



# 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](http://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

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 29)

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

and early '70s, it was a music that was faded, and there was a whole group of guys, starting with my generation, who almost singlehandedly pulled this music out of the grave by writing about it, performing it and promoting it. These young musicians who are playing today often don't give a damn about that history. They don't respond to emails and adhere to a very cliquish booking situation.

**TNYCJR:** There's a new movement afoot to reclaim the African-American roots of country music, and that's a field you've explored.

**LOWE:** We can talk about the essential Blackness of jazz, the central Blackness of blues, the central Blackness of rhythm and blues. But when we're talking about country music, it is truly a mixed-race creation. I have a collection of probably about 100 Black performances that essentially qualify as country music in the period from 1910-1930. It's a myth that record companies didn't let Black artists record country or music other than the blues.

**TNYCJR:** It's no secret that you've had lots of health problems. At the same time, your discography shows a renaissance in recording and composing since approximately 2007. This happened despite your physical challenges.

**LOWE:** There were other obstacles. I moved out of Maine in 2016 and living there was a sort of slow torture. I didn't play for about 10 years while I was up there, and was totally snubbed by the state's musical establishment. And then I moved back to Connecticut. The Maine years weren't totally barren. Before I left there, I did *Blues and the Empirical Truth*, which had Matthew Shipp, Roswell Rudd, Marc Ribot and Lewis Porter on it. And Shipp did a whole album of my compositions in 2015 (*Matthew Shipp Plays the Music of Allen Lowe*, Constant Sorrow). The music really got rave reviews. I did really well review-wise, but it didn't lead to an active calendar of gigs.

I didn't get really sick until 2019, with throat cancer. It was treated successfully with radiation and chemotherapy. And then in 2021, I developed a tumor in my sinus, which was ignored a little longer than it should have been. They didn't find it in 2019. And it also was the pandemic. So that complicated things. It was a surgeon in Boston who really saved my life. I had, like, 20 surgeries. I produced quite a number of recordings and books in succession, including *America: The Rough Cut*, *In the Dark* (with Ken Peplowski and others), and then *Louis Armstrong's America*. That latter album is getting some attention now. I honestly am not sure how I did it. As people, we encounter these horrific situations and just start doing stuff. And maybe there was a certain desperation, thinking I was going to die at one point. I didn't know how much longer I'd be around. It was a period of artistic fertility, which is impossible to reproduce.

**TNYCJR:** What does the blues mean to you?

**LOWE:** The blues comes from a long and complex Black tradition, which goes back really far, to the 1840s, when you had the emergence of the minstrel shows and the broadening of Black culture all over the US. At that time, you saw the emergence of a lot of syncopated fiddle tunes and then ragtime a little later on in the century. And that's why I did *America: The Rough Cut*. Even [critic] Robert Christgau, who's not a jazz guy, cited that as one of his top albums of that year. In 2023, Christgau's Consumer Guide gave the album an A- and said "...it generates a surprisingly compact, uncommonly straightforward, and dare I say pop-friendly sense of identity and purpose." I just started to compose like a maniac. And the Armstrong thing was launched just as a guy in New

York, Jonathan Scheuer, decided he wanted to make a documentary around it. It's semi-autobiographical and the working title is *I Should Have Stayed Dead*. We organized some sessions to film that would capture the Armstrong work. Trombonist Ray Anderson is involved, and also guitarist Marc Ribot, who showed a lot of faith in me when no one else did. We're still working on the film. I also just had a recording session with pianist Matt Shipp, trumpeter Daniel Bereket, bassist Colson Jimenez and drummer Ethan Kogan. It's great to work with some brilliant young musicians who are on top of things.

For more info visit [allenlowe.com](http://allenlowe.com). Lowe is at Downtown Music Gallery Jul. 29. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Allen Lowe — *An Avant-Garde of Our Own: Disconnected Works* (Constant Sorrow-ESP-Disk', 1980-2018)
- Allen Lowe — *At The Moment of Impact...* (Fairhaven, 1989-90)
- Allen Lowe/Roswell Rudd — *Woyzeck's Death* (Enja, 1994)
- Allen Lowe — *Blues and the Empirical Truth* (Music & Arts, 2009-11)
- East Axis — *Cool With That* (ESP-Disk', 2020)
- Allen Lowe & The Constant Sorrow Orchestra — *Louis Armstrong's America Vol. 1-4* (ESP-Disk', 2023-24)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

Over the years, Bead has released albums featuring cream of the crop improvisers from the UK, the European continent and beyond, including John Butcher, Wolfgang Fuchs, Evan Parker and Wolter Wierbos. One of its more recent recruits has been bass guitarist and electronics musician, Tremblay, the Switzerland-based Canadian who had been a UK resident for 20 years. Tremblay adds to the Bead story: "My duet: light.box, with (trumpeter) Alex Bonney was recording its third album, and Alex suggested this young gifted free drummer from Leeds: a certain Emil (Karlsen). I was blown away by his musicianship, and he then suggested that we might consider Bead as a label." The label was such a great fit for the music, with its legacy and a new breadth of releases, it gave Tremblay the confidence that it was the best platform possible for the duo's idiomatic improvised music. Earlier this year, Bead released light.box duo's *Eyre*, featuring tenor saxophonist Tom Challenger. Says Tremblay, "There was both a catalog of fantastic works, which is always inspiring, and a horizon of fantastic new releases coming out. Recording was very slick and fresh, with high production values and a dynamic energy that would enable the music to be heard and be part of a living catalogue. In other words, it's a community of music-making people I was proud to be associated with."

Now in its 51st year, Bead remains the boutique label it has been in the past, with no set annual release schedule or limit as to what it will put out. "We only release music when we feel we have something important to say," says Karlsen. As for formats, although a few cassettes were released in the past and some original Bead LPs are still available for sale, the focus now is on compact discs. "As much as I like LPs, CDs are still a much more cost-effective way of producing works of the highest quality," he explains. "We're not consciously avoiding other formats but at the moment CDs seem to make the most sense. It depends on a lot of factors, all of which can of course change."

Summing up, Wachsmann reiterates Bead Records' credo: "The respect for the commitment of participants remains—and it is not about such things as repertoire duplication."

For more info visit [beadrecords.com](http://beadrecords.com)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

her to play over chord changes using pentatonics. As Alcorn said in TNYCJR (Mar. 2021 issue): "Then everything slowly began to make sense...Ornette Coleman and Harmolodics have a lot to do with how I hear improvisation."

Steeped in the country music tradition, combined with the influence of classical and experimental composer Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening concepts, Alcorn's improvising and musical support created a very different, unpredictable musical context (for listeners and fellow musicians, alike, arguably akin to the initial shock of what Ornette Coleman's music did and still does for many). She bolstered her own bands as well as other many-varied projects as a prized partner in sound, from the *Mirage* trio (Clean Feed, 2011) with bassist Michael Formanek and tenor saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, who notes, "She created a sonic well of warmth and clarity from which she delivered all manner of movement and texture," to Nate Wooley's Columbia Icefield and Seven Storey Mountain groups. The trumpeter calls Alcorn "the quintessential American musician."

Wooley was recently mixing their last album together and adds, "It was a moment of laughter and tears as I was confronted over and over again with the little things she had changed on the fly and how they made the group breathe as we caught ourselves in free fall. It was Susan's gift to make sound breathe in this way, reminding us all that music and life — at their best — are malleable and free." Guitarist Mary Halvorson, who played alongside Alcorn in Wooley's Columbia Icefield, and who was a frequent collaborator, knew from the first time she heard the pedal steel player that "It was a rare thing I was witnessing... She had a deep vision and an ability to seamlessly synthesize diverse musical influences into something uncategorizable." The guitarist was also a member of Alcorn's quintet (*Pedernal*, Relative Pitch), and in her own octet (*Away With You*, Firehouse 12), Alcorn served as "both the wildcard and the glue," reveals Halvorson.

Also in the Halvorson Octet was saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock, who additionally co-led a trio with Alcorn and cellist Leila Bordreuil (*Bird Meets Wire*, Relative Pitch). The trio was scheduled to record a follow-up album this year, which ended up getting postponed. Says Laubrock, "Sadly it was too late...her untimely death brought home once again how precious our time with friends and family really is." Ken Vandermark and Joe McPhee, two other saxophonists with whom Alcorn played, recorded as a trio in 2017, *Invitation to a Dream* (Astral Spirits). Vandermark sums up Alcorn's indelible footprint, not only as a pedal steel guitar great but as a music giant with a thoughtful voice and generous personality, which will not to be forgotten: "Though the pedal steel guitar is a rare instrument in improvised music circles, what Susan Alcorn did as an artist proved that it's the player that counts above all...Susan filled a space with music that didn't exist before. Now that she's gone, that space is empty again and will remain so because as an artist and human being, Susan Alcorn was and is irreplaceable."

For more info visit [susanalcorn.net](http://susanalcorn.net). The "Susan Alcorn Memorial Concert" featuring guitarists Mary Halvorson, Nels Cline and Ava Mendoza as well as Ingrid Laubrock, Nate Wooley, Leila Bordreuil and others is at Zürcher Gallery Jul. 30. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Susan Alcorn — *Uma* (Uma Sounds, 1999)
- Susan Alcorn — *And I Await The Resurrection of The Pedal Steel Guitar* (Uma Sounds, 2007)
- Susan Alcorn — *Touch This Moment* (Uma Sounds, 2008-10)
- Ellery Eskelin, Susan Alcorn, Michael Formanek — *Mirage* (Clean Feed, 2011)
- Susan Alcorn, Leila Bordreuil, Ingrid Laubrock — *Bird Meets Wire* (Relative Pitch, 2018)
- Susan Alcorn Quintet — *Pedernal* (Relative Pitch, 2019)