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YOUR FREE GUIDE TO THE NYC JAZZ SCENE

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ROBERT GLASPER

MODERN(IZING) JAZZ



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MODERN(IZING) JAZZ

BY JORDANNAH ELIZABETH



Grammy award-winning keyboardist and Black music aficionado Robert Glasper has never been afraid to speak his mind. The 47-year-old jazz musician has attained heights of acclaim many musicians 20 years his senior will never reach, but this is because Glasper cast his net wide and decisively chose to step away from traditionalism and mastering jazz standards for a living to chart new territory, creating hip-hop and R&B fusion, which, 10 years ago, had not been done on the scale in which he was working.

Since receiving his start as a traditional jazz musician under Christian McBride and other leaders right out of college, Glasper has been called upon to speak about the future of jazz, seen as a beacon of light with his hand on the pulse of musical youth culture and speaking freely about the disconnect between what is happening in jazz and postmodern popular culture. Still young in his own right, he feels a bit of frustration, wondering how jazz is going to survive without making efforts to connect with the new generation. "Name one jazz song that talks about a cell phone, name one jazz song that talks about Instagram or something that's happening in this decade. When people sing a jazz song it's something from 1940 and they're like, 'How come no one is listening to this?'" he expresses via phone from Los Angeles.

"It's because you're not singing anything [young people] can relate to," he continues. When asked what he would do if he were given a superpower to remake the entire international jazz scene, he replied as if he had already pondered the question years before. "I'd definitely put more female musicians in the scene. I'd put more Black musicians in the scene," he pauses then says, "I feel like most of the time, jazz is closed off to other styles of music. I hate that because it stunts the growth of the music. The music has grown from the 1920s to now because of the outside influence of music. Outside music defines the times. It's not that you have to work with a hip-hop group every time but I wish people would be more open to that and be open to what happens now."

Glasper has made these declarations before, but the repetition of his philosophy on the futuristic movement of jazz is one of the things that is keeping the concept of modern hip-hop and R&B jazz fusion alive. He's not beating a dead horse. He's trying to draw the horse to water to refresh and replenish an animal that is slower and aging. Nonetheless, jazz still has the capacity for vitality if nourished. Glasper wants to see jazz survive, so he expresses his sentiments continuously but he doesn't just speak. He makes tangible efforts to draw in new audiences and works with like-minded jazz musicians who are collaborating and updating the idea of the look and feel of jazz.

His most recent release *Live* (Blue Note) comes from his allstar band R+R=Now: multi-instrumentalist Terrace Martin, trumpeter Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, bassist Derrick Hodge, keyboard player Taylor McFerrin and drummer Justin Tyson. This followup to the 2018 studio album *Collagically Speaking* was recorded at Glasper's Blue Note Club residency in

2018 and released in early 2021.

So much has happened in the span of three years between the recording and release: a global pandemic and unprecedented international protests rallying against police brutality in the United States. "It's not that we were playing protest songs. There are people who, because of the times we're in, were like, 'Let's play protest songs' but there's another side of it that says, hey, people are hurting right now," says Glasper. "Music is healing. It's medicine and I was happy that R+R=NOW *Live* came out at that particular time because people were not able to go to live shows. We made it so that the live concert actually feels live. You can hear glasses clinking. You hear the audience. I wanted to make people feel like they were there. To give that experience right now, I think it was something that was needed."

These insights into the daily plight of humanity are what keeps Glasper hip to the pulse of culture. He looks around for inspiration and has a knack for timing. He uses morsels of his private reality to name and create compositions that stand out, even if the inspiration comes from painful experiences. He spoke about the title of *Live's* opening track "Resting Warrior": "Right before we did the album, my little cousin passed away and I watched her take her last breath. I was in Houston sitting with her in the hospital for the last three days [of her life] and the doctor came in and told us [she's going to pass away] tomorrow. We all just gathered around the bed and watched her fight to breathe. Then she took her last breath and then was at rest. After that, we went into the studio to do *Live* and that reminded me of that."

The album reflects a pre-pandemic era when the world was open and jazz clubs were buzzing with life and enthusiastic fanfare. But during the pandemic, Glasper took the time to make changes in his life, moving from New York to Los Angeles to pursue film scoring after winning a Grammy for his work on Don Cheadle's Miles Davis biopic *Miles Ahead* and composing the entire score for *The Photograph* starring Issa Rae, which was released on Valentine's Day 2020. "I've said you should come out of the pandemic being better at something than you were before the pandemic. I've gotten better at recording and I've delved into film scoring."

But before Glasper established his new creative path of film scoring he had to overcome controversy due to his explanation of a term he coined called the "Musical Clitoris" while candidly speaking in an interview with fellow pianist Ethan Iverson. Women in the jazz community were angered and taken aback at his comments where he expressed that he believed that women didn't like jazz solos but drawn-out rhythmic patterns instead. This generalization led to accusations of sexism. "I wasn't saying all women. If I said it that way, that was a mistake. If someone would have asked me, I would have said that I was trying to say was a lot of women don't want to hear solos for 30 minutes. I can tell you that because of my experience. I have more women at my shows than any other jazz musician, period. It's not even close. So, this subject, I can speak on it." Glasper defended himself, "I've

been in the business for so long I've never had anybody call me sexist. I'm not sexist. Any woman that knows me would tell you I'm not sexist. People looked at one interview and took that now you're saying I'm sexist."

Whether or not women in the jazz community believe Glasper to be sexist, or believe that he was creating a term that he felt fit his live music performances, which are constructed through the observation and the energy of his crowds, doesn't mean a powerful man should not be questioned when commenting on women's sexual body parts. He may see it as a way to express himself but Glasper is not a woman nor does he have a clitoris. Nonetheless, he chose to use the term for describing his artistic ideology, which for some seemed problematic. "The Music Clitoris is a term I use because [jazz] musicians don't like to get on a groove, they like to solo [too much] and it annoys me. I say, 'Hey, this groove feels so good. Let's stay there' and the more you stay there the better the groove feels. I'll stay on a groove for 10 minutes and I call it the Music Clitoris. It's talking about sex but it's not downing women. I'm grown. I can talk about sex. To me, that's the best way to describe it. Jazz musicians hit a groove and it feels good, then they fuck it up and put a solo in the middle."

When Glasper speaks his mind, it is not always for the faint of heart, "To put it in a less vulgar way, I like to supply the room and you can move your own furniture in. When I get a groove, I leave it open so there are no solos on top so there's room for your thoughts. The groove can be therapy, it can be for prayer. This is another way of saying it. That's something I've always said and it makes sense to me."

When listening to his albums, seeing him perform or hearing him speak, it is always up to the observer to take their stance on the relevance of his work as much as any other artist but, because of Glasper's talent and experience, which is vast, he keeps himself in the top tier of modern jazz musicians. No one should be shamed for their opinion of his perspective and contributions and no apologies should be made for him for the words he speaks. Glasper is going to live his life and make music that continues to define the culture. He has a responsibility and is future-minded so, one hopes, his words and presence will bring people together while keeping himself accountable for what is happening with him, his music, the jazz world and beyond. ❖

For more information, visit robertglasper.com. Glasper is at Blue Note Jun. 15th-20th. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Robert Glasper Trio — *Mood* (Fresh Sound-New Talent, 2002)
- Robert Glasper — *Canvases* (Blue Note, 2005)
- Robert Glasper — *In My Element* (Blue Note, 2006)
- Robert Glasper — *Covered* (Blue Note, 2014)
- Blue Note All-Stars — *Our Point Of View* (Blue Note, 2015)
- Robert Glasper — *Fuck Yo Feelings (Instrumental)* (Loma Vista, 2019)

OUTSIDE IN MUSIC

BY JOHN PIETARO

“Outside In grew organically,” Nick Finzer explained. “And, today, it’s not only a label but an artist-focused media company.” The trombonist chose to develop his company, birthed initially as a vehicle to release his own recordings, another way. Finzer became a New Yorker some 11 years ago after relocating for graduate studies at Juilliard. The move proved fruitful: he began playing with the Maria Schneider Orchestra, Anat Cohen Tentet and Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, among others, as well as embarking on any number of jazz education ventures. But it was as a bandleader that he came to know the struggles of getting his music recorded and much more so, heard. “I never expected to have my own label, but this just developed.”

Upon closer inspection it’s obvious that this is not just another musician-run indie. Outside In has a unique approach to producing and distributing wherein the artist retains full ownership of intellectual property rights. Similar to grassroots book publishers that fit no specific category, Outside In partners with its artists to develop projects; the artist pays the initial cost but retains 80% of the proceeds. “We work closely with every artist to give as much support as we can on development, distribution and marketing,” he added. The label has several imprints geared toward the needs of clients, from youth to mid-level and career musicians, but in each case offering variously-priced options.

Outside In has grown consistently during its

relatively brief existence, particularly attracting those seeking independence with backing, as well as the rising voices desperately in need of global exposure. Currently, Finzer and company are releasing between 30 and 40 albums per year for a roster of artists that’s varied and ever-expanding: Roxy Coss has been working with the label as of late and the celebrated saxophonist and feminist-activist’s most recent album *Quintet* is one highlight; the preview cut from Andrew Gutauskas’ latest shows the baritone saxophonist’s quite hip quartet recording a piece evocative of Gerry Mulligan’s progressive catalog of the late ‘50s; and drummer Ulysses Owens, Jr.’s tenaciously swinging big band’s new single “Harlem, Harlem, Harlem” was recorded live at Dizzy’s Club and carries with it utterly classic uptown drive and authenticity.

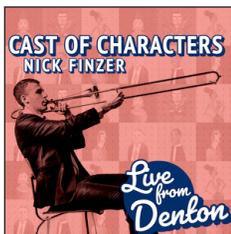
Another associated artist is Min Xiao-Fen, Chinese pipa virtuoso and vocalist who has brought the traditional instrument full-throttle into the West, having performed with Wadada Leo Smith, Derek Bailey and more. Her album *White Lotus* is out this month and features not only her stunning artistry but also that of guitarist Rez Abbasi. And then there’s vibraphonist Simon Moullier, hailing from France, who released his *Spirit Song* last fall. Deemed a singular voice on the instrument by Herbie Hancock and “the best vibes player” by Quincy Jones, Moullier is a young lion, surely soon to claim every major accolade. Another artist is Hailey Brinnel, a swing music double-threat: trombonist and vocalist whose debut, *I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles*, is an homage to the great, often undersung artists and bands of the 1920s-40s.

Outside In is far from shy about use of marketing campaigns not normally associated with the music

industry, jazz in particular. “We really push artists to become involved in their own publicity, both via traditional press and social media,” says Finzer. “Some embrace this idea more than others, but we allow them to take it where they want it to go. We also have agreements with multiple podcasters and vendors. Younger listeners have responded well to this. They may not always buy the records, but they are downloading and engaging in the brand collaboration we have established. Currently, we’re not only working with music brands for endorsement deals, but lifestyle brands including clothing, sunglasses, sneakers and many other items.” As a result, Outside In has established distinctive business partnerships: “It’s a vital way for the artist to sustain him or herself.”

Further, the label is building a veritable community among its artists with a series of collaborative efforts, creative company picnics, if you will, minus the BBQ. “So far we’ve had three projects to get various bandleaders into the studio and do audio/visual recordings of each other’s music and are already aiming for more. The label sponsors these gatherings and helps to cross-pollinate the artists and their releases.” Given Finzer’s background, it’s no surprise that Outside In has also sponsored numerous educational events, inspiring and possibly grooming the next generation to take the step forward. “It’s so hard to do it on your own and our philosophy is all about working in a close relationship with our artists.” ❖

For more information, visit outsideinmusic.com. Artists performing this month include Philippe Lemm at Little Island Jun. 24th (See Calendar) and Min Xiao-Fen live-streaming Jun. 29th at iamavl.com.



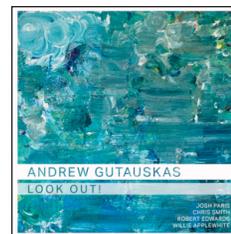
Live from Denton
Nick Finzer Cast of Characters



Soul Conversations
Ulysses Owens, Jr. Big Band



First Step
Philippe Lemm Trio



Look Out!
Andrew Gutauskas



White Lotus (featuring Rez Abbasi)
Min Xiao-Fen

VOXNEWS

FACES UNMASKED

BY SUZANNE LORGE

When the Blue Note reopens with its much-anticipated festival this month, British composer/arranger **Jacob Collier** will be the only headlining vocalist in the lineup. A teenaged Collier surprised the music world almost a decade ago with precocious arrangements of various pop tunes, released via YouTube videos of himself, collarbone up, singing all the parts a cappella. Since then Collier has worked with musicians both inside and outside the jazz world, including Quincy Jones, Herbie Hancock, Dr. Dre, Snarky Puppy and the WDR Big Band. His debut jazz album, *In My Room* (Membran), with the latter group, won him two Grammys for arranging and his second, *Djesse Vol. I* (Hajanga), with Metropole Orkest, went on to solidify his reputation as a jazz trailblazer for his generation. But it would be a mistake to tag him as a jazz singer. Collier followed the first release *Djesse*—an ambitious four-installment opus—with two others, *Djesse Vol. II* and *Djesse Vol. III*, original forays into the many musical worlds that first inspired Collier’s capacious musicianship. His melody-rich, deeply layered compositions on these records favor his warm baritone and the vocal contributions of more than a dozen up-and-coming guest singers, most of

whom defy ready classification—just like Collier. So when he plays Blue Note (Jun. 21st), better to think of him as a musician who sings jazz and release all expectations except one: how glorious it will be to hear live music in a club again.

Downtown Brooklyn’s Roulette, one of the few premier spaces for concertizing during the pandemic, will also be one of the first to open its doors to audiences. Among the ensembles on offer there this month is **Amirtha Kidambi** (vocals, harmonium, synth, electronics, compositions), who will play with her trio Elder Ones (Jun. 10th). If their new work is anything like their 2019 release *From Untruth* (Northern Spy), the room will reverberate with a visceral mix of sounds, unmitigated emotion and societal soul searching.

For the most part, however, business as usual still means remote performing. Fact is, as the pandemic wanes without disappearing completely, it’s getting harder to remember a past or to imagine a future without live-streamed concerts. For singer/composers **Jen Shyu** and **Sara Serpa** and writer Jordannah Elizabeth, online collaborations only expand their already extensive creative reach. Together these three jazz leaders have formed Mutual Mentorship for Musicians (M³), an organization that engenders creative partnerships among womxn musicians from around the globe. This month the National Jazz Museum in Harlem will host their virtual M3 festival (Jun. 12th-13th), with six world premieres featuring

Fay Victor, Ganavya Doraiswamy, Shanta Nurullah, Miriam Elhajli, Richie Seivwright, Monnette Sudler, Michele Rosewoman and Malika Zarra.

With all postponements in the past, The Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition, too, will embrace remote performance with a Facebook broadcast of the contest from NJPAC’s Prudential Hall. The four U.S.-based finalists—**Hailey Brinnel**, **Tawanda Suessbrich-Joaquim**, **Benny Benack III** and **Gabrielle Cavassa**—will compete via live-stream (Jun. 6th), joined by 2019 winner **Samara Joy McLendon**. (This gig is just a preview for McLendon, whose career next month picks up where it left off pre-pandemic, with the release of her debut album and a full roster of high-profile dates.) Two days later, singers **Cécile McLorin Salvant** and **Angélique Kidjo**, both multiple Grammy winners, will share their thoughts on how to remain open and expressive during challenging times. Their free joint lecture, “Creativity Cannot Be Locked Down”, will stream on the NJPAC Facebook page (Jun. 8th).

The Blues Alley Jazz Society also found it expeditious to conduct the Ella Fitzgerald Competition virtually this year. Though newly inaugurated, this competition draws contestants from around the world; Kansas City native **Lucy Wijnands** took the top spot on April 24 against finalists from as far away as Germany and South Africa. (Coincidentally, both Wijnands and McLendon were named Ella Fitzgerald Scholars at SUNY Purchase, where each studied with vocalist/educator **Alexis Cole**.) ❖