



GENE PERLA

GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY

BY DANIEL A. BROWN

Talk about jazz cred: Gene Perla played extensively with legendary drummer Elvin Jones and been name-checked by the Beastie Boys. The bassist played a crucial role in Jones' early '70s ensembles. And for the Beastie Boys' "Root Down" (1995), they offered an on-the-mic shout-out to the tune "Sweetie Pie" by Stone Alliance, the trio that Perla co-founded with percussionist Don Alias and saxophonist Steve Grossman. "You know what?" asks Perla with a laugh, from his home in Pennsylvania: "The surviving members (Beastie's Mike D and Ad-Rock) bought my entire vinyl catalog!" That's a fitting tribute to Perla, a musician who has enjoyed a long, illustrious and multi-hyphenated career. Along with his decades as a bassist-composer, the now 85-year-old has also been (and continues to be) a producer-engineer, sound designer and label owner. And in addition to educational stints at Center for the Media Arts (NYC), Berklee College of Music and William Paterson University, Perla spent 20 years teaching at Lehigh University. Since 2008, he's been teaching at The New School's School of Jazz.

Perla remains too busy to rest on any laurels. His forthcoming album, *Twin Peaks*, is not a reference to David Lynch but rather the session's unorthodox instrumentation. "Do you know of any recordings at all that are two jazz bass clarinetists?" he asks. "That's how the thing popped in my head: *Twin Peaks*." Two recent singles—"Mother", based on a poem by underground film icon Jonas Mekas, and the addiction-awareness song "The Smoker"—are led by Perla and vocalist Viktorija ("Vik") Gečytė. Both tunes feature rosters of notable players. The bassist's current band, the Tiger Quartet, features twenty-something players Gus Hurteau (vibraphone), Ilhan Saferali (trumpet) and Willie Bowman (drums). "I put this group together because I've got to step up with these kids who are playing their asses off," Perla explains. "They're pros already!"

A New Jersey native, in his youth he studied classical piano and then trombone. "So, you know, I'm okay with (sight-reading) ink on paper," he says. In his early twenties, Perla began playing both the double bass and bass guitar. It was on the stages and studios of Boston and NYC where he garnered a sizable education, first with a four-month stint in 1967 with percussionist-bandleader Willie Bobo. "The conga player in that band was Carlos Patato Valdés and he took me under his wing, and I learned so much about life through him." In 1969, Perla played on clarinetist-saxophonist Woody Herman's pioneering soul-funk album *Heavy Exposure* (Cadet), a session that included (among other heavyweights) John Hicks (piano), Donny Hathaway (organ), Phil Upchurch (guitar) and Ed Soph (drums). "That was a helluva band," Perla recounts.

Bassist-peers began checking out his versatility and chops and were impressed. "Gene is a great musician and bassist," raves fellow bassist Frank Tusa of Perla (who produced Open Sky's self-titled album on his PM Records imprint, a group which included Tusa, Dave Liebman and Bob Moses). "He has done some amazing things for the music with his record label and is a wonderful teacher." The late '60s to early '70s were a potent era for Perla. Gigs and sessions with Miles Davis, Sonny Rollins and Nina Simone honed his skills and helped expand his reputation. "You know I was the first bassist for the Mahavishnu Orchestra?" asks Perla with a laugh. "Me! I jammed with those guys. But I knew that John McLaughlin was looking for a keyboard player, and Jan Hammer was my roommate. So we had another rehearsal, and Jan came in, got the gig, and I turned it down because I just joined Elvin's band." Perla's first gig with drummer Jones and saxophonist-multi-instrumentalist Joe Farrell was live on TV at Boston's WGBH studio. "I go off a little bit," says Perla, of that trial-by-fire gig. "But the thing that really did it was I got in the pocket with Elvin, and some months went by, and then, boom! He called me on the phone."

The high-octane modal jazz of *Live at The Lighthouse* (Blue Note, 1972), which includes the band performing his original tune "Sambra", featured the bassist, saxophonist Grossman and saxophonist-flutist Liebman, and is emblematic of Perla's skills at joining locked-in swing and virtuosity. "(Elvin and I) had a very sociable relationship. I spent time at his home having dinner with he and his wife, Keiko."

Decades after playing with Jones, the bassist reflects on his creative collaborations—both as a musician and producer of Jones' music—with the storied drummer. "I describe that when the music and time-feel gets just right, it's like you're looking at a lake and there's absolutely no breeze, and it looks like glass. And when the time gets right, that's what it's like. And with Jones, that's *who he was*."

In subsequent years, Perla continued to honor the music and legacy of Jones on The Lighthouse Project, with a recurring lineup that once included Liebman, also tenor saxophonists Jerry Bergonzi and George Garzone and drummer Adam Nussbaum. "I was fortunate to hear Gene with Elvin on many occasions," raves Nussbaum. "So when I got to play with him, it was a great thrill for me. Gene is always a pleasure to play with and is firmly committed to being a functional, supportive team player."

While Perla appreciates the acknowledgment of his place in the overall jazz pantheon, he is both pragmatic and still passionate about his ultimate joy: the gig. This month alone, Perla's concert schedule is packed with shows, including two in one day—with two different groups. "The number one thing in my life is playing the bass. I imagine people might wonder how, with my experience as a musician, why I would play these \$100 local gigs. But I have always known that, number one, I *know how* to do it, and number two, I am *given the opportunity* to do it. And number three is, *I am wrong if I don't do it!*"

For more info visit perla.org. Perla's Tiger Quartet is at Saint Peter's Church Jul. 13, Lafayette Bar Jul. 16, Shanghai Jazz Jul. 17, Miller Symphony Hall Jul. 18, Ice House and Deer Head Inn Jul. 19 and Smalls Jul. 20. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Elvin Jones—*Live at The Lighthouse* (Blue Note, 1972)
- Elvin Jones/Masabumi Kikuchi—*Hollow Out* (Philips, 1972)
- Stone Alliance (Steve Grossman, Gene Perla, Don Alias)—*Stone Alliance* (PM, 1975-76)
- Elvin Jones Jazz Machine—*The Truth* (*Heard Live at the Blue Note*) (Half Note, 1999)
- Vik & Gene Perla—*In The Moment* (PM, 2018-19)
- Jon Ballantyne, Gene Perla, Adam Nussbaum—*The Parker Trio* (PM, 2021)

LEST WE FORGET



SUSAN ALCORN

PEDAL STEEL ROYALTY

BY LAURENCE DONOHUE-GREENE

The pedal steel guitar is an instrument with a comparatively recent history in jazz, especially within free-improvising circles and experimental-leaning music. When the news of pedal steel guitar virtuoso Susan Alcorn's Jan. 31 passing (just a few months shy of turning 72) spread through the music community, it brought to many a certain level of shock and sadness, given that her contributions as a leader and valued collaborator had played such a significant part in the pedal steel's newly expanded role.

Cleveland-born Alcorn started playing guitar in middle school, was listening to Edgar Varèse in junior high, and eventually took to the slide guitar, inspired by Robert Johnson, Son House and Blind Willie McTell. By

age 21 she had discovered the unique music world of the pedal steel guitar and quickly became fascinated with its established history as primarily a traditional country and western instrument. She soaked up the influence of one of its greatest practitioners, Buddy Emmons (1937-2015), whom Alcorn referred to as "the Paganini of the pedal steel." Known primarily for his work in country and Western swing, Emmons' 1963 leader debut actually featured a stock of significant jazz names, including saxophonist Jerome Richardson, bassist Art Davis and drummer Charli Persip. This certainly rubbed off on Alcorn's intrigue in the jazzier and freer potential that had barely been tapped and exploited on the instrument.

From Emmons and other great pedal steel players who preceded her, Alcorn took what was established and was soon creating altogether new possibilities on her instrument, recording at least 30 albums as leader or co-leader in a mere 25 years. As an influential trailblazer in her own right, she became appreciated by contemporaries and a younger generation alike. Of the former, French pedal steel player Lionel Wendling remarks that "we were both innovators but she of all the steel players was the only one to promote the instrument in another musical dimension." New Orleans player Dave Easley—

the first to play pedal steel at the Village Vanguard—reflects on how he and Alcorn both placed a premium on individuality, with certain threads in common, such as free jazz and modern classical music: "Susan's mastery of (Astor) Piazzolla melodies was otherworldly and her inventiveness in free form was a delight... (Her death) was truly a great loss for many musical worlds that intersected in one Susan Alcorn."

Of the fresh crop of players whose imprint of Alcorn is undeniable, there's Heather Leigh, whose years-long work with German free jazz saxophonist Peter Brötzmann pressed right up until his death two years ago. Leigh says simply, "Susan is the reason I play pedal steel guitar." Bob Hoffnar, who first met Alcorn when they were living in Texas in the '90s, recalls how she had a deep understanding of the foundations and history of the music and her instrument. "Her ears led her to different places," he says. "She kicked down some big doors for us mortal steel players to try to follow her through."

It was in Houston, TX, that Alcorn had first met legendary jazz musician and educator Conrad Johnson, who she credits as being the one responsible for teaching

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