of frustration and stir-craziness, and of grief. And then also, what kind of future could we now imagine, and how does this music speak to that? Also, it was a summer of incredible uprising, which was its own sort of gesture of hope and intention and speculative energy — as if saying, Our future can be better than our present, should be better, must be better. The music became bound up with that moment.

**THE TITLE PIECE, “UNEASY,” IS A DECADE OLD. DID YOU FEEL THE SAME WAY THEN?**

Yeah, because that unease was already there. That was during the Obama years. There was a façade of prosperity, and there were new opportunities: The Affordable Care Act, gays in the military, gay marriage. A lot of landmark stuff happened, yet there was also a lot of doubt. At the same time, there was drone warfare. There was surveillance capitalism, detentions and deportations. In many ways, it wasn't a rosy moment. So that's what “uneasy” was referring to then — plus the emerging right-wing nonsense that had been going on for decades, but was taking root in a new way, becoming omnipresent.

**YOU ORIGINALLY WROTE THAT PIECE FOR A COLLABORATION WITH KAROLE ARMITAGE'S DANCE COMPANY IN CENTRAL PARK, IN NEW YORK.**

We were commissioned by Summerstage to work together. Neither of us had done anything like that— live music onstage with dancers, outdoors. It was meant to express a certain exuberance, an optimism of spirit, but then there was also this pessimism of the intellect, around what was looming, in this context of growing unease. So that's why I spelled it with the internal capital E. It's easy, and it's not easy.

**YOU ALSO HAVE PIECES WITH TITLES LIKE “CHILDREN OF FLINT,” IN REFERENCE TO FLINT, MICHIGAN, AND “COMBAT BREATHING,” WITH ITS SUGGESTION OF ERIC GARNER'S WORDS, “I CAN'T BREATHE.” HAS POLITICAL ACTIVISM BECOME A NECESSARY ELEMENT OF YOUR MUSICAL PRESENTATION?**

There are certain awarenesses that I can't avoid and must voice, but that's always been true for me. That's nothing new. I hesitate to use the word “activism” because, as musicians, as public figures, we can shine a light on certain things. But to me real activism is what people do on the ground, and that sort of labor that is often unacknowledged and sort of tireless and selfless. That's been something that I admire and try to support, but I think it would be a little inaccurate to call me one of those people.

**THAT'S AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION. YET IN THE CASE OF “COMBAT BREATHING,” THAT SEEMED AS MUCH POLITICAL ACTION AS ARTISTIC EXPRESSION.**

Yes. That piece of music was supporting specific action. It was part of a program at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music] that was under my name. So, it was my decision to incorporate this gesture of refusal, this gesture of support.

**WHAT WAS THE GENESIS OF THAT GESTURE?**

I was doing this run at BAM, which was a major deal. It included a live performance with the film, *Radhe Radhe: Rites of Holi* [a collaboration with filmmaker Prashant Bhargava focused primarily on the Hindu celebration of Holi, in India]. BAM commissioned me to do a solo piano piece to open the program. As the day drew near, I was feeling uncomfortable. One reason was the way that BAM was advertising the program. I'm glad that they use stills from the film, but they tended to focus on like a certain kind of exoticizing. Like, here's a dirty Indian boy with blue stuff smeared all over him. It certainly wasn't a photo of me.

The other thing is that this was 2014, which was the year that Michael Brown was killed, the year that Tamir Rice was killed, and a year that Eric Garner was killed. All in a row, you know? So that was when the phrase Black Lives Matter actually took hold. I remember that there were protests happening in the vicinity of BAM. People were having “die-ins” [in which participants simulate being dead bodies, often in obstruction

**“By now, Tyshawn and I have this almost familial bond. We're in each other's lives in very important ways. It's more than being in a working band. It's more like just being in life together.”**

of traffic or business]. I remember feeling like there was a weird way that these die-ins were functioning for privileged people on social media.

I wasn't sure what to do about the solo piece of mine. Part of me just wanted to not do it. Yet it's kind of like ridiculous for someone privileged enough to have a show at BAM to shut it down as a kind of gesture. Still, I was also finding myself concerned that somehow my performance was being treated as an escape from

what was happening on the street — like that image of the dirty Indian boy offered escape to another world. I wanted to confront those audiences at that institution about that notion of escape from the New York that it inhabits, from the world outside its walls.

I talked to some different friends of mine. [Author and UCLA professor] Robin Kelley gave me a better understanding of what die-ins were about. It's not just performance. It's not just spectacle. If it's done as intended, it gets in the way of the

**“It was one of the most intense experiences I’ve ever had onstage. I remember a few of the dancers were in tears afterward because it was so intense, and because of how they faced the audience, what it meant to look those people in the eyes in that hall.”**

element of surprise on our side. And then, in this choreographed way, the performers, those who “died,” stand up and face the audience. At first, I thought I shouldn’t even be a part of it, but everyone wanted me to play, to give them something to move to.

#### **HOW DID THAT IDEA AFFECT WHAT YOU COMPOSED AND PLAYED?**

Well, that’s the perennial question. How do you make music that serves movement of any kind, and specifically serves a social movement? All I can say is that it was born of that moment in a very crucial way. I wanted simply to give them something to help them stand up, and then give them something that had a sense of continued movement, some sense

normal working of society. It’s like people putting their bodies on the gears. So that gave me the license to do this. Also, I talked with a friend of mine, choreographer, Paloma McGregor, who founded a collective called Dancing While Black. She agreed to work with me. It was a loose idea at the time, but it felt like what we needed to do. We wanted to create this sense of stoppage, so that maybe even just for a moment, someone in the audience feels like the show is not going to happen. In the printed program, it just said “Untitled Solo-Piano Composition, Vijay Iyer.” Instead, you see all these people lying onstage and no one at the piano, at first. There is this die-in that’s getting in the way of the show that they came to see. We had the

of ongoingness, of endless possibility, a projection into the future. It was functional in that sense. The other thing was, it wasn’t about me. I was trying to help them make the statement they wanted to make. It was one of the most intense experiences I’ve ever had onstage, honestly. I remember a few of the dancers were in tears

afterward because it was so intense, and because of how they faced the audience, what that gesture meant, what it meant to look those people in the eyes in that hall.

#### **WHEN YOU RECORDED THAT PIECE WITH TYSHAWN AND LINDA, WERE YOU TRYING TO RECAPTURE THAT MOMENT OF RESISTANCE? DID YOU TALK ABOUT THAT?**

Well, for one thing, as with many moments in my life, Tyshawn was there. He was there in 2014, so I didn’t have to tell him anything. And he has played it many times since then. I felt like that sentiment, that impulse, would speak through the music in some way or it would be made anew for a new moment. And that both of those paths are valid.

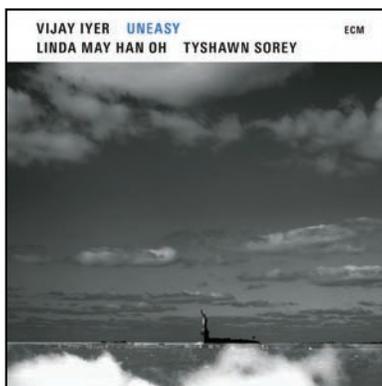
#### **IS THERE SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR TRIO THAT ENABLES THE CONSCIOUSNESS BEHIND A LOT OF WHAT YOU ARE SAYING WITH SONGS LIKE THIS?**

I know there’s a certain consciousness and a certain sense of purpose that comes from our collective life experiences, from facing certain things in our lives. I also feel like I can trust them to honor situations. You’ve witnessed each of our trajectories as artists — how we came in, how we were viewed, how people chose to write about us or talk about us, and what we did anyway. You’ve seen what someone like Tyshawn faces as a black musician who is a drummer but also far more, who has composerly aspirations and faces an uphill battle for all kinds of structural reasons. Or Linda, being a non-American woman of Asian heritage playing a bass. How many of those can you name? Or me, being, along with Rudresh, among the first few South Asians in this music, making my own artistic choices on my own terms — what the stakes were, what people misread or what they assumed about me. That’s where an awareness comes from, and that’s why we’re sensitive to others enduring it, too.

We’ve talked about a lot of things already, in the context of being faculty in a program at Banff, where issues of race and gender are at the forefront every minute of every day, and connected to music-making in direct ways: in terms of putting together ensembles, noticing the way certain people felt more comfortable than others with the way that privilege works.

#### **WHY IS THAT SUCH A FOCUS AT BANFF?**

Because we don’t not care about it. Because Tyshawn and I are co-directors of the program. Because we make it a priority. Because it matters in creating a sense of community. How do you create community if you don’t address those things, if you don’t accommodate difference? We all know where we all stand, and it’s an understanding born in that space where those issues are not off the table. Those issues are part of our thinking continually, but then it’s also just to enable us to come together to make music. It’s not some topic or subject, it’s not some kind of extra overlay of special concerns. The concerns are just already there. It’s where we begin to create. ■



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# auditions



From left, Charlie Hunter, Skerik and Stanton Moore

# three for the funk

When the three members of Garage a Trois hauled their gear into Studio Litho in Seattle for a hastily arranged recording session, they soon encountered an issue that most musicians would consider a serious problem. “A headphone amp wasn’t working right,” says Charlie Hunter, guitarist for the trio, which also includes drummer Stanton Moore and saxophonist-keyboardist Skerik. “I was the one who needed headphones the least, so I didn’t hear myself when I was playing. I just listened to Stanton.”

“Come again — couldn’t hear yourself?” “It was cool, man,” Hunter answers nonchalantly, talking by phone from his home in Greensboro, North Carolina. “Liberating.”

Garage a Trois’ new album, *Calm Down Cologne* (Royal Potato Family), is aural evidence that Hunter indeed did not struggle. Neither did Moore or Skerik, who could hear their guitar player just fine during the session. Hunter’s laissez-faire attitude reflects the core aesthetic of the trio: Keep it loose. Have fun. Improvise. Of the album’s five tracks, only the title tune was sketched out beforehand. The rest were created on the spot by the three on-again-off-again compadres.

*Calm Down Cologne* is all about the funk: fast funk (“The Epic”), faster funk (“No Zone”), slippery funk (the title track), greasy funk (“In-a-Pro-Pro”), sludgy funk (“Numinous”). The tunes, built on spontaneous riffs, are driven by Moore’s limber flow, which provides constant propulsion. Skerik ladles on an array of vintage analog keyboard sounds and effects-heavy saxophone licks — routinely playing them simultaneously. On the opener, “No Zone,” he turns heads with an extended, quicksilver line on both horn and keys.

Hunter, using a Hybrid Big6 with three guitar strings and three bass strings, lays down thumping bottom end and R&B-flavored riffs. He solos sparingly — and briefly — opting to follow the funk blueprint rather than strut his chops.

Instead of simply lining up solos, the players interlock for

## THE ORIGINAL GARAGE A TROIS RELEASE THEIR FIRST ALBUM IN 22 YEARS.



extended sequences, happy just to groove. On “In-a-Pro-Pro,” the trio bites into the rump-roller rhythm and devours it. Skerik and Hunter peek out with random licks and filigrees, while Moore cracks the whip.

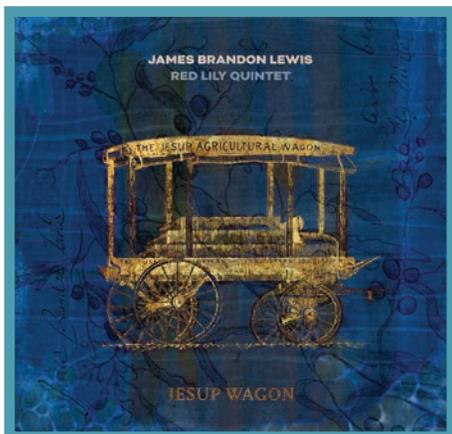
Garage a Trois’ origins came about as extemporaneously as their music. In the late-’90s, Moore was riding high as a member of Galactic, which was spreading a modernized New Orleans sound throughout the land. Presented with the opportunity to cut an album under his own name, the drummer recruited Hunter and Seattle-based Skerik, whom he had encountered during his travels with Galactic. Several Crescent City musicians played on the sessions for *All Kooked Out!* in early 1998, but the core trio developed a special bond during rehearsal jams. “Our improvised stuff felt like a different record,” recalls the New Orleans-based Moore, “so [producer] Dan Prothero said, ‘Let’s put it to the side, put out your solo record and revisit the improvised stuff for another record.’”

That raw material, far slower and muddier than the current batch, was released as *Mysteryfunk* in 1999. Its spacey 25 minutes attracted a cult of enthusiasts, and the band revisits that nascent sound on “Numinous,” the latest album’s dubby, downtempo closing track.

Garage a Trois went on to release four more albums, using different personnel configurations, but only the debut showcased just the original trio. Hunter, Skerik and Moore gigged sporadically over the years, but it wasn’t until a three-night stand at Seattle’s Nectar Lounge that the stars aligned for them to record as a threesome again. “Skerik set up the session,” Moore says, in a studio owned by Pearl Jam’s Stone Gossard. “I literally carried my drums across the street from the club to the studio. We got some sounds and started playing. I think the session lasted three or four hours. I hauled my drums back to the club for the gig that night.”

No biggie. Plug in and play, whether the guitarist can hear himself or not. That’s how Garage a Trois rolls. ■

B Y E R I C S N I D E R



**James Brandon Lewis  
Red Lilly Quintet**

*Jesup Wagon*

(Tao Forms)

The innate cry of James Brandon Lewis' tenor saxophone is the primal force that drives his splendid sixth album, *Jesup Wagon*, a reverently crafted homage to Black renaissance man Dr. George Washington Carver. Lewis' cry traces back to slave songs and early country blues, with a more direct linkage to the groundbreaking tenor work of such iconoclasts as Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp. The cry summons rage, pain, sorrow, joy and love. Combined with Lewis' formidable technique and imagination, it's a potent force.

Lewis has crafted the ideal showcase: seven original compositions, all with an organic connection to the blues, gospel and Africa. Each track evokes one of Carver's innovations, mainly in the field of agriculture, during his time as a professor at the Tuskegee Institute.

For a musician who was born and raised in Buffalo, New York, Lewis shows a natural affinity for the Deep South. His earthy melodies act as ideal springboards for gristly solos and collective improvisation among a stellar collection of fellow travelers: cornetist Kirk Knuffke; drummer Chad Taylor; bassist William Parker and cellist Chris Hoffman, who plays both pizzicato and arco.

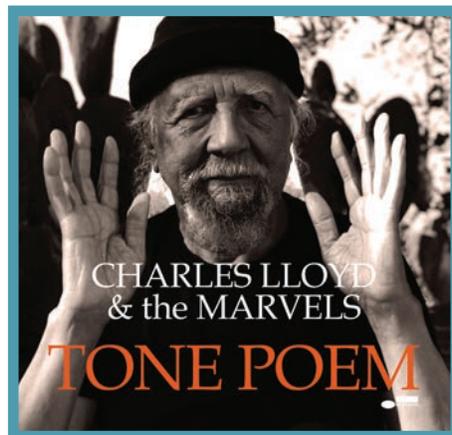
The opening title track begins with a minute-plus solo-sax intro that morphs the cry into screams, wails, sighs and low

guttural moans. A Taylor cymbal-crash kicks off a spunky New Orleans beat. Lewis and Knuffke briefly state a jovial parade riff then launch into free-rhythm romps.

On the other end of the spectrum "Seer," a soulful lament, simmers along on Parker's lean bass motif and Taylor's minimalist percussion on the African *mbira*, laying a foundation for entwined tenor and trumpet solos. The plaintive melody of "Chemurgy," played with purposeful imprecision by the two horn players, floats atop the rhythm section's smoldering, Afro-tinged groove.

*Jesup Wagon* is named for the rickety, horse-drawn wagon on which Carver roamed the Alabama countryside teaching his agricultural breakthroughs. More than a century later, that work inspired music that adroitly blends Black history and consciousness with raw, primal emotion.

— Eric Snider



**Charles Lloyd & the Marvels**  
*Tone Poem*

(Blue Note)

In the context of Charles Lloyd's storied musical life, the Marvels might be viewed as a late-breaking "party band" venture. Contrasting the revered veteran's long-standing format of a Coltrane-ish acoustic quartet, the Marvels finds Lloyd in cahoots with tasteful electric guitar maestro Bill Frisell, pedal steel guitarist Greg Leisz, Reuben Rogers often opting for electric bass, and frequent drummer Eric Harland leaning into groove pulses. Song



Charles Lloyd

Photo by D. Darr

**auditions**





Alexa Tarantino

Photo by Anna Yatskevich

lists dip into pop, country and R&B, and the first two Marvels releases featured cameos by Norah Jones, Willie Nelson and Lucinda Williams.

*Tone Poem*, their third release, sans vocals, amounts to their strongest, most unified statement on record. At times, Lloyd's gospel and R&B sensibilities come full circle, illuminating the Memphis-bred musician's early gigging with Bobby "Blue" Bland, Howlin' Wolf and B.B. King; his seminal Memphis soul training; and his '70s brushes with the Beach Boys. More historical looping shows up with the opening one-two punches of Lloyd's erstwhile jamming partner Ornette Coleman's "Peace," done up in a painterly, loose-limbed fashion, and a groove-lined take on "Ramblin.'" The empathetic Lloyd-Frisell dialogue recalls the partnership of the saxophonist with guitarist Gabor Szabo, especially on the title track and "Lady Gabor."

Leisz's peeling timbres shine bright on "Monk's Mood" (also a highlight for Lloyd's testifying tenor) and "Ay Amor," and Lloyd's penchant for "singing" through his horn comes to the fore on Leonard Cohen's classic "Anthem."

*Tone Poem* benefits from a steady glow, an advancing band aesthetic and a "groovular" pep in the step. It comes to a contemplative conclusion with "Prayer," the album's closing track offered as a benediction at a time sorely in need of one.

— Josef Woodard

## Alexa Tarantino

### *Firefly*

(Posi-Tone)

The most striking thing about Alexa Tarantino is her alto saxophone sound — not because of any radical innovations or signature quirks, but rather for her ability to shade it just enough to fit a range of material without altering its essence. Diving into up-tempo cookers on her new release, *Firefly*, like her knuckle-busting "Surge Capacity," she shadows hard-bop timbre with a sliver of softness; it lends a hint of humility to the swagger. When she pours herself into "Iris" — one of two

lesser-played Wayne Shorter compositions — her hushed-tone poetry shows flashes of that hard-bop steel. She excels at nuance.

Tarantino's slippery technique is impressive enough, but these tone adjustments constitute her calling card — along with the creative passion she imparts in her improvisations. (You won't hear a rote note on *Firefly*.) Leading a quintet comprising fellow Posi-Tone leaders Behn Gillette (vibes) and Art Hirahara (piano), plus bassist Boris Kozlov and the masterly drummer Rudy Royston, she channels New York sheen on her fast stuff; aggressively pushes the mainstream envelope on the high-octane "Rootless Ruthlessness"; and leans into her excellent flute and soprano-sax work on several lightly Latin, California-cool tracks.

Tarantino has two previous albums under her name, having built her reputation as a member of the DIVA big band and Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra. She's also starred in three collectives organized by Posi-Tone, working with several of her label mates in quintet and sextet settings. Tarantino treats her own group as a sort of collective: *Firefly* includes a composition from each of her sidemen, and her own songs don't appear until 20 minutes in.

The label's mix-and-match of roster artists carries some risks. With many leaders sharing similar personnel, the lines can blur between albums, as happened on some of the less distinctive Blue Note albums of the '50s and '60s. Tarantino mostly avoids that trap with



# STRINGS AND THINGS

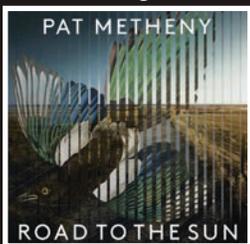
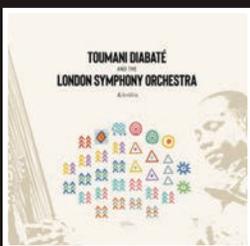
**Diverse recordings** employ a panoply of plucked, picked and strummed instruments.

By Scott Yanow

Whether invoking ancestral tradition or innovating modern sounds, string musicians strive for a connection with listeners that seems *sui generis* to their craft. Here are some recent examples.

*Kôrôlén* (World Circuit) captures a historic meeting between *kora* master Toumani Diabaté and the London Symphony Orchestra. The Mandinka word for “ancestral,” *Kôrôlén* consists of six delightful pieces and is the first recording of *kora* (a large African lute) with a symphony orchestra. Joined by five other Malian musicians, Diabaté is showcased on arrangements by Nico Muhly and Ian Gardiner with the LSO (conducted by Clark Rundell). The gentle and sometimes playful music, which is filled with memorable yet sophisticated melodies (and singing by Kasse Mady Diabaté on one piece), was first performed by this unique collaboration in 2008; now the recording is finally available. It shows listeners that there is much more to African music than its stereotyped function of providing rhythm for dancing.

Pat Metheny’s *Road to the Sun* (BMG/Modern Recordings) defies expectations, even for a work from the consistently adventurous guitarist. In fact, although Metheny contributed two suites and a song, he is barely on this album. Instead, the four-part “Four Paths of Light” features the brilliant classical guitarist Jason Vieaux. He displays his virtuosity during the first part, interprets a sensitive ballad during the next, and is at his best on the third section which is colorful and even a bit playful; the final section is a brief and quietly spiritual closer. The six-part title suite is performed by the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet. Metheny plays on the two sections (2 and 5) that have the most energy, taking a fine solo on Part 5. Much of the other music on “Road to the Sun” is a bit sleepy although impeccably played. The composer closes the CD by performing Arvo Pärt’s “Für Alina” on his 42-string Pikasso guitar, mostly playing quiet sounds that he lets fade before moving on to the next idea, creating a piece that could serve as an ideal background for meditation.



*Descension* (Out of Our Constrictions) from the Eremita label finds the Natural Information Society welcoming soprano saxophonist Evan Parker as their main soloist throughout a



75-minute, four-part composition that was performed live. Leader Joshua Abrams, who founded the group in 2010, has called their music “ecstatic minimalism,” and the description is apt. A repeated six-beat bass pattern on Abrams’ *guembri* (a type of African bass guitar), which is soon echoed by drummer Mikel Patrick Avery and Lisa Alvarado on harmonium, is heard throughout the piece and quickly becomes hypnotic. Parker plays melodically at first and sometimes sounds surprisingly like John Coltrane, at least until he engages in his ferocious use of circular breathing. Bass clarinetist Jason Stein is also an important part of the ensemble (à la Bennie Maupin on *Bitches Brew*) and occasionally recalls Eric Dolphy in tone if not choice of notes. Depending on one’s mood, the repetition on this endless piece will either be magical or tedious.

*Notes With Attachments* (Impulse), a project co-led by bassist Pino Palladino and Blake Mills (who is heard on more than a dozen instruments), is quite intriguing. The music itself is fairly conventional, with Palladino’s lightly funky bass lines often setting the groove. But the extensive use of electronics infuses the set with an otherworldly atmosphere. Instrumentation on the eight originals, which are performed on various tracks by a total of 13 musicians, includes electric sitar, Poly-Sax, guitar synthesizer, bass synthesizer, calabash, rubberized guitar, *ngoni*, sampled celeste, fixed reeds, single-note guitar, Senegalese percussion and prepared piano, in addition to more conventional axes. While the supporting cast features keyboardist Larry Goldings, saxophonists Sam Gendel, Marcus Strickland and Jacques Schwartz-Bart among others, it is the conception of the co-leaders that gives this set a unified purpose and its unusual tone colors.





Pat Metheny

## AUDITIONS

muscular compositions and a sure hand at the helm, as this easy-on-the-ears release confidently strides toward the breakout album that seems just around the corner.

— Neil Tesser

### Miguel Zenón *Law Years: The Music of Ornette Coleman*

(Miel Music)

Miguel Zenón is known as much for his methodical explorations of his Puerto Rican heritage as for his blazing inventiveness as an alto saxophonist. His visionary work as a conceptualizer has won him numerous accolades, including multiple Grammy nominations and a MacArthur “genius” fellowship. So this live session, recorded at the Bird’s Eye Jazz Club in Basel, Switzerland, in May 2019, is probably as close to an old-fashioned jazz blowing session as we’ve heard from him. The results crackle with the urgency and pleasure of the moment.

The band is not Zenón’s longstanding quartet. In fact, this was the first night of his residency at the Bird’s Eye, and the first time he and these players — tenor saxophonist Ariel Bringuéz, bassist Demian Cabaud and drummer Jordi Rossy — had played together as a band. Zenón being Zenón, that didn’t mean throwing together standards and blues for everyone to jam on, but instead crafting a well-considered program of Ornette Coleman compositions. They range from some of Coleman’s earliest recorded



Miguel Zenón

### LAW YEARS: THE MUSIC OF ORNETTE COLEMAN

MIGUEL ZENÓN  
ARIEL BRINGUEZ  
DEMIAN CABAUD  
JORDI ROSSY

LIVE AT THE BIRDS EYE JAZZ CLUB

pieces (“Free” and “Giggin”) to cuts from the epochal 1971 *Science Fiction/Broken Shadows* sessions.

Perhaps the challenge of facing those pieces cold accounts for both the urgency and the go-for-broke daring of the performance. Multiple contrasting tempos, harmonic ambiguity, unpredictable stops and starts? No problem. Check the heedless swirl of extended counterpoint between Zenón and Bringuéz on “Free” and “Dee Dee,” or the laughing figure from Zenón that cues

the solo hand-off to the tenor saxophonist on the lickety-split “The Tribes of New York.” Aside from being a showcase for the band’s virtuosity, this album also makes the case for Coleman’s compositions — as idiosyncratic and sturdy as Monk’s, each with its clearly defined character (the hide-and-seek playfulness of “Dee Dee,” the somber plaintiveness of “Broken Shadows”). They are built to last, and they are served well here by a band ready to kick back and let it rip.

— Jon Garelick

# JAZZIZ

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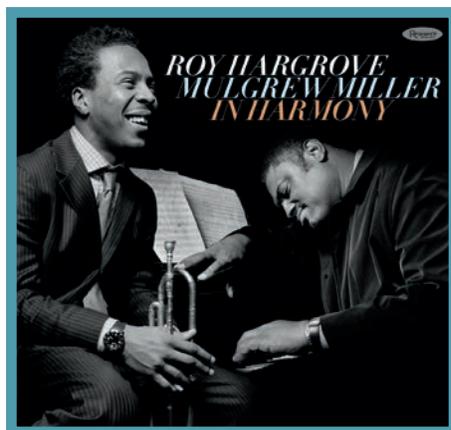
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Jennifer Wharton



### Roy Hargrove and Mulgrew Miller *In Harmony*

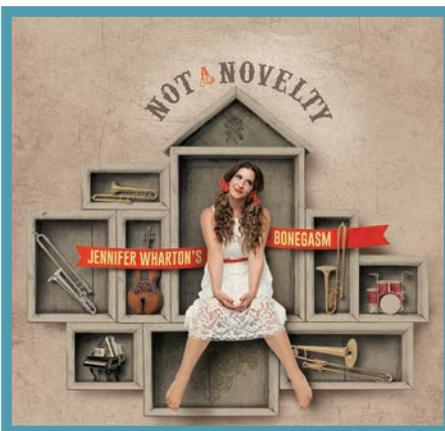
(Resonance)

Given the tremendous level of artistry on these two concerts — duo performances featuring pianist Mulgrew Miller and Roy Hargrove on trumpet and flugelhorn — it's almost impossible to believe that the two hadn't rehearsed. In fact, for the first concert (New York City, 2006), they didn't even have time for a sound check and quickly selected standards while waiting in the wings. But audiences for both performances — the second gig taking place the following year in Easton, Pennsylvania, Miller's hometown — must have left feeling elated and in awe.

The ballad selections, including "This Is Always," "I Remember Clifford" and "Never Let Me Go," are particularly affecting, as they showcase Hargrove's sumptuous tone and Miller's orchestral phrasing. Much more surprising are tunes such as Blue Mitchell's "Fungii Mama," which would seem to require a percussionist yet sound fully complete despite the intimate setting: Miller drives hard with bass lines and Oscar Peterson-esque flourishes, and Hargrove sculpts decisive, captivating lines with wit and muscle — there's a reason Jimmy Heath called him "Hardgroove." Most of the pieces last more than eight minutes yet almost never falter in terms of energy and fluidity; in terms of symbiosis, this pairing rivals the legendary duo performances by Stan Getz and Kenny Barron. The title of this two-disc set,

*In Harmony*, is both spot-on and an understatement.

Miller died in 2013 at the age of 57; Hargrove in 2018 at 49. The 50+ pages of essays and reflections, multigenerational perspectives ranging from Sonny Rollins to Common, do not shy away from the elegiac nature of this release. Several musicians also emphasize that Miller has been "overlooked" and "underappreciated." If a single recording can right that wrong, it may be this one.  
—Sascha Feinstein



### Jennifer Wharton's *Bonegasm* *Not a Novelty*

(Sunnyside)

Bass trombonist Jennifer Wharton's second release with Bonegasm — a four-trombone frontline with rhythm section — proves that her thoughtfully conceived concept, as its title avers, is no novelty. Nor is the idea of female jazz instrumentalists venturing beyond the piano bench, as they constitute a kinetic force among various "best of" jazz polls with growing frequency.

A trombone ensemble may be the most appreciable of homogenous groups because of the instrument's unobtrusively round sonic properties. Although decibel-wise it's capable of being the loudest acoustic instrument, no other blends better in multiples, especially when performing tastefully arranged music covering a broad range of dynamics.

Well written music commissioned from a talented pool of composers is

# SOUNDBITES

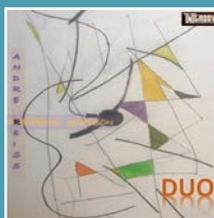
By Eric Snider



## Ches Smith

### *Path of Seven Colors* (Pyroclastic)

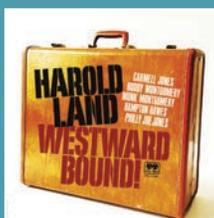
Drummer-composer Smith, who has immersed himself in Haitian *vodou* music for nearly two decades, delivers a sublime magnum opus. *Seven Colors* blends traditional songs — sung in earthy call-and-response by four Haitian vocalist-percussionists — with jazz compositions. Pianist Matt Mitchell and saxophonist Miguel Zenón contribute stirring work, fully grasping the ambitious concept.



## Fred Johnson/Andre Reiss

### *Duo* (TNTGroove)

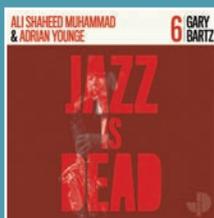
Veteran singer Johnson, a long-time Florida resident, is a hidden gem. He teams with guitarist Reiss for a set of eight standards and one original that range from buoyant (“Almost Like Being in Love”) to jaunty (“Willow Weep for Me”) to tender (“When I Fall in Love”). Johnson bends and shapes melodies without overstretching, while Reiss provides supple accompaniment and concise solos. Johnson’s vocal range, innate swing and powers of interpretation reveal a master at work.



## Harold Land

### *Westward Bound* (Reel to Real)

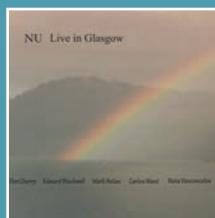
These nine unearthed tracks chronicle a fertile period (1962-65) for Land, a vastly underappreciated tenor man. On *Westward Bound*, he burns and dazzles in Seattle nightclub sets recorded for radio. Quartet and quintet dates include sidemen Philly Joe Jones, Hampton Hawes, Buddy and Monk Montgomery, and trumpeter Carmell Jones. The hard-swinging post-bop brims with verve, and sound reproduction is spot-on.



## Gary Bartz

### *Gary Bartz JIDoo6* (Jazz Is Dead)

Alto sax legend Bartz gets the '70s-inspired jazz-funk treatment from producers-instrumentalists Adrian Younge and Ali Shaheed Muhammad, and the results are uneven. Most of Bartz’s solos fail to find the flow, making you question if he’s fully engaged. Still, the eight-song effort, with its swirl of analog keyboards and rugged drumming, earns solid marks for overall feel.



## NU

### *Live in Glasgow* (Radio Legs Music)

From the archives of bassist Mark Helias comes a valuable document of a short-lived band led by trumpeter Don Cherry and including saxophonist Carlos Ward, drummer Ed Blackwell, percussionist Naná Vasconcelos and Helias. A sense of discovery and delight courses through the music, which favors swing grooves and spontaneity over precision. Cherry’s trumpet work is exuberant and occasionally sloppy. He’s also a loquacious emcee. Recorded in 1987, the 46-minute set benefits from crisp sonics.



## Masabumi Kikuchi

### *Hanamichi* (Redhook)

Pianist Kikuchi, who died in 2015, once claimed, “I don’t have any technique.” On his final studio album, a solo set, he plays it slow and loose on six pieces that include “Summertime” and two versions of “My Favorite Things.” He unspools melodies gradually, arrhythmically, with hard-won deliberation, liberal amounts of space and a propensity to wander back alleys. The music can become ponderous if taken in one helping, but Kikuchi’s idiosyncratic approach wins out.



## Nelson Riveros

### *The Latin Side of Wes Montgomery* (Zoho)

Guitarist Riveros’ quintet plays Montgomery staples like “Four on Six” and “West Coast Blues” with carefree vivacity. His liquid playing skews toward single-note lines and sparingly employs Montgomery’s trademark sliding octaves. Percussionist Jonathan Gomez amplifies the Afro-Cuban dimension, but the album would have benefited from a few slower tunes.



## Lorne Lofsky

### *This Song Is New* (Modica Music)

Toronto guitarist Lofsky’s first album in more than two decades comprises five worthy originals bookended by jazz classics “Seven Steps to Heaven” and “Stablemates.” With a light touch and rubbery tone, Lofsky builds elegant solos that blend slippery-fingered runs and sly chordal accents. Kirk MacDonald — an energetic alto saxophonist who solos as long and frequently as the leader — sucks up a bit too much oxygen.



Gary Bartz

indeed the fulcrum of this 10-song set, with every song allowing ample room for improvisation by trombonists Wharton, John Fedchock (her husband), Nate Maryland and Alan Ferber; pianist Michael Eckroth; bassist Evan Gregor and drummer Don Peretz.

*Not a Novelty* opens *mucho vigoroso* with Eckroth's "BonGasm." Following a bass trombone-acoustic bass unison line, Eckroth lays down a pianistic salsa variation expounded upon by intricate rhythmic trombone passages. Immediately, Bonegasm takes the high road with an approach that's as individual as it is difficult. And instead of using the basic American songbook 32-bar song form, each chart is composed and arranged with a complexity that demands the utmost in cliché-less improvising from these talented players.

Spanish-tinged in a more subtle way, "Face Value," a Remy LeBoeuf original, showcases the trombone ensemble in block-chord chorale form. Beautifully textured harmonies offer a welcomed dose of tranquility, with solo spots ably handled by trombonists Wharton and Ferber.

It's hard to tell whether the entire band or vocalist Kurt Elling is having more fun on Darcy James Argue's bawdy arrangement of grunge band Soundgarden's "The Day I Tried To Live." Either way, the enjoyment is contagious throughout Bonegasm's consistently musical second chapter.

— James Rozzi

## Benito Gonzalez *Sing to the World*

(Rainy Days)

Few jazz pianists arriving on the scene since the 1960s have been able to sidestep the musical influence of the late McCoy Tyner. Benito Gonzalez is no exception. Gonzalez absolutely reveres Tyner, especially the elder's chromatic-based, two-fisted pentatonic techniques. Gonzalez's uptempo modal compositions — constituting nearly half of *Sing to the World* (Gonzalez's fifth release) — call to mind Tyner's energized forays while still

a member of Coltrane's renowned quartet.

Gonzalez's amped-up music is similarly dense yet openly in search of a musical message to explain the most basic human conditions. His opening "Sounds of Freedom," a blistering piece alternating 4/4 and 5/4 meters, features trumpeter Nicholas Payton, bassist Essiet Essiet and drummer Sasha Mashin frenetically testifying to heartbreaking crises all peoples endure, particularly in Gonzalez's native Venezuela.

If ever a rhythm section can be labeled a "power trio," it is that of Gonzalez, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts, who are featured on four of 10 cuts. Their approaches to Coltrane-esque compositions "Views of the Blues" and "Visionary" come busting out of the gates swinging hard and fast, spinning freewheeling improvisations at breakneck tempi.

Hearing trumpeter Payton play on four straight-ahead jazz cuts is a treat these days; for the past several years, his creative endeavors have ventured into adjacent musical landscapes. On "Father," by Roy Hargrove, both Payton and Gonzalez wax lyrically while strolling a luxurious mid-tempo groove. Gonzalez's "Smile" is an interesting folksong drenched in a Middle-Eastern blues vibe. Payton also buoys Watts' melodious ballad "412," soloing ultra-sweetly with little regard for the trumpet's rep as a machismo purveyor of fanfares.



Reverting to sounds of aggression, "Flatbush Avenue" is among the hardest of the hard-blowing tunes in this spirited set. The Gonzalez trio's robust wall of sound (with Mashin on drums), in tandem with the trumpet ferocity of Josh Evans, is arguably every bit as compelling as their Coltrane-backing forefathers.

—James Rozzi

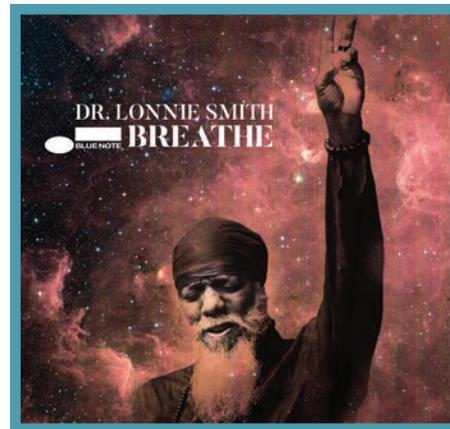
## Dr. Lonnie Smith *Breathe*

(Blue Note)

Exhilarating, cosmic, sublime: All come to mind when describing *Breathe*, the latest release from Hammond B3 organ legend Dr. Lonnie Smith. The album marks the NEA Jazz Master's third disc on Blue Note since his 2016 homecoming; the label cemented his legacy as a soul-jazz pioneer in the late-'60s and early-'70s.

Recorded mainly in 2017 during a week-long stint at New York's since-shuttered Jazz Standard — billed as Smith's 75th birthday celebration — *Breathe* is the blistering companion to trio album *All in My Mind*, recorded around the same time. The live sessions are enlivened by a septet comprising a robust horn section — John Ellis on tenor sax, Jason Marshall on baritone sax, Sean Jones on trumpet and Robin Eubanks on trombone — along with Smith's longstanding trio.

Smith also finds magic in the studio by way of the album's bookends, featuring an unlikely ally in fellow South





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Iggy Pop and Dr. Lonnie Smith



Floridian Iggy Pop, the godfather of punk. The former Stooges frontman's trippy, textured rendition of Timmy Thomas' soul tune "Why Can't We Live Together" poignantly kicks off the program, utilizing the unhurried phrasing of Pop's lounge-inspired vocals. Donovan's 1966 pop hit "Sunshine Superman" is infused with exoticism as Smith scribbles playful lines on the organ; tambourine keeps time and Jonathan Kreisberg's groove-infused guitar sparsely sketches subtle lines that contrast with Pop's unconventional baritone.

But the live set is the main event. "Bright Eyes," a Smith original, rides a steady up-tempo groove with Johnathan Blake's brilliant synergy behind the traps and lean brass coolly darting around Smith's shimmering organ. "Too Damn Hot" rides a beguiling melody brimming with mischief. It sneaks up surreptitiously until Smith unleashes a crescendo of dizzying notes. A moment of abstract whimsy arrives by way of "Track 9," which starts off with staccato drumming and is punctuated by playful time shifts and a sizzling solo by Ellis before syncopated interplay climaxes into frenzied free-flight.

Thelonious Monk's "Epistrophy" closes out the live set. Smith's trio inhabits the bebop master's angular openness, offering a pulsating rendition anchored in Blake's dynamic polyrhythms and accentuated by Kreisberg's psychedelic guitar stabs and Smith's breezy keys.

— Lissette Corsa

## Charlie Sepúlveda & the Turnaround

### *This Is Latin Jazz*

(HighNote)

Since forming his group the Turnaround three decades ago, Puerto Rican trumpeter, bandleader and composer Charlie Sepúlveda has been an unwavering disciple of Latin jazz in its most elemental form — the bracing mixture of Afro-Cuban rhythms and bebop-rooted melodies and improvisations that evolved in the late 1940s. Over many years,

stylistic variants spawned throughout Latin America have co-opted the Latin jazz label, somewhat to Sepúlveda's chagrin. On *This Is Latin Jazz*, his third release on HighNote, he defiantly lays down a marker with an eight-track program that he contends expresses the true spirit of vintage Latin jazz.

Recorded at Dizzy's Club in Jazz at Lincoln Center, the session owes its winning personality to the presence of guest soloists whose disparate stylistic trademarks profoundly shape the character of each arrangement. "Liberty," one of five Sepúlveda originals, features long-form solos by the leader and trumpeter Randy Brecker, whose stratospheric excursions, slurs and rapid-fire articulations recall the signature style of Dizzy Gillespie, one of the founding fathers of the idiom. Another arrangement with strong ties to the bop tradition, "Tales From the Wall," spotlights trombonist Steve Turre, whose gritty solo is in stark contrast to Sepúlveda's rich tones and svelte reading. Miguel Zenón's alto sax solo on "Frenesi" (Frenzy) lives up to the promise of the tune's title, while Nestor Torres' dancing flute work on a nostalgic read of "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White," a Cuban standard from the 1950s, is as "dulce" (sweet) as warm coconut milk.

Not every track lies within the realm of classic Latin jazz. "Alfonsina y el Mar" is a revered Latin American folktune from Argentina, perceptively interpreted by the husky-voiced Natalia Mercado, Sepúlveda's wife. "Estampas" is set to a *danza* rhythm,



a courtly Puerto Rican form that allows the trumpeter's lyrical side to shine. Whatever the style, Sepúlveda and his cohorts have crafted a session that celebrates the Latin jazz legacy via vibrant and uncommonly virtuosic performances.

— Mark Holston

## Alban Darche *Le Gros Cube #2* (Yolk)

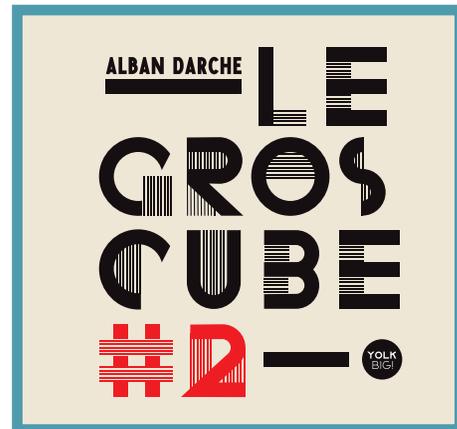
French saxophonist and composer Alban Darche has sourced 14 musicians from four different countries to create a big band record without a single hummable melody or danceable groove. The project is a resolute success.

*Le Gros Cube #2*, released on Darche's own Yolk Records, marks a return to the composer's home format of the traditional big band after a decade-long foray into what he refers to as "chamber music" (with his nine-piece *L'Orphicube*). All the compositions on the album are originals, but none of them are new. The bandleader assembled the repertoire

from his extensive back catalog, thus allowing him to focus entirely on arrangement and orchestration. This is where the record shines.

These dense, dramatic pieces sound like a classic spy-movie soundtrack heard in a dream. The opening track, "À la Bougie" ("By Candlelight"), lays out a familiar noir language of tense swells, slinking bass lines and brassy crescendos that the band proceeds to contort and dismantle. With a nonchalance afforded by flawless professionalism, they stretch the music over lopsided metric constructions, saturate it with modern classical harmony and riddle it with textures and countermelodies that squirm beneath the surface.

"Arcane XV — Le Diable," despite having no memorable theme other than a hypnotic two-note figure, covers more textural ground in just under nine minutes than most jazz albums do on the whole. American alto players Jon Irabagon and Loren Stillman scribble uneasy post-bop lines over a series of droned chords



that fold over each other like waves on the shore. The saxes eventually break free into an oasis of prancing drum and bass only to have the harmony sour once more, cuing the return of the heaving brass. When the tension breaks again, the song finds itself in a pointillistic realm of pops and clicks. Vertiginous arpeggios then suck in the instruments one by one, sending the piece spiraling towards its climax. Darche pulls no punches and rarely repeats himself.

— Asher Wolf



Alban Darche



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# Chick Corea's Trio Legacy

By Bill Milkowski

It's tough to accept the passing of a boyhood hero. I was 19 when I met Chick Corea backstage in 1974 at my first Return to Forever concert. He was 33 then, exactly half my current age. Seems like multiple lifetimes ago.

I would go on to interview Chick numerous times over the years, including for last summer's JAZZIZ fusion issue. And I saw him perform in various configurations maybe 30 or more times since that first encounter, including one particularly playful gig with Bobby McFerrin, during which the vocalist crowd-surfed to the back row of Avery Fisher Hall.

Through numerous backstage hangs, I became friendly with Chick, to the point where he was recommending books for me to read (Dr. Joel Fuhrman's *Eat To Live*, L. Ron Hubbard's science-fiction novel *To the Stars*). And whenever I would interview him, he was always generous with his time and engaging in his heavily Boston-accented banter. Now he's gone.

Corea left a rich recorded legacy going back to his work as a sideman during the early '60s for Latin jazz bandleaders Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo and Montego Joe. Following straightahead gigs with Blue Mitchell, Sonny Stitt and Stan Getz, among others, he joined Miles Davis' seminal electric band, recording such game-changers as 1968's *Filles de Kilimanjaro*, 1969's *In a Silent Way* and 1970's *Bitches Brew*. After leaving Miles, Chick would forge new musical paths with a myriad of electric bands. But no matter how immersed he became in high-tech gadgetry, he would always return to the piano trio. That was home base for Chick.

His first piano trio recording, 1968's *Now He Sings, Now He Sobs*, featuring Miroslav Vitous on bass and Roy Haynes on drums, is now regarded as a landmark of piano jazz. Recorded in March of 1968 (six months before he joined Miles), it set the template for his restlessly creative approach to the piano trio that continued for the next 50 years.

Corea pushed the envelope on piano trio playing with Circle, a free jazz group he formed with bassist Dave Holland and drummer Barry Altschul. Following his electric run with Return to Forever,

he would return to piano trio in 1981 on *Trio Music*, a reunion with Vitous and Haynes that mixed free playing with spirited interpretations of Thelonious Monk staples.

After three consecutive Elektric Band recordings during the mid-'80s, Corea premiered his Akoustic Band in 1989. With virtuoso bassist John Patitucci and drummer Dave Weckl, this invigorating piano trio showcased its ability to burn (John Coltrane's "Bessie Blues," "Autumn Leaves," "So in Love") on its self-titled debut and 1991 followup, *Alive*.

Chick ushered in the millennium with his New Trio, featuring bassist Avishai Cohen and drummer Jeff Ballard, documented on 2001's *Past, Present & Futures*. Then in 2008, the mammoth six-CD set, *Five Trios*, found him in highly interactive mode with five different rhythm sections. He reunited with his old Return to Forever bandmates Stanley Clarke and Lenny White for a worldwide unplugged trio tour in 2009, resulting in 2011's two-CD set, *Forever*, then later unveiled another new piano trio with drummer Brian Blade and bassist Christian McBride. Their first recording, 2013's three-CD set, *Trilogy*, documented their easy, engaging rapport on tour and won two Grammy Awards.

In 2018, Chick began touring with his Vigilette Trio of bassist Carlitos del Puerto and drummer Marcus Gilmore. All of their 2020 engagements were canceled due to the COVID pandemic, during which time Chick took to live streaming his nightly practice sessions at home on Facebook. An upcoming Spring 2021 tour was canceled after the sudden passing of the piano master, who died in February, just five months short of his 80th birthday.

At the Grammy Awards in March, Chick's wife and soul mate of 50 years, Gayle Moran, accepted two posthumous Grammys for *Trilogy 2*, which features selections from Corea's concerts with McBride and Blade. But that was not Chick's swan song. A release due out in July, *LIVE*, documents a reunion of the Akoustic Band at SPC Music Hall in St. Petersburg, Florida. Recorded in 2018, it's the group's first recording in 20 years and stands as yet another example of the maestro's lifelong love of the piano trio. ■



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