



# EIVIND OPSVIK

## POSSIBILITIES OF SOUND

### BY MATTY BANNOND

Cupboards overflowed with percussive instruments, flutes, saxophones and guitars in Eivind Opsvik's childhood home in Oslo, Norway. A cool cousin had even abandoned an electric bass in the house. It was the perfect environment for an inquisitive youngster to experiment with the possibilities of sound. "Then my dad picked up a four-track tape recorder when I was 13 and I spent all my free time making music on it," Opsvik says. "In fact, that approach is pretty close to what I do today."

Those well-supplied and open-spirited early experiences gave Opsvik a strong intuition for music—even though he could barely read a note. After he chose to concentrate on the upright bass, his parents packed him off to university for a four-year course of classical training. He schlepped his apparatus out to jazz gigs and sessions most evenings. After graduation, he headed to New York City. "I visited New York on vacation in 1995 and went to jazz shows," he says. "We happened to arrive during the JVC Jazz Festival, and I saw Ray Charles at Lincoln Center and Elvin Jones in a tiny club. It was great. I wanted to come back, so I applied for the master's program at Manhattan School of Music."

In the 27 years following his arrival in the Big Apple, Opsvik has tapped into a vast network of innovators and improvisers across the city. He has appeared on albums by pianist Kris Davis, guitarist Mary Halvorson, trumpeter Nate Wooley and drummer Harris Eisenstadt. He also runs the record company Loyal Label and the Greenwood Underground studio, while mastering releases for saxophonist Jon Irabagon, drummer Lesley Mok and cellist Tomeka Reid. His longstanding group Overseas, which has put out five studio albums plus one live record since 2002, is his highest-profile project. "These people are my dream band," he says. "I know them really well, so I write with their sound in mind—but I like to challenge and surprise them too. I don't give a lot of instructions. It's pretty free. I just sometimes write notes on the chart to trigger an emotional reaction." The lineup and instrumentation for Overseas has shifted over the years, but since 2010 the group has stuck to its core unit: Tony Malaby (tenor, soprano), Brandon Seabrook (guitar), Jacob Sacks (piano) and Kenny Wollesen (drums). Together, they create a serene and understated world of sound with irresistible momentum. "Eivind gives us complete freedom to be ourselves while somehow simultaneously reining us in to focus on the compositions and sound of the band as a whole," Seabrook says. "There are often long breaks between gigs, but when we reconvene, it's instantly Overseas magic."

Two Miles a Day is another long-running project, where Opsvik and Sacks split writing duties. Their 2007 debut featured violist Mat Maneri and the late drummer Paul Motian, and the group's second album (*Two Miles a Day, So Depending On*) just hit the shelves last month (with Billy Mintz filling Motian's chair). It's a brooding but urgent record marked by pace changes

and mood swings. "Eivind has a sixth sense for how to combine different ideas to find something truly unique and transcendent," Sacks relates. "We've been playing together for 27 years and it's inspiring to collaborate on projects like *Two Miles a Day* and *Overseas*, as well as having him play in my various groups and playing together in other ensembles led by great artists such as Okkyung Lee and Dan Weiss."

"I'm not precious about my music," Opsvik says. "I have a lot of fun, but I feel it strongly. It's very intuitive. I love changing things up and sound is important to me. When I'm picking projects or putting a group of musicians together, sound is always my main concern. That's what makes or breaks the music." This summer Opsvik will release a trio record (*The Setting*) with keyboardist Elias Stemeseder and guitarist Will Graefe. "It's an electro-acoustic mix, drenched in analog synths," Opsvik reports. "You get the super-direct sound of synthesizers with the width and depth of bass, plus warmth from acoustic guitar. That combination came out really well in the recording. I'm very proud of it." His multi-instrumental roots (including a deep affinity for inventive electronics) also reveals itself in his solo work as well as a unique collaboration with photographer Michelle Arcila (*A Thousand Ancestors*), which explored the interplay between visual imagery and music. Solo projects are dotted among his array of group activities, session playing and sideman work. He released the solo album *Emotional Switches* (2021) and occasionally performs the rare one-man gig, such as most recently for Brooklyn's Prospect Series (Mar. 29).

Later this month at the up-and-coming New York go-to-spot, *Close Up*, the bassist is booked to make or break sounds with Overseas, presenting a combination of pieces and group improvisations from the band's two-decade-long association. Opsvik is leveraging this show as a chance to polish fresh material for the group's next release (with publication expected next year). "I always feel a sense of peace and serenity when I perform with Eivind," Malaby says. "He never overplays and has the most beautiful sound, especially when he plays arco. As an improviser, he has an amazing sense of space and form. He is one of my favorite bandleaders and has taught me the art of sharing the bandstand. I'm so grateful for the past 20 years as a member of Overseas."

Opsvik may be adept on many instruments and involved in numerous projects, but there is a thread of consistency running through his wide-ranging output. Like the cupboards in his childhood home, the bassist overflows with ideas. Classical training may have sharpened his sight-reading and bolstered his technique, but the Norway-born, NYC-based bassist remains an inquisitive child at heart. He continues to spend all his free time making music. And he still loves to experiment with the possibilities of sound.

For more info visit [eivindopsvik.com](http://eivindopsvik.com). Opsvik's *Overseas* is at *Close Up* Apr. 28. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- The Quintet (Carl Magnus Neumann, Bjørnar Andresen, Eivind Opsvik, Ketil Gutvik, Paal Nilssen-Love) — *Events 1998-1999* (PNL, 1998-99)
- Tone Collector (Tony Malaby, Eivind Opsvik, Jeff Davis) — *Tone Collector* (Jazzaway, 2004)
- Kris Davis — *The Slightest Shift* (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2005)
- Harris Eisenstadt Canada Day — *Canada Day* (Clean Feed, 2008)
- Eivind Opsvik — *Overseas IV* (Loyal Label, 2011)
- Dan Weiss Trio Plus 1 — *Utica Box* (Sunnyside, 2015)