

## FESTIVAL REPORT

# JAZZKAAR

BY MARTIN LONGLEY

# LONG PLAY

BY TOM GREENLAND

**Blue Note**  
**JAZZ FESTIVAL**  
NEW YORK CITY • JUNE 2025



## BRANFORD MARSALIS QUARTET: BELONGING

FT. JOEY CALDERAZZO, ERIC REVIS  
& JUSTIN FAULKNER



## CHARLES LLOYD SKY QUARTET

FT. JASON MORAN, HARISH RAGHAVAN  
& ERIC HARLAND

**JUNE 28 // 8PM**

THE TOWN HALL



URMO MÄNNI

Oscar Andreas Haug, Maria Faust @Jazzkaar

Estonia is bordered by the Baltic Sea, Latvia and Russia at the far eastern reaches of the European Union. Its exceptional Jazzkaar festival, held in the country's capital of Tallinn and now in its 36th edition (Apr. 17-26), continues to combine local artists with visiting acts from across Europe and the Americas, and sometimes beyond. The program ranges from mainline jazz to free improvisation, global-folkloric and modern music to classically-infused premieres. There's also an annually increasing dose of near-unbearable neo-soul and pop-loaded bands, but these do obviously assist in growing audiences. Stateside performers certainly magnetize the crowds, and this year offered a greater such presence than usual, with Detroit native saxophonist James Carter, Snarky Puppy's multi-instrumentalist Michael League (now in Catalanian parts) and Bill Laurance, plus vocalist Jazzmeia Horn who landed at Jazzkaar four days after its main conclusion, offering a postscript climax.

Alto saxophonist **Lakecia Benjamin** showed off her new crew of John Chin (keyboards), Elias Bailey (bass) and Dorian Phelps (drums). She's finally gained the profile she deserves, after almost two decades since she was gigging with former John Coltrane drummer Rashied Ali. Making the journey towards funk and soul, she's recently found her true position with such albums as *Pursuance*, *Phoenix* and *Phoenix Reimagined (Live)*, melding post-Coltrane jazz with a harder manifestation of funk, soul and hip-hop. This new quartet plays hyper-jazz, even speed-jazz, and Benjamin's new sidemen are perfectly suited to drawing out her own strength of powerhouse blowing extremity, fast but charged with supple virtuosity. We might be fatigued by the Coltrane-associated "My Favorite Things", but Benjamin continues to dissect its essence into something radically transformed, just now in its most manic manifest. This marked the first tour for stripling Phelps, who is akin to a human triphammer, but not a robotic one. Phelps, rather, skimmed and skirted the natural dynamics of a number, with stunning energy and precision. A repeated alto-drums face off found the leader feeding off the drummer's responses and escalating the music with abandonment. Chin delivered copious degrees of runaway invention on either acoustic, Nord or Rhodes pianos. The four musicians connected in an ultimate, frenzied unity, Benjamin's cohorts pushing her even higher, further and faster.

Testament to the festival's diversity, the set prior to Benjamin's had introduced a fresh pairing of three improvising drummers, who nevertheless spontaneously prepared closely interlinked grooves of complexity, loaded with overlapping cross-patterns and surprise details. **Kresten Osgood** (a regular NYC visitor from Copenhagen) came to Tallinn for a second year, bringing

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ANTHONY CREAMER III

Anaïs Maviel/The Rhythm Method @Long Play Festival

Now in its fourth instantiation, Bang on a Can's Long Play Festival (May 2-4) has become an exciting forum for composers and improvisers. Held in fourteen performance spaces in and around downtown Brooklyn—the festival presented over 50 concerts in 48 hours.

On opening night, your correspondent, who sampled, in part or in whole, over twenty concerts, began at Roulette Intermedium with composer-conductor **Henry Threadgill**'s world premiere of *Listen Ship*, a series of vignettes arranged for acoustic guitars, pianos and electric basses, its relatively subdued dynamic range enlivened by subtle differences in the tones of the numerous guitarists (Gregg Belisle-Chi, Bill Frisell, Miles Okazaki, Brandon Ross). But the set's real sparkplug was Stomu Takeishi, who slapped his acoustic bass guitar body like a cajón and strummed the strings so hard with his bare thumb that it needed a band-aid after the show. The following set, trumpeter **Peter Evans' Being & Becoming** with Joel Ross (vibraphone), Nick Joz (acoustic bass, synth bass) and Tyshawyn Sorey (drums), ably balanced acoustics and electronics, climaxes and lulls, the leader playing with authority and soul on three different trumpets. Ross was a magical, mercurial presence, while Sorey was on the warpath, at one point cracking his drums so loud and hard it drew nervous laughter from the audience.

The next day began at noon with the unforgettable spectacle of a large herd of shiny brass buffalo rumbling and snorting as it wandered over the hilltop of Fort Greene Park, curious humans trailing after the beasts like calves following cows. Only these weren't really buffalo. They were tubists (with euphoniums, sousaphones, baritones, pocket tubas, even a helicon), 60 or 70 of them, performing **Anthony Braxton's Composition No. 19 (For 100 Tubas)**, the initial herd dispersing into four groups, bleating and bellowing from short distances apart until they reconvened an hour later into one big bunch, their voices murmuring softly together in one last, truly gorgeous polychord.

In The Space at Irondale, **Blackbox Ensemble** staged an immersive concert during which looming dissonances threatened, but never succeeded in disrupting the irenic ambience. At Roulette, guitarists **Bill Frisell** and **Mary Halvorson** duetted arrangements of songs like "Shenandoah", merging avant and Americana. An unexpected highlight was a spiritually illuminating set at Issue Project Room by **The Rhythm Method** string quartet with vocalist **Anaïs Maviel** also playing n'goni (West African harp/lute). Seated beneath the venue's crypt-like vault, dressed in similar shades of bright orange-red, the five women sang and played Maviel's *listen to the rain* suite, the tempo and emotional engagement slowly, steadily increasing as Maviel's fingers delicately treaded

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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](https://maestramusic.org/profile/chloe-rowlands), [instagram.com/\\_chloerowlands\\_/?hl=en](https://instagram.com/_chloerowlands_/?hl=en) and [westerliesmusic.com](https://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)

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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](https://queermusicheritage.com/feb2003bt.html) and [legacyprojectchicago.org/person/billy-tipton](https://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)

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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/](https://jazzkaar.ee/en/)

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across the harp strings like a ten-legged spider. (The suite's eight movements will be digitally released over a solar year, with each seasonal change, culminating with a November full album release.)

At BRIC Stoop, **Caroline Davis** (alto, electronics, vocals) and **Wendy Eisenberg** (guitar, vocals) played repertoire from their 2024 album *Accept When* (Astral Spirits): abstract, shapeshifting songs tailor-made for uncertain times. In the main ballroom, pianist **Adam Tendler** performed John Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes*, a 70-minute piece for piano prepared with machine screws, rubber tubes and bits of credit cards, suggesting the sound of a gamelan ensemble; even more amazing than the music itself was Tendler's captivating interpretation, his burly, weightlifter's physique moving with fragile, balletic grace. Back out in the Stoop space, Peruvian percussionist **Efraín Rozas** conjured up an eerie effect with a robot "tree" of cowbells and woodblocks, something like a ghost rattling the chandeliers in a haunted house, Rozas pounding the deep bass drum and cymbals with mallets as if trying to drive it away. At the Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew, six percussionists from **Talujon** were scattered around the huge chapel, synchronized by earphones, for a three-dimensional performance of Gerard Grisey's *Le Noir de l'Étoile*, their beats bouncing through space like echoes across a box canyon.

At Irondale, **Fred Frith** grabbed an unusual assortment of implements—a paintbrush, necklace, ashtray, tin-full of rice, even a goat horn—to prepare and belabor his guitar, whooping or cackling into the mic, radically detuning strings until they sagged and warped like a koto, looping and droning these strange sounds with signal processors, only to end with a garden variety major triad chord. At BAM Opera House, keyboardist-composer Max Richter

conducted **American Contemporary Ensemble** on *In a Landscape*, a series of soothing but ultimately insipid diatonic "hymns" separated by short inserts of found sounds (weather, people chatting, whistling), akin to a collection of expurgated fairy tales with no big bad wolves or wicked witches. Back at the Church of St. Luke and St. Matthew, **Talea Ensemble** gave Fausto Romitelli's *Manifesto* an appropriately psychedelic treatment, enlivened by Chris Gross' expressive cello and Daniel Druckman's kinetic percussion.

At BAM Ballroom, **Buke and Gase** played catchy, bubblegum-flavored songs with homemade hybrid guitars, foot percussion and harmony vocals. Last stop, at Roulette, provided another highlight: drummer **Dave King's Trucking Company** with Erik Fratzke (guitar) and Chris Morrissey (bass). In contrast to his more polite projects, this setting allowed King to charge through the china shop, like the proverbial bull on a rampage, though even at his most outrageous he never breaks anything, never loses his poise or place, with Fratzke's sloppy but brilliant guitar work a perfect foil for the rowdy escapades.

The closing day's festivities began in BAM Ballroom with **David Lang's Darker** (for chamber orchestra) providing the soundtrack to Bill Morrison's assemblage of film clips from the 1910s and '20s, the music's smooth façade subtly subverted by a tricky rhythmic scheme. In the Stoop, flutist **Nicole Mitchell** led Luke Stewart (bass) and Tcheser Holmes (drums) on hooky, danceable jams, looping and harmonizing ideas, rocking up on her toes to rip off a few fast bebop figures. At BAM Café, **Sara Serpa** revisited her soundtrack to the film *Recognition*, her angular vocal lines sensitively shadowed by Qasim Naqvi's impressionistic electronics. Later in the same space, Tunisian guembri (fretless lute) player **Nour Harkati**'s husky voice and propulsive, high-decibel beats had the room rocking.

Claire Edward had a solo percussion feature at the end of **Ensemble Offspring's** set in BRIC Stoop, followed by Julia Wolfe's evocative *Cruel Sister* in the ballroom, played with panache by **Ensemble Signal**, utilizing layered beat groups of twos and threes in odd-length phrases, plus organ-like effects of swelling, smearing string chords, and unusual techniques such as having the violinists strum like guitarists. Back out in the Stoop, **Immanuel Wilkins** (alto), Tomeka Reid (cello) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums) played a first-ever collective free-blow with impeccable artistry, Fujiwara in an especially exuberant mood as the trio navigated stormy winds and doldrums, another festival highpoint. Back in the ballroom, eight women comprising **Lorelei Ensemble** sang Christopher Cerrone's sibilant *Beaufort Scales* before projected images of slow-motion ocean waves with inserts of spoken word texts, a double-echo effect created when one woman's narration was repeated by others, then ricocheted through the house speakers by live-delay effects.

The festival finale, held at Red Hook's Pioneer Works, fêted composer **Terry Riley** (who turns 90 this month) with renditions of two of his iconic pieces: "Rainbow in Curved Air", arranged by and featuring his son Gyan Riley on guitar, played in an edgy rock style; and "In C", the band now joined by the **Bang on a Can All-Stars** with special guests such as sitarist Krishna Bhatt, all 14 musicians pounding out unrelenting eighth-note pulses, each working through the score's individual modules at his or her own pace, finishing together in a climactic collective explosion.

For those of us lured into incessant screen-scrolling in the age of the smart-phone, Long Play offers an antidote: deep immersion in epic musical adventures that will challenge and lengthen your attention-span.

For more info visit [bangonacan.org/longplay](http://bangonacan.org/longplay)



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