



LAKECIA BENJAMIN

UNSTOPPABLE

BY MATTY BANNOND

Ravi Coltrane, Jeff “Tain” Watts, Branford Marsalis and a crowd of other jazz icons were hanging out backstage at the Pittsburgh International Jazz Festival in 2021. They all applaud as Lakecia Benjamin walks towards them—on crutches and wearing a neck brace. She has just performed a 45-minute set with a broken scapula, a broken jaw, three broken ribs and an untreated brain bleed. It’s a staggering story but not untypical of the alto saxophonist’s attitude to life and music: she is unstoppable.

One of the world’s favorite cookies fueled the start of her bumpy journey through jazz. “In elementary school they started me off playing the recorder,” she says. “Then I asked our band director if I could move onto the saxophone but he said there were none available. So, I found the three students who had the instruments and asked a girl to swap it for four packs of OREOs. She made the switch with me and I took the saxophone back to class. My director couldn’t believe I got it.” Soon after this sweet deal, Benjamin’s new instrument became a common sight around her New York neighborhood in northern Manhattan’s Washington Heights. She played at barbecues, block parties, parades and other community gatherings. “It felt like something that brings joy to people,” she says. “As soon as we began playing, everyone’s dancing and having a great time. We’d even go to the local Port Authority where people take buses to work and they got excited to see little kids like us making music.” Those formative experiences led to a spot at Fiorello LaGuardia High School, where tuba player Bob Stewart led the school’s highly-regarded jazz program. He passed along to Benjamin CDs by Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Kenny Garrett and other key figures from the jazz tradition. Students were also required to check out rehearsals by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, who were based across the street from the school at that time. Those practice sessions gave Benjamin up-close insights into the work and habits of prominent figures such as saxophonists Steve Coleman, Greg Osby and Jerome Richardson.

Next, she earned a chance to study at The New School’s School of Jazz. One of her teachers at the prestigious Manhattan music school, saxophonist Gary Bartz, became a musical mentor and the pair have remained in close contact ever since. “There’s nobody better than ‘Uncle Gary’ to show how versatile you can be,” she says. “Over the years he’s helped me to understand that music is a business. He also got me to really focus on my saxophone playing and getting my personality to define who I am as a horn player.” Benjamin struggled to win bookings early in her career—so she began gatecrashing other people’s gigs instead. She scribbled a list of top artists and snuck into concerts, then jumped on stage with her saxophone and tried to steal a solo. “Jazz clubs are easier than big performing arts centers for that,” she jests. “I’d go to the Blue Note and other intimate shows and BOOM, I’m up there. I was very shy, but I found that if I didn’t learn to be assertive, I may go hungry. I had no choice!”

The saxophonist’s career gathered momentum and she enjoyed collaborations with high-profile non-jazz

artists such as Stevie Wonder, Macy Gray and Alicia Keys. In 2012, Benjamin stepped into the studio to lay down her first album as a bandleader. *Retox* (Motéma Music) is packed with bouncy bass lines and strutting synthesizers. Soul and funk are at the heart of the record, with guest vocalists on almost every tune. Harpist Brandee Younger also appears on one track. “Playing with Lakecia is just so, so much fun,” Younger says. “She has undaunted drive and a New York state of mind that are so relatable, and I’ve always admired her work throughout the years. On stage, she brings infectious energy to the entire band and the audience. I feel lucky to call her a dear friend and colleague.” Another funk-inspired project is her *Rise Up* (Ropeadope). By that album’s 2018 release, Benjamin was in high demand around New York. She was also working as a core member of vocalist Gregory Porter’s band, but her own projects still weren’t grabbing headlines. Her funk band was only scoring two or three gigs each year and she began to doubt her bandleader ambitions. With her back to the wall, Benjamin wrote another list and then took even more assertive action.

“I didn’t have any money but I had a dream project and I decided to give it my all,” she says. “So I wrote down all the people I’d ever wanted to play with and I found their hotel rooms, their houses, their upcoming shows...You can’t really hide in the Blue Note, and anyway, the worst thing they could do was say ‘no.’ But hopefully, I would get some of them to play something and we could record it. At that point, I planned to ask Gregory if I could sell my CDs at his gigs for \$5.” That dream project turned into *Pursuance: The Coltranes* (Ropeadope). It features six compositions by Alice Coltrane and six by John Coltrane, plus one original. It also features an all-star cohort of collaborators including Ron Carter, Regina Carter, Reggie Workman, Dee Dee Bridgewater and the string group Rootstock Republic. It’s a jazz record that marked a change of direction for Benjamin and triggered a tsunami of positive press coverage.

It was while riding that wave of success when in 2021 she crashed her car enroute to Pittsburgh. “I was coming from the Tri-C jazz festival in Cleveland,” she says. “I totaled my car in a terrible accident and the hospitals wouldn’t admit me or diagnose me because COVID-19 was rampant. They stabilized me but I couldn’t start proper treatment. That’s considered elective. And since it was during the pandemic, we hadn’t been making a lot of money. Everybody’s relying on this well-paid gig. So I gave it a shot.” Only one side of Benjamin’s mouth was able to close. She was bleeding profusely and in excruciating pain. She played the set, then soaked up applause onstage and backstage. But there was no time to enjoy the admiration of her peers and no time to seek proper medical attention either. Benjamin was booked for a three-week tour of Europe to promote her Coltrane record. Again, all eyes turned to the saxophonist. Again, she refused to give up. She started the tour. And she finished it.

Her next record carried the apt title *Phoenix* (Whirlwind, 2023). It also carried Benjamin to three

GRAMMY nominations. It’s another project with a large ensemble that includes a string quartet and several vocalists, as well as spoken insights from Wayne Shorter, as heard on “Supernova”. The album was produced by drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. “Lakecia is a force of nature,” Carrington says. “Her sound on her horn penetrates the soul and stirs the spirit. There’s a sense of urgency with every note, like her life depends on it. Her sonic delivery and pursuance of freedom are true reminders that music is a powerful energy that connects people, creates transcendental experiences and humanizes what is often academic or sterile—which is exactly what we need at this time.” Building off of the success of that album, Benjamin released *Phoenix Reimagined (Live)* via the same label one year later. It’s a live-in-studio recording that puts a fresh spin on five songs from *Phoenix*, while also introducing some new works. Benjamin tracked down and won over another large group of co-conspirators, including guitarist John Scofield and trumpeter Randy Brecker, and subsequently picked up two more GRAMMY nominations.

This month at 92NY, she is performing with her regular band plus two special guests: Gary Bartz and vocalist Jazzmeia Horn. “Intergenerational activity is kind of the theme of this gig,” she explains. “We want to show how jazz is old and new at the same time. Jazzmeia and Gary are both hungry to be the best they can be. Together, we’re going to put on an energetic 90-minute concert and I think the audience will enjoy seeing that interplay.” More touring is planned for this year and beyond, plus another album is taking shape. “With my next project, it’s like I’m trying to usher in the next chapter of my life,” Benjamin says. “That means I’m looking to showcase different styles of my work and I want to join up with artists who are redefining what it means to be an instrumentalist. Every time I do a project, I’m trying to learn from the people I do it with. As I move further along my path, I want to open doors for other people too.” That learning process has included some harsh lessons and tough tests. But when life has handed the saxophonist a bag of lemons, she has repeatedly proven her capacity to make lemonade. In fact, she has turned four packets of cookies into five GRAMMY nominations. It’s a staggering story. And whatever the next chapters bring, Lakecia Benjamin no doubt will remain unstoppable.

For more info visit lakeciabenjamin.com. Benjamin is at 92NY May 10. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Kit McClure Band — *Just the Thing: The Sweethearts Project Revisited* (Red Hot, 2002-2005)
- Lakecia Benjamin — *Retox* (Motéma Music, 2010-11)
- Lakecia Benjamin — *Rise Up* (Ropeadope, 2017)
- Lakecia Benjamin — *Pursuance: The Coltranes* (Ropeadope, 2019)
- Lakecia Benjamin — *Phoenix* (Whirlwind, 2022)
- Lakecia Benjamin — *Phoenix Reimagined (Live)* (Whirlwind, 2024)