



CHLOE ROWLANDS

PLAYING IT FORWARD, SEEKING PARADISE

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

Starting in 2018, the established trumpeter and educator Chloe Rowlands has negotiated two major life experiences, begun at the same time: becoming a member of the heralded, jazz-influenced brass quartet *The Westerlies* and coming out as a trans woman in a community that provided little initial support for such a decision. In the seven years since, Rowlands has gained respect for her talent, her dedication to quality private instruction, and her empathetic approach to counseling young artists, as well as contributing to *The Westerlies'* eclectic oeuvre. Recently, Rowlands has additionally found a place on Broadway, as a member of the orchestra for the musical *Gypsy* starring Audra McDonald.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: The breadth of your professional and educational experiences is impressive. When you moved to New York City 15 years ago, did you envision such a career?

CHLOE ROWLANDS: When I first moved to New York to go to The New School, I pretty much just wanted to be a jazz trumpet player. As I've gotten older and more mature, I've sort of discovered how much more is out there, and as a result my musical interests broadened quite a bit. What really opened up my career was joining *The Westerlies* back in 2018 because this group can exist in so many different music worlds at once.

TNYCJR: It seems like you've always wanted to be a music professional.

ROWLANDS: I have. It's been my goal since I can remember, actually. My dad was in a rock band in the Bay area back in the '70s and '80s called *Merlin*. He played guitar, flute, harmonica and sang. My parents actually met at a *Merlin* show. So I exist because of music, which is fun to think about. My dad and my mom have incredible taste in music, had all kinds of music going on around the house. There's a photo of me when I was, I think, two years old, of me and my dad. I have these big headphones on, with a big smile on my face and my eyes closed, and my dad has a big smile on his face too. He was showing me *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis.

I have memories of my dad putting on John Philip Sousa and giving me and my brother pots and pans with wooden spoons and having us marching around the house playing along with it. I remember when I was about seven or eight, I was visiting my dad's brother, Uncle Don, who is a drummer, at his apartment in Berkeley, CA. His apartment had bins of random instruments everywhere. One time he pulled out an old bugle and handed it to me, and my whole family was standing around me, encouraging me to make a sound on it. I made a little toot noise, with my whole family cheering me on and applauding. I think that feeling of being celebrated for doing something like that really stuck with me.

TNYCJR: Who were your influences as you were developing your talent on the trumpet?

ROWLANDS: I'll give another shout out to my Uncle Don. When I started playing trumpet, for every birthday and every Christmas, he would send me a couple of CDs of trumpet players, and he sort of went in chronological order, giving me a bit of a jazz and trumpet education at the same time. First he would start sending me Louis Armstrong Hot Five and Seven records when I was in elementary school. That's all I listened to back then. And then he started sending me big band records that featured trumpet players on Duke Ellington and Count Basie records. And then I started getting Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker records, and then Miles Davis and people like Freddie Hubbard, and so on. In middle school, I would walk around with headphones on, just listening to *Kind of Blue* on repeat. And Clifford Brown was also a huge inspiration.

TNYCJR: How did you get involved in music education?

ROWLANDS: I've been teaching private lessons for many years. I started when I was still in high school. I think my high school band director connected a younger elementary school student who wanted a little bit of extra help getting his technique together. I studied from eighth grade until the end of high school with a really wonderful classical trumpet teacher, Russ Plylar, who really got my trumpet technique and fundamentals together, which equipped me with the right tools to help out younger players.

I really love teaching private lessons. I had so many great private teachers, and I wouldn't be the musician or trumpet player I am today without them. I think it's the duty and responsibility of musicians to pay it forward to the next generation. In *The Westerlies*, we do a ton of teaching, working with students as young as elementary school all the way through graduate level students. We often do teaching residencies at universities and work with them on a form of conducted improvisation called "Conduction." Currently, *The Westerlies* are an ensemble in residence at The New School where we are all faculty members.

TNYCJR: How did you become a member of *The Westerlies*?

ROWLANDS: I knew all of the members, including the former member Zubin Hensler, before joining. I first met Riley Mulherkar, the group's other trumpet player, at the Essentially Ellington competition in New York City when we were in high school. I met [trombonist] Andy Clausen in high school as well, at the Monterey Jazz Festival. I was there performing with the Next Generation Jazz Orchestra, a big band made up of high school students from across the country. Andy had won a composition competition, so he had a big band piece

that was featured and performed by this band at the big stage, featuring Wynton Marsalis. So we all go way back.

We all moved to NYC around the same time and would see each other around the music scene. I was asked to audition in April 2018 and was very excited about the opportunity because I'd seen them coming up for the past seven years, creating this incredible ensemble doing things that you don't hear other brass musicians doing. I took the audition very seriously and decided to memorize the music for it, since the ensemble performs memorized. It felt like from the first note there was just great musical chemistry between

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 42)

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

us. Getting asked to join the band was life changing for me and really opened up my entire career.

TNYCJR: Even though the ensemble refers to itself as “genre agnostic” it definitely has a kind of chamber music vibe. How do improvisation dynamics operate within the ensemble?

ROWLANDS: The majority of the music we perform is through-composed, but within that we may have certain songs with sections that have improvisational elements that can happen in different ways. As an ensemble we love the idea of group or communal improvisation. One example is a piece called “Robert Henry”, written by Andy Clausen, dedicated to his nephew who at the time of the composition was two years old. In the middle of the song, there’s a section where Riley and Addison [Maye-Saxon, trombone] both improvise in a communal and textural way. The instructions given to them are to embody what might be going on in the mind of a two-year-old, which can vary quite wildly night to night. There’s another piece that will be on our upcoming album *Paradise* called “The 5:10 to Ronkonkoma”, which has a similar group improvised section in the middle that we describe as a simmering soup that starts to bubble over throughout. There are other songs that have a more traditional, single featured soloist in it, like one we’ve recently been playing called “Cupid” by the late, great trumpeter Ron Miles. Riley, the other trumpet player is featured on this one.

We actually have a record of all completely improvised music, *Bricolage*, that we recorded in 2019, during a residency in New Hampshire with pianist Conrad Tao. He was there with us, writing a piece of music for us, which turned out to be a concerto for The Westerlies and full orchestra. Part of his process for getting to know our sound was to improvise with us every single day for at least an hour. So we decided to put up mics everywhere to archive it. Flash forward to 2020 in the middle of the pandemic. We were going back into the archive and rediscovered these very long recordings of improvised music and found some really incredible golden moments that we decided to edit down to our favorite moments and put into an album.

TNYCJR: You’re known to be a strong advocate for equity in the music business, especially in regard to the LGBTQ+ community. How has your personal and professional life prepared you for such a role?

ROWLANDS: In a way, I was kind of thrust into the position of being an advocate and an elder, if you will, for people to look up to. So it’s not something that I necessarily sought out to do but something that has happened purely out of necessity, yet something that I’m happy to do. I first came out as a trans woman in 2018, actually simultaneously with my joining The Westerlies. When they asked me to join, all of my bandmates were so wonderful with navigating this time with me. I never had any idea how I was going to come out—the idea terrified me. When I joined The Westerlies I knew that it was important for me to come out before they made the announcement, so we made a plan for me to come out on social media the day before they announced me as the newest member. It was a wild 48 hours.

The jazz scene historically has not been a very welcoming place for queer people. I had convinced myself that if I came out as queer, especially if I came out as trans, then I would have no shot at being a professional musician, especially a professional jazz musician in NYC. Because of that, it was so terrifying to even think about. At the time, I didn’t know a single other trans musician in the professional world, at least in New York City, performing at this level, so there was no roadmap or anybody to talk to about how to go about

it, but I knew that I needed to do it. The idea that I could potentially be, I guess, a role model for younger trans musicians really helped me get through it. And, yeah, it’s been really incredible over the past seven years now. I’m getting messages on Facebook, on Instagram, getting emails from younger musicians telling me, “hey, thank you so much for doing what you’re doing, you gave me the courage to come out too.” It’s extremely rewarding to receive these messages and know that I made a difference with these younger people.

TNYCJR: Are things getting a little better in that direction within the jazz community?

ROWLANDS: Yes and no. I think there’s a lot of folks on the more progressive side who are much more open to it than people used to be and making an effort to learn more about us, but at the same time we have places like JALC hiring the famously transphobic Dave Chapelle to host their Gala just recently, which is so troublesome when we’re dealing with so much intense anti-trans rhetoric and pushback against us by the federal government. It’s honestly a very scary time to be trans, especially openly trans like myself. I mostly rely on my queer and trans communities to feel heard and be seen and feel safe these days.

TNYCJR: Meanwhile, you’re not just busy with The Westerlies, you’re on Broadway now.

ROWLANDS: Yes! I’m playing the second trumpet book in the show *Gypsy*, starring Audra McDonald. We’ve been going since November. It’s my first time doing anything on Broadway, and it has been such a fun and exciting experience. This music is incredible and has a hell of a lot of trumpet in it. There’s a famous trumpet solo in the overture, which happens to be in my book. It’s such an honor to get to play it every show. We recorded a cast album a few months ago, which was recently released. You can hear my solo towards the end of the overture.

For more info visit maestramusic.org/profile/chloe-rowlands, instagram.com/_chloerowlands_/?hl=en and westerliesmusic.com. Rowlands is at Public Records Jun. 11 (with The Westerlies). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- The Westerlies – *Wherein Lies The Good* (Westerlies, 2018)
- The Westerlies & Conrad Tao – *Bricolage* (Westerlies, 2019)
- The Westerlies – *Songbook Vol. 2* (Westerlies, 2020)
- The Westerlies – *Songbook Vol. 1* (Westerlies, 2021)
- The Westerlies – *Move* (Westerlies, 2021)
- The Westerlies – *Paradise* (Westerlies, 2024)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

nightclub Allen’s Tin Pan Alley. To make a living wage he joined the Dave Sobol Theatrical Agency, booking the musicians. With a fifth wife, Kitty, and three adopted sons, they became pillars of the community.

We may never know why, when Tipton was finally offered the opportunity of musical success, he retreated to Spokane. But the legacy left is now larger: in 2020, *No Ordinary Man: The Billy Tipton Documentary* (a film by Aisling Chin-Yee and Chase Joynt) was released. IndieWire called it “a riveting dive into the past that heralds the future of trans cinema...arrives at something transcendent.” According to Orfield, “The world writ large branded him ‘woman,’ but that’s not who he was. He wanted to play music. He wanted to live as his authentic self, and he did.” Denio adds she’s spoken to many people who knew Billy. “They are all unanimous,” she says, “Billy’s decision...did not interfere with their sense of (his) generosity or

creativity. Everyone...shares the same love and respect for him.”

For more info visit queermusicheritage.com/feb2003bt.html and legacyprojectchicago.org/person/billy-tipton

Recommended Listening:

- Billy Tipton – *Billy Tipton Plays Hi-Fi on Piano* (Tops, 1956)
- Billy Tipton – *Sweet Georgia Brown* (Tops, 1956)

(JAZZKAAR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

along the ubiquitous Berlin experimenter **Christian Lillinger** and the lesser-known Lithuanian sticksman **Arkady Gotesman**. Their involved patterns seeped away into near-silence, as Osgood whipped a dried sprig-twig, crashed his high, high cymbal, then sung a wine glass, joined by Lillinger to rattle around the brick walls and the onstage lighting construction. As listeners immersed for meditation, Osgood announced guest alto saxophonist **Maria Faust**, an Estonian native who has been on the Danish scene for a couple of decades. She reflatd the percussionists with a lung-strong issuance of ceaseless linear soloing. The drummer-percussionists returned to their scatter-and-flail tendencies, Gotesman adding colors with bongos, as well as invoking a big bass drum. Faust had played on the previous evening, with **The Economics**, a sort of seated marching band who have been providing the live soundtrack for a long-running play in Tallinn, with a pair of narrators capturing the text to the side of the stage. The tunes lie down at the Carla Bley or Willem Breuker end of the alleyway, strong on subverted tradition. The group included trumpet, trombone, tuba and drums (a big bass side-beast), in a feast of lowdown lollop and funereal crawling. Faust soloed almost throughout, buoyed by the other horns, as a gallop would rise out of a placid plain and get punctuated rousingly, adding a wildness that the songs also needed more towards the set’s beginning.

Two nights later, pianist-composer **Mathei Florea** brought his New Grounds (including a string quartet) to the Fotografiska gallery (there’s one in NYC), with specially-imported NYC-based, Israeli guitarist **Gilad Hekselman**. This band recently won an Estonian Jazz Award, presented just a few hours earlier at the Von Krah! venue next door. Trumpeter Dmytro Bondarev shone most during this set, with a series of impressive, peppery solos. Straight after, in Von Krah!, the Snarky Puppy quietcore of **Bill Laurance** and **Michael League** continued their extensive European tour, positioning themselves deliberately at the opposite pole of their core combo existence. The two have honed an extremely sensitive interaction of melodic grace which floats around the Middle East (mostly at the behest of League’s oud), with Laurance sounding very different compared to his other complementary solo dates. Snarky Puppy has been producing a variegated tangle of off-shoots as a form of so-called ‘rest’ in between their own tours. Laurance and League evoke a delicacy of tender sound, with the latter furthering the scope whenever he picks up his loose-string-action fretless acoustic bass guitar. With a slinking, gently funk progress, the twosome beamed smiles of ecstasy towards each other.

Around midnight, Hekselman and the Snarky Puppy musicians rolled up at the jam session, around the corner at Terminal Records & Bar, joining a hardcore of local players governed by the expatriate US trumpeter Jason Hunter. The Tallinn bunch were deeply into a no-wave funk hypnotism along the lines of Defunkt and James Chance, but relaxed the leash when Hekselman and the Snarky Puppy duo took to the stage, providing the attentive audience the climax to what was an otherwise typical jam session. In a microcosm, these are the daily extremes of the Jazzkaar experience.

For more info visit jazzkaar.ee/en/