



**AUBREY JOHNSON
HELEN SUNG
DAVE DOUGLAS**
LIVES OF THE SAINTS
Portraits in Song with Words by
DAVID HAJDU
SSC 1774 / AVAILABLE 4/4/25

When writer-producer David Hajdu was growing up, he was drawn to a mystical book on his mother's shelf entitled *Lives of the Saints*. This was a collection of tales of Catholic saints and their heroic martyrdom. Later in life, Hajdu began to collect his own stories of ordinary individuals who, through their deeds, attained exalted status in his mind, essentially created his own canon of secular saints. For his new recording, which borrows the same title, *Lives of the Saints*, Hajdu enlists an assemblage of first-tier composers and performers to tell the stories of ten remarkable people from history, all of whom happen to be women.

Appearing at
Dizzy's Club
(Jazz at Lincoln Center)
Thursday, April 10
2 sets (7pm & 9pm)



www.sunmidsiderecords.com

On Tuesday evenings the improvised music is free (in both the economic and esthetic senses) at Downtown Music Gallery. A recent three-set line-up (Mar. 11) began with **Musique Libre Femmes**—Cheryl Pyle, Mary Cherney (flutes), Jeong Lim Yang (bass), Yuko Togami (drums)—playing “Tweet Storm”, an improvised commentary on the president’s controversial social media posts, with twin piccolos frantically chirping like sparrows caught in a windstorm. Throughout the set, the flutists worked together with great empathy and cohesion, Yang bowing sustained tones as backdrop, occasionally moving more assertively to the fore, Togami’s roiling drums evoking stark contrasts of positive and negative sonic space. The initial crowd of a dozen listeners had swelled to twice its size by the second set, which featured Damir Kafka (soprano) and Boris Janje (bass), both visiting from Croatia, and Tracy List (drums). Janje typically established a motive or texture, joined by Kafka’s pinched falsetto whistles and overtones, List adding billowing mallet rolls on tom-toms and cymbals, together generating a hypnotic effect. The final group—Sylvain Leroux (Fula flute, alto), Hilliard Greene (bass) and Dan Kurfurst (drums)—was equally provocative. Leroux’ high-pitched lines, blown and sung on transverse flutes in a style verging from swing to skronk, juxtaposed Greene’s urgent low bellowing and deep crunchy rumbles, Kurfurst’s contributions fluctuating from insistence to acquiescence. — *Tom Greenland*



Musique Libre Femmes @Downtown Music Gallery

Guitarist **Frank Vignola** is a brave man. As host of Birdland Theater’s popular Wednesday *Guitar Night* series, he has no qualms about inviting some of jazz’ finest fretboard aces to share his stage. He recently featured frequent guest Pasquale Grasso (Mar. 5), whom he respectfully refers to as “The Beast” because of his precocious technique, along with his regular rhythm section of Gary Mazzaroppi (bass) and Alex Raderman (drums). Vignola and Grasso have developed a shared chemistry that was immediately apparent on the opening number, “My Funny Valentine”, during which they accompanied each other, traded 8-bar phrases and even soloed simultaneously, a beautiful blending of bell-like timbres. During their lengthy set covering standards by Cole Porter, Thelonious Monk and less familiar fare such as Bud Powell’s “Blue Pearl” and Irving Berlin’s “They Say It’s Wonderful” (*Annie Get Your Gum*), the two guitarists matched wits and skill. Grasso’s solos, intelligently developed and executed with delicate but stunning virtuosity—epitomized by his solo feature, a medley of “Don’t Blame Me” (McHugh, Fields) and “So Beats My Heart for You” (Ballard, Henderson, Waring)—set an extremely high bar. But Vignola never failed to rise to the occasion, playing swinging chord riffs, driving strum patterns and soulful phrases ornamented with punchy accents, tasteful slides and bluesy bends, matching Grasso’s excellence with his own musical moxie. Mazzaroppi proved a fine soloist as well, developing his ideas with such coherence that it often sounded as if he’d just written a new song. (TG)

Combining classical music and jazz is nothing new, so when string quartet **ETHEL** (Kip Jones and Corin Lee, violins; Ralph Farris, viola; Dorothy Lawson, cello) teamed up with bassist **Ron Carter** at Zankel Hall (Mar. 13), the fusion demonstrated how jazzy strings can be. Take away traditional melodic bowing and add sound effects such as pizzicato, bowed skronks and short phrasing, for instance, and jazz is born. The program, *Reflections on Monk and Bach*, featured *Monk Suite*, seven compositions by the piano wizard-composer (arrangements by Tom Darter) that Carter and the Kronos Quartet originated 40 years ago. This outing revealed Monk as a melodist at heart. Opener, “Well, You Needn’t”, a vibrant rendition of string and bass statements, ended whimsically on a long note, with Carter adding three quiet plonks as a button—stage set. Through “Rhythm-A-Ning”, “Crepuscle With Nellie”, “Off Minor”, “Epitaphy”, “Round Midnight” to suite closer “Misterioso”, mood and tempo changes, angular accents, pauses, trade-offs, personnel and instrument combinations, and various other creative ideas (how about a ticking clock?) appropriately revered Monk. And all in service to Carter, the rhythmic and melodic genius at the center of the music. Duke Ellington was also well-represented with Darter arrangements of a robust “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” and the haunting “Black and Tan Fantasy”. Additionally, there was Carter’s “Tail Feathers” and “Song for a Friend”. As for Bach, his prominence in the second part of the evening was solidly Third Stream. — *Marilyn Lester*



Ron Carter @Zankel Hall

The Wild Geese Gallery (along with Jazz Foundation of America) presented a two-set concert (Mar. 16) with pianist **Danny Mixon** and frequent collaborator, vocalist **Antoinette Montague**. Talk about making beautiful music. The pair has a special chemistry, with a joyful blues-saturated style. For each set, the pianist soloed for several tunes before the vocalist came on. Mixon has a percussive style (he started as a tap dancer as a youth!) and akin to Art Tatum, an orchestral rhythmic flexibility; while his left hand holds a mighty bass line, the right is off in a wonderland of play, with glissandi and slides his favorite devices. His bossa-nova chops on Jobim’s “Triste” were anything but sad; “Mercy, Mercy, Mercy” was drenched in soul and Ellington’s “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” saw him play with the most improv of the sets, including a fun quote of “Mary Had a Little Lamb”. Montague is a full-out, high-energy performer who holds nothing back, has a choreography of movement for every tune and believes strongly in audience involvement, which the small, intimate space invited. Her rendition of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” had the house rocking. A storyteller with a varied repertoire, she is always soulful and particularly masterful with blues. “I Loves You Porgy” called for tissues, while a tribute to Roberta Flack included a slow, sinuous R&B version of “Feel Like Makin’ Love”. Mixon, a sometime character, vocally comping with “shake your booty.” The entirety: maximum fun and entertainment. (ML)

Vocal improviser **Ellen Christi**, now at age 67, is an artist that helped shape the avant garde, which, during the incendiary times of the ’70s loft scene, flourished in jazz and savaged new music. Christi possessed the divining rod that led ears to the newer New Thing, riding the wake of Jeanne Lee as well as musical partners Butch Morris, David S. Ware, Ray Anderson, Rashied Ali and Roy Campbell, among others. Presenting a single, tireless work at Nublu (Mar. 2), as part of Art for Art’s OUT Music Fest, the storied vocalist shredded the now classic “Baldwin” (based on a William Parker poem) with Chaos/Flux, her singular ensemble, which included Patricia Nicholson-Parker (dance/movement, voice), Michael TA Thompson (drums, voice) and the inimitable Cooper-Moore brandishing electric axes of his own devise. Sitting at stage-right, Cooper-Moore devoured the lower harmonic end, sliding on and striking his diddly-bow with a pair of drumsticks as he locked into Thompson’s beats, the pair illustrating the meaning of a tight rhythm section. The drummer, also celebrated for his use of spoken word, made excellent use of his vocal mic, adding swaths of tenor harmonies and improvised, whispered poetry, contrasting Christi’s aerial vocalized strains. Calling on the full range of scat singing, Eastern lamentation and electric rock-blues, Chaos/Flux (with the recorded voice of James Baldwin) enflamed the dank clouds over Avenue C. Throughout, Christi’s improvisational realization of Parker’s poem proclaimed a most prescient need right now: “One poem kills a thousand lies.” — *John Pietaro*



Ellen Christi @Nublu

Hailing from the outskirts of Milano, Italy, pianist-composer **Simona Premazzi** has uniquely touched the NYC jazz scene over a generation, with her buoyant, robust, wandering but fully determined style that sculpts the music from within as much as far beyond. At Café Ornithology (Mar. 11), with Pablo Menares (bass) and Jay Sawyer (drums), she casted a shimmer within the moody Bushwick, Brooklyn room. Opening with an original, “Premaxity”, she captured the hushed crowd through rubato flourishes of a modal theme. By the time she was at tempo, with rhythm section partners creating a Latin-esque backbone, the piece was a showcase of dynamics building into a classic montuno (repetitive) section, Sawyer releasing a thunderous drum solo, vanquishing bar lines over pulsations of bass and piano. Another original, “Back Seat”, with its Monk compositional vibe, featured her two-fisted, inexhaustible solo statement against Menares’ driving, hyper pedal points and Sawyer’s sonic capture of electricity one moment and summer rain the next. Much of the concert spotlighted originals, but within the mix there was also a wry, swinging Harold Arlen standard, “Get Happy” (both Bud Powell and Bill Evans conjured), and Andrew Hill’s “Pumpkin”, opened by the bassist’s free, dramatic solo and a show of flawless pianistics with thick handfuls of harmony. A melodic drum solo over the piece’s complete form led to a triumphant “Buster Rides Again” (Powell), closing the magical set. (JP)

Night three of pianist **Micah Thomas**’ four-night residency of his various ensembles at The Stone at The New School (Mar. 7) united him with Mary Halvorson (guitar), Jessica Pavone (viola) and Lesley Mok (drums), for a thrilling set of wholly free, open sonic exploration. Despite never having played together as a quartet before (Thomas had only previously collaborated with Mok) the four held a sustained, wide-ranging musical exchange bristling with ideas and deep empathic listening over the course of an hour, stopping their play only once. Although this was Thomas’ show, he knew to respect the power of his fellow musicians, never dominating or overpowering, offering up an egalitarian group dynamic that allowed each contribution to serve as its own revelation. A gifted improviser and instrumentalist, he displayed an expansive palette of sounds, including extended techniques of reaching into the piano’s strings to manipulate and prepare them directly. Halvorson’s stunning guitar work and breadth of musical ideas served as the group’s fulcrum. She used her pedals to transform the sound of her signature hollow-body, allowing it at times to double the tone of Thomas’ piano or adding pitch-bending delay effects. Pavone plucked, bowed, scraped and rapped her viola to produce a range of textures, veering between melodicism and atonal noise. It was moving to watch Mok’s intuitive drumming, her fluidity and inventiveness, almost trance-like in its subtle intensity. The group swelled from farthest-out space coalescing in moments of chamber-like lyricism, before pushing back out towards pure sound art abstraction. — *Ariella Stok*



Micah Thomas @The Stone at The New School

Tenor saxophonist **David Murray** has long expressed favor for the octet format since his key 1980 record, *Ming*, calling it “the perfect unit for jazz.” On Mar. 3, his first of three Mondays last month at the Blue Note, the venue was stuffed with an enthusiastic crowd savoring the elusive opportunity of seeing him in this expanded guise. Murray, now at 70, an éminence grise, surrounded himself with a fire-powered yet reverential band of younger players, his rhythm section of Lafayette Gilchrist (keyboards), Luke Stewart (bass), who heroically drove the band, and Russell Carter (drums), along with Corey Wallace (trombone), Shareef Clayton (trumpet), Immanuel Wilkins (alto) and Murray’s son Mingus Murray (guitar), shredding throughout the set. With his lyrical tenor playing and the refined eclecticism of arrangements, Murray led his band from the rigorous groove-oriented, show-opener “Necktar” and deepened into looping eddies anchored by Wilkins’ circular breathing, through to the soppingly tender waltz of “Francesca”, plus a vibrant Latin-inflected “Switchin’ in the Kitchen”. He paid tribute to former collaborators and role models with “Obe” (by conduction pioneer Butch Morris) and a sultry blues, “South to a Very Old Place” (referencing writer-critic Albert Murray). As the closer, over a funk-laced vamp, Murray intoned a fiery excerpt from “WISE, WHY’S, Y’S”, a long-form poem by late activist Amiri Baraka, about challenging systemic wrongs. A bracing coda to a celebratory performance, this piece felt like the crucial answer to the urgent question of how do we make art in times such as these? (AS)

WHAT’S NEWS

The annual **Harlem Jazz Club Revival** (Apr. 11-20) will present over 200 musicians (including T.S. Monk, Reggie Workman, Patience Higgins and Kojo Roney) at over 80 events throughout Harlem at such venues as Minton’s Playhouse, Patrick’s Place, NAMA, The Cotton Club, Shrine, Silvana and Red Rooster. A second line parade kicks off the festival the first day, starting at the Harlem State Office Building on W. 125th St. and winding up at the Red Rooster. For schedule and more info visit harlemlatenightjazz.org/jazz-club-revival.

The American Academy of Arts and Letters last month announced the 17 recipients of its 2025 Awards in Music, which included pianist-composers **Aruán Ortiz** (Goddard Lieberston Fellowship Award) and **Sylvie Courvoisier** (Arts and Letters Award). Since 1942, Arts and Letters—an honor society of artists, architects, composers and writers who foster and sustain interest in the arts—has annually recognized and supported artists with a rotating voter committee of composers. This year’s 300-member committee included David Sanford and Wadada Leo Smith. For more info visit artsandletters.org.

“Duke at 125” is the theme for this year’s **Jazz at Lincoln Center** (JALC) Gala at Frederick P. Rose Hall (Apr. 30). The Gala concert will honor Duke Ellington’s legacy and feature the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis, plus guests Sean Jones (trumpet) and Sean Mason (piano). Veteran pianist-bandleader Toshiko Akiyoshi (who was inducted into JALC’s Ertegun Hall of Fame in 2023) will receive the Artistic Achievement Award. For more info visit jazz.org/support-us/gala2025.

The Lower East Side’s Wilmer Jennings Gallery at Kenkeleba presents “Sound of Light & The Blues and Mean Reds,” a photographic exhibition (Apr. 26 - Jun. 28) featuring iconic figures from jazz, funk, hip-hop, soul and beyond, by photographer **Frank Stewart**, as well as his mentee and former student Petra Richterová. Featured photographs include Robert Glasper, Wynton Marsalis, Burnt Sugar, Keyon Harrold, Marcus Strickland, Chucho Valdés, Fishbone, Living Colour, George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic and much more. The Kenkeleba House is an alternative art space that includes Kenkeleba Gallery and Wilmer Jennings Gallery. Its mission is to present, preserve and encourage the development of art by African Americans and artists of the African Diaspora, as well as other artists historically overlooked by the mainstream (including Latino, Asian, Native American). For more info visit kenkeleba.org.

The second annual **Litchfield Jazz Camp** (LJC) Talent Search winners were announced last month. The judging panel consisted of Jazz Camp faculty members Zaccai Curtis (piano), Conway Campbell (bass), Ian Carroll (drums), Albert Rivera and Don Braden (saxophones), plus Vita Muir (LJC founder). Winners included alto saxophonist Dontae James (New Haven, CT), baritone saxophonist Xavier Smith (New Haven, CT), Xander Rosenblum (New York, NY) and Kenjiro Matsuki (Tenafly, NJ). Prizes ranged from \$350 to \$2K scholarships. The one-to-four week sessions of the 29th Litchfield Jazz Camp (Jun. 29 - Jul. 25) take place at Frederick Gunn School (Washington, CT), immediately followed by the 30th annual Litchfield Jazz Festival (Jul. 25-27). For more info visit litchfieldjazzcamp.com.

Award-winning indie filmmaker, Michael Jacobsohn’s *Café in Exile* is a new documentary that pays homage to **Cornelia Street Café**’s 41 years of existence in the heart of Greenwich Village, before shuttering its doors in January 2019. The film features interviews and/or performance footage by David Amram, Gerald Cleaver, Ellery Eskelin, Cooper-Moore, Arturo O’Farrill, Mario Pavone, Paul Shapiro and Sanda Weigl, as well as singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega, American Nobel Laureate Roald Hoffmann and the face, name and presence most visitors and regulars to the venue fondly remember: Café co-founder Robin Hirsch (aka “Minister of Culture” and “Wine Czar”). The film premieres at the New Plaza Cinema (35 W. 67th St.) on Apr. 5-6. For more info visit cafeinexile.com.

The first annual NiteLife Exchange “Barry Levitt Jazz Award” is being presented to vocalist **Marianne Solivan** at the 39th MAC (Manhattan Association of Cabarets) Awards (Apr. 10) at Symphony Space. Nominees for other awards include Nicole Zuraitis, Liz and Ann Hampton Callaway, Gabrielle Stravelli, Rick Bogart, Eric Comstock and Barbara Fasano. For more info visit macnyc.com.

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