

HASAAN IBN ALI'S LOST ALBUM • ANNUAL SUMMER JAZZ PROGRAMS GUIDE

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

JazzTimes

APRIL 2021

The
Low-End Griot

**BUSTER
WILLIAMS**

Is Now on Film

MORGAN GUERIN
Instrumental Polymath

EDDIE HENDERSON
His Brightest Moments

THEO BLECKMANN
Meets **THE WESTERLIES**

BASS SPECIAL

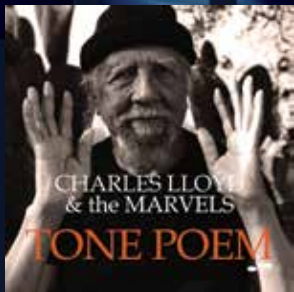
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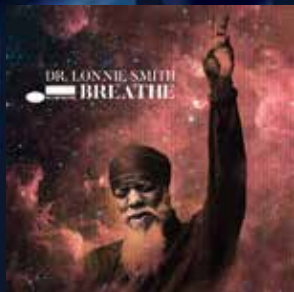


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New series of all-analog **180g vinyl** reissues kicks off with timeless Blue Note classics mastered by **Kevin Gray** from original masters & pressed at **Optimal.**

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BUSTER WILLIAMS

He's been a first-call bassist for decades, an indispensable support player, but his time to take center stage is finally here courtesy of Adam Kahan's insightful new documentary *Bass to Infinity*. **Ted Panken** discusses the film and the career it traces with Kahan, George Colligan, Kenny Barron, Christian McBride, Lenny White, and Williams himself.

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MORGAN GUERIN

The three albums that Morgan Guerin has released so far as a leader are all called parts of a "saga," and adding to their epic nature is the fact that he plays nearly every instrument on them. **Geoffrey Himes** talks to an in-demand 22-year-old who's as ambitious as he is versatile.

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From his early days with Herbie Hancock's Mwandishi crew to his most recent dates for Smoke Sessions, trumpeter Eddie Henderson has appeared on more than 150 records. In our latest installment of Bright Moments, he guides **Michael J. West** through selected highlights of his formidable catalog.

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THEO BLECKMANN & THE WESTERLIES

The eclectic German-born singer/songwriter and the similarly genre-averse American brass quartet met up five years ago, and they describe their subsequent creative process as "five minds working together as one." On their first joint album, *This Land*, those five minds are thinking about the troubled state of the U.S.—and how to address it in beauty. By **A.D. Amorosi**

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Cover image by Alan Nahigian
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THIS LAND IS THEIR LAND



L to R: Willem de Koch, Chloe Rowlands, Theo Bleckmann, Riley Mulherkar, and Andy Clausen

Dynamic vocalist THEO BLECKMANN and bold brass ensemble THE WESTERLIES make beautiful (protest) music together

By A.D. Amorosi
Photography by John Labbé

Late in the afternoon on an unusually warm January day, the House of Representatives—stirred to fast action by the attack on the United States Capitol the week prior—voted to impeach then-President Donald J. Trump for the second time in his term. Mere days before his four-year tenure was ending, with Joe Biden soon to ascend to the presidency, Trump was cited for incitement and insurrection.

“The more impeachment, the better,” Theo Bleckmann said that same day, stifling something between a laugh and a sigh of disgust. Born in Dortmund, Germany 54 years ago, the Impressionist nu-jazz vocalist, interpreter, and composer has lived in America since 1989, and knows U.S. politics and policy as confidently as he does the genre jumbles of his own music.

“Words count,” he added with a huff. “It is a message that needs to be sent, this impeachment. You can’t hold public office and incite violence. There are consequences. A week left? So what?”

As Bleckmann revved himself up, trumpeter Chloe Rowlands hummed in approval. She and her bandmates in the Seattle-born, NYC-based brass quartet the Westerlies have collaborated, most democratically, with Bleckmann on a quiet but storming new protest album, *This Land*.

“Crazy it took this long,” Bleckmann continued. “It is good to know that an attempted insurrection is what it took to get him out. I mean, *what the fuck?* What, then, can we do beyond looking at ourselves? That was the point of this record: What can we do with the means that we have? Maybe we’ll preach to the choir, and maybe it’s not enough. But maybe it is. Rather than just play a jazz standard that expresses love, maybe the subject matter needs to change

for a moment. To something stronger. Besides, there’s nothing wrong with preaching to the choir. The choir needs support too, strength to continue.”

“So,” I interjected, pulling a title from one of *This Land*’s more incendiary tracks, “it’s fair to say that you covering Woody Guthrie’s ‘Tear the Fascists Down’ has never seemed more relevant than it does today.”

The three of us laughed; that is, despite the fact that neither Trump’s actions nor those of the House—nor, indeed, those of the five-person team that made *This Land*—are all that funny.

Then again, if you’re not laughing, you’re crying.

FROM A SCREAM TO A WHISPER

Before we get to *This Land*—which sets Bleckmann’s rubber-band vocals against the mixed-grain experimentalism of Rowland, fellow trumpeter Riley Mulherkar, and trombonists Andy Clausen and Willem de Koch over gentle protest music penned by Joni Mitchell, Bertolt Brecht, Phil Kline, and members of the team—it’s crucial to know how *they* got to this state-of-the-union address together.

Mentored by Sheila Jordan; renowned for scintillatingly offbeat arrangements of compositions by Charles Ives, Kurt Weill, and Kate Bush (the Ives tunes got him a Grammy nomination for Best Classical Crossover Album in 2009); and frequently teamed with an eclectic odd lot of jazzbos including John Hollenbeck, Anthony Braxton, John Zorn, Dave Douglas, and Meredith Monk, Bleckmann made his true start as a champion skater before coming into his own as an elastic phraser, arranger, writer, and curator.

“I was an ice dancer many, many decades ago,” Bleckmann said, amused

that I remembered. “For me, the idea of its lines, and of floating—that curved aesthetic—has found its way into a sound that uses soft edges. Everything blends and melts together with me. It’s a never-ending arc, a never-ending propulsion, which has found its way into my music.”

Rowlands hasn’t done much ice dancing. But the trumpeter and flugel-hornist has spent time in wedding cover ensembles, led the brass section of the orchestra for LoftOpera productions, and played in indie-rock bands such as Fleet Foxes and Cape Francis. She joined the Westerlies in 2016, just as the rest of the group were first making Bleckmann’s acquaintance. At that point, the quartet had made two acclaimed albums in a third-stream vein with original trumpeter Zubin Hensler; they have since made one more, 2020’s *Wherein Lies the Good*, along with various other collaborative efforts.

“Be it Brecht or an opera session, or playing with pedals and effects, or background parts in an indie band with more ethereal textural elements, or full-fledged improvisation and soloing—all the styles I’ve pursued all of my life have found my way into everything I do now,” Rowlands said. “That’s how the Westerlies operate to begin with. With us there is an amalgamation of a string quartet’s accuracy and the creative exploration of a free-jazz outfit.”

Bleckmann doesn’t dare to try to find a reason or rhyme to his aesthetic. “If I knew or could put it into words, I think I’d be a better writer, but there is a stripped-down aesthetic that I’m very interested in, where I try not to take over or use any jazz mannerisms or bring them into the material,” he said. “I try to look at things as sober and emotionally pure, without taking any style-isms from



think that both of our aesthetics line up thematically,” she said. “In working with him now for several years, I can honestly say that ours is a perfect match: how we function, as well as how we sound.”

OUT AND PROUD

For the sake of frankness, and given that *This Land* is a direct response to the Trump years, it’s important to note at this point that Bleckmann is a gay man, long married to a Black man, and that Rowlands proudly came out as trans around the same time that she joined the Westerlies.

JF: I wouldn’t have asked this question 10 years ago. Maybe not even five years ago. We just happen to have been in a less tolerant time for the last four years. Theo and Chloe, how have you both crafted and maintained a life in what we’ll loosely call jazz, which tends to define itself as cisgender, heterosexual male-dominated, and often misogynistic?

BLECKMANN: I’d like to speak about this, first, in reference to knowing Chloe before her transition, during her transition, and after her transition. I’ll tell you, it is the same person—no difference, save for the fact that Chloe is happier now. Being gay or trans has little to do with what I’m singing about. I’m hoping that what I’m singing about is always universal, and that love rules. I don’t believe that who I am has ever made a difference or been an issue for anyone with whom I have worked. I’ve always been comfortable with who I am. Besides, if anyone didn’t want to work with me because of who I am, *fine*, I don’t want to work with them. Good riddance. Identity goes so much deeper than that... I’ve seen it in Chloe, before, during, and after her transition. It’s magical. She’s the same soul.

ROWLANDS: For sure, being trans has never been something I put above my music. It’s just another aspect of who I am. I came out *and* joined The Westerlies simultaneously. I became part of something. Maybe if I had stayed a freelance player, I would have had to defend myself more, I don’t know. It was really nice, joining an established group immediately following the transition. It never had

any other arena. It comes back to being honest and direct.” That phrase “emotionally pure” resonates throughout *This Land*, a jazz protest album that doesn’t sound like one.

“When we first got together, I sort of wanted us to react to the political situation,” Bleckmann recalled. “This was 2016 and Trump had just gotten elected.” The five musicians were taking part in a residency at Yellow Barn in Putney, Vermont, a home to and think-tank for all levels of chamber-music experimentation.

“We were actually working on a different collaboration with other singers, and I remember going to an ice cream shop with the rest of the Westerlies after we first got together,” Bleckmann

continued. “We talked about all that was going on politically and thought out loud about doing something musical that expressed something political without being harsh or loud or preachy... Can we be sensitive to a cause without shouting? Can we make effective protest music that didn’t scream?”

Yes, yes, a resounding yes, as their trembling takes on Mitchell’s “The Fiddle and the Drum,” Guthrie’s “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore,” and trumpeter Mulherkar’s “Looking Out” demonstrate.

Rowlands was quick to say how the Westerlies looked up to Bleckmann before their collaboration and admired his desire for equality among all working partners once the process began. “I

to be a thing. I never made any music that commented on that specifically. That said, the biggest thing about my trans identity is that there is no one else that I can think of in the jazz world—especially in NYC—who is an out trans person. The fact that I exist and succeed in what I am doing will, I hope, inspire a whole new generation of trans people who maybe never felt comfortable coming out. Perhaps seeing me, they will feel more confident.

Theo, you moved to America from Germany in the ’80s. Having lived elsewhere in the world and seeing the arc of our politics, our social and cultural changes, from that perspective—how does that play a part in your work?

BLECKMANN: In my 31 years in America, I have discovered how the ugly underbelly of America is only now becoming more visible than before. Being married to a Black man made things even more clear to me. That stuff [racism] is everywhere. And America is a young country. There are so many things pushed under the rug here and never dealt with that are only coming up now, and coming up with a vengeance. We must contend with that. And it has to come out. We can’t just wish it away to live for the old ways, for it to just not be there. The shit has piled up. It’s time to get rid of that pile. And look, the same is true of European countries, for ages. It goes in cycles there too. This is America’s first real go-round with the ugly truth. There’s a lot of cleaning up to do.

Let the clean-up begin with *This Land*.

DEMOCRACY FOR FIVE

Back to Putney, Vermont, in 2016. The first song Bleckmann brought to this new collaborative project was his own composition “Another Holiday.” Immediately, Rowlands recalled, it was “five minds working together as one.”

“I didn’t just bring in the song and arrange it,” Bleckmann noted. “I became one of them; I got my hands dirty with them. Everybody was contributing and talking. This kind of democracy is very difficult.”

“And exciting, like the very best improvisation,” Rowlands chimed in. “We

worked eight hours a day, but always around each other: hanging, talking, sequestered from everything else. The entire situation was intimate, filled with laughter. We had a such a great time at all times. We have this policy in the Westerlies where if somebody has an idea they want to try that has never been tried before—maybe taking a third valve slide out of a trumpet—we have to try it,

improvising over. It took us to interesting places that we would not have reached otherwise. I loved going in these directions as I am someone who is fascinated by working with effects.”

It’s an unusual album for Bleckmann too. Although he’s written and curated plenty of socially conscious songs before, *This Land* is more direct and unflinching about it. Take, for example, the recla-

“There’s nothing wrong with preaching to the choir. The choir needs support too, strength to continue.”
—Theo Bleckmann

no matter what. Theo loved that. He had that spirit as well, which made it all the more pleasurable. And never was there a moment where ego got in the way.”

“Working with young musicians who grew up with my music and could play any style—classical, jazz, new music, ambient, rock—is fascinating because it’s a different animal than the musicians I played with as I grew up,” Bleckmann acknowledged. “Back then, musicians were proudly renowned for doing one thing. Now, this new group of musicians is open-minded and highly skilled, geniuses on their instruments yet with the soul of a puppy dog. Incredible. ... Plus, they’re the most heavenly brass section you could find. Period. The Westerlies never sound like those annoying brass outfits that hit you over the head—that’s what makes this unique.”

That and the approach they took to recording *This Land*, which was an experimental first for the Westerlies. “All of the previous Westerlies albums were straight quartet music recorded in a way like a string quartet would be recorded, where we keep everything as four straight voices,” Rowlands explained. “Here we layered, overdubbed, added extra octaves, had sections dedicated to

mation of songwriter Joe Glazer’s “Look for the Union Label,” originally used for a 1970s television commercial. Arranged ever so cleverly by Bleckmann, its subtle, pomp-and-circumstantial classicism is right up the Westerlies’ alley.

“What appealed to me was that ‘Union Label’ *was written* for commercial advertising purposes,” Bleckmann emphasized. “It was a made-for-TV idea of labor and unions ... this ‘spirit’ of America that isn’t quite real. I love that the Westerlies and I are taking source material not from art music or even jazz, but rather this bizarre place: TV. Another thing that was remarkable about this song is its lyrics, asking the consumer to consider the source of where you’re buying stuff, because considering that source will actually help the garment workers making it. Well, that didn’t really go so well, did it? How many people truly consider where their clothes come from? Not enough not to buy elsewhere. That failed greatly in its day. The idea of an America based on union—makers and consumer both from the U.S.A.—is completely antithetical to the American dream of individualized freedom, to be and to buy and to wear whatever I want. That is an interesting dichotomy,

a paradox to me, a bizarre idea of what has never worked or could never work in America.”

The first track Bleckmann and the Westerlies worked on together was also the first track they recorded together, and it stands out as the truest testament to *This Land*’s tone, as well as to their collaboration: Bleckmann’s “Another Holiday.” Penned in response to the Pulse nightclub shooting of 2016, in which 49 people were killed, it’s a vision of America filled with “BBQ and pie,” all fireworks displays and summer lawns; that is, until those picnics grow rife with a hidden brand of hate, exposing how even the seemingly safest havens can be filled with menace.

“That song came out of me as no other song has come out of me before,” Bleckmann said proudly. “I usually labor over all of my compositions, but this one came out very quickly and spontaneously. Though we all live in a safe environment as gay and trans people in big cities within our own communities, when we go back to our homes beyond the big city ... where you come from ... it becomes an issue,” he continues in a rush of words. “And it’s always around a holiday that you go home. It all gets pushed in your face. You have to be somebody else, but just for a few days. It’s painful. There is an idea of family and happiness that you can have *but* just don’t say anything. Be quiet. You just play along, but you are never fully allowed to be who you really are. You *are* yourself—up to a point.”

PEACE AT LAST?

At the end of our conversation, I asked what an audience—their audience, separate and together—might learn about the Westerlies and Theo Bleckmann from *This Land* that they didn’t know before.

Rowlands focused on sonics, how the album goes much further from a production standpoint than any previous Westerlies release. “There are so many moments where we sound regal ... we surprised even ourselves,” she said. “There’s a wide range of sound that we use here that people might have never thought of or heard from us before.”

Bleckmann, however, went a different route.

“I don’t want people to think anything. I want them to *feel*. Like how



“In working with Theo now for several years, I can honestly say that ours is a perfect match: how we function, as well as how we sound.” —Chloe Rowlands

I felt anger about the holidays, or a befuddlement with TV, politics, and the culture. Now, of course, I promise that listeners won’t miss drums or the beat—that this brass sound is its own world, complete, and that you will be moved by the sound and the people who are playing it. But feel it. We talked about resistance so often while making *This*

Land, but refuge too was a big part of our duty in making it. A refuge that the listener could feel too. We wanted this music to be healing, in order to deal, gently, with what’s happened in this country over the last four years. I hope there is a calmness here. Finally.”

Whether that calm is meant for *This Land* or this land is up to the listener. **JT**

JazzTimes’ Guide To

SUMMER 2021

JAZZ CAMPS & PROGRAMS

NOTE: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all listings in this directory are even more subject to change than usual, and we are unable to guarantee the accuracy of any listing beyond press time. Please check program websites to confirm.

United States

ALASKA

Juneau Jazz & Classics Festival

May 19-29

Juneau

(907) 463-3378

jazzandclassics.org

Description: Juneau Jazz & Classics brings world-class artists to inspire, teach, and enrich the lives of Alaskans in a beautiful yet remote location. JJ&C education includes school clinics, performances and public workshops. 2021 format TBA.

Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival

July 18-August 1

University of Alaska, Fairbanks

(907) 474-8869

fsaf.org

AK Jazz Workshop Summer 2021 Jazz Camp

August 2-7

University of Alaska Anchorage Fine Arts Building, Anchorage

(907) 332-3234

akjazzworkshop.org

Description: The AJW Jazz Camp at UAA features internationally acclaimed and Alaska Jazz Master Artists guiding beginner to advanced music students (grade 7 through adult) on a fun exploration of the creative art of jazz improvisation. The camp schedule is 9 a.m.-2:30 p.m. M-F with faculty and student concerts on Fri. and Sat. Our guest artist will be drummer Mark Walker. 2021 format TBA.

ARKANSAS

IfCM Jazz and Creative Music Camp at the University of Arkansas

June 6-11

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

uofacmsjazz@gmail.com

fayettevillejazzcamp.com

Description: Open to students ages 11+, any instrument or voice type. Campers will play in a large ensemble as well as in small groups organized by age and ability, learning songs, style, and improvisation by ear. Students will also learn recording techniques, composition/arranging, practice strategies, and historical/social context. In-person and virtual options available.

CALIFORNIA

Stanford Jazz Workshop

Various dates

Stanford University, Stanford

(650) 736-0324

stanfordjazz.org

Description: SJW offers three online jazz-immersion opportunities: Jazz Camp—a residential program for ages 12-17 (July 12-16 or July 19-23)—and Jazz Institute, which puts advanced young players and adults together with some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world, focusing on improv skills and combo performance (July 25-31). Adult jazzers and jazz educators will enjoy the Jazz Institute, and admission to evening concerts at the Stanford Jazz Festival is included.

Jazzschool Jazz Piano Intensive

June 14-18 (tentative)

Berkeley

(510) 845-5373

cjc.edu/jazzschool/intensives/

summer-youth-programs/high-school-intensive

Description: A five-day intensive for the intermediate jazz pianist, focusing on rhythmic feel, comping, and soloing in both piano trio and solo piano formats. Emphasis on swing feel, voicings and voice leading, and analysis and performance of select jazz pianists’ solo transcriptions. Pianists will work with a professional bassist and drummer.

Alex de Grassi’s Mendocino Summer Guitar Workshop

July 11-18

Albion Retreat and Learning Center, Albion

(707) 318-7932

degrassi.com/workshops

Audience: All ages, intermediate to advanced acoustic guitar players

Description: An intensive, interactive workshop for intermediate and advanced guitarists and for singers who play guitar. Alex and Andrew York will share their insights into the techniques, the composing and arranging skills, and the inspiration that have become an integral part of their unique styles. The workshop consists of four parts: master class, lecture/demos, one-on-one and optional participation in an ensemble performance.

Lafayette Summer Music Workshop

July 18-23

Lafayette

(925) 914-0797

lafsmw.org

Description: Since 1998, the week-long Lafayette Summer Music Workshop has provided an intimate and inspiring environment for learning and playing jazz. Master classes, improvisation workshops and jazz combos are led by some of the preeminent professional musicians in the field. The workshop is directed by Stanley Middle School music director Bob Athayde and jazz curriculum director Kyle Athayde. Kids – middle school, high school and college age – as well as adults have a blast!

Jazzschool Girls Jazz & Blues Camp

August 2-6 (tentative)

Berkeley

(510) 758-2200

cjc.edu/girlscamp

Description: Produced by Jean Fineberg and Ellen Seeling (asst. dir. and dir. of the Montclair Women’s Big Band), our camp provides a supportive musical environment where girls have fun and develop self-confidence. Campers hone improvisational, technical and ensemble skills while meeting new friends and creating music with other young musicians from the Bay Area and beyond.

Jazzschool Vocal Intensive

August 9-14 (tentative)

Berkeley

(510) 845-5373

cjc.edu/jazzschool/intensives/adult-camps/

summer-vocal-intensive

Description: This weeklong program is designed to help singers define, create and perform in a distinctive style. Jazz singing is like a tree that can grow branches in many genres. With roots firmly grounded, this unique intensive emphasizes the technical, creative and spiritual aspects of singing and serves as a catalyst for artistic growth.

COLORADO

Lamont School of Music Summer Academy

June 20-July 3

University of Denver, Newman Center for the Performing Arts

(303) 871-6400

du.edu/lamont/summeracademy

Audience: High school, ages 14-18 (some age exceptions), intermediate through advanced

Description: The Jazz Studies Program of the Lamont School of Music Summer Academy is an inspiring and motivating pre-college music camp for instrumentalists ages 14-18. The Jazz Studies Program provides focus on jazz theory in practice—“on the instrument,” small ensemble performance study, lessons with practicing jazz artists and unique opportunities for the study of rhythm section techniques and jazz repertoire.

UNC Jazz Camp

July 11-16

University of Northern Colorado, Greeley

(970) 351-2394

arts.unco.edu/music/jazz-camp

Audience: Middle school through college

Description: Designed to be intensive, challenging and inspiring, the UNC Jazz Camp is led by faculty from the University of Northern Colorado plus special guests. Be part of student big bands, combos, vocal jazz ensembles, jazz master classes, jazz theory and listening classes, student jam sessions, nightly faculty group concerts, and a special performance by the Colorado Jazz Orchestra. Previous band or choir experience required.