

# BEAD RECORDS

BEYOND A GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY

BY KEN WAXMAN

The late '60s to early '70s was a period when improvised music was burgeoning, yet major record labels made a point of ignoring the trend. As a result, several significant independent imprints were founded. Some disappeared after a few releases, some thrived for years then gave up the struggle, and very few continue to celebrate their long-term survival. One of these labels is London-based Bead, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, moving into middle age but still thriving. Over the years Bead has recorded numerous innovators and is still releasing albums by musicians who have a similar vision and commitment to that of its founders, including violinist Philipp Wachsmann.

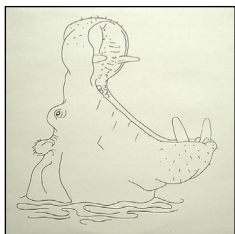
A concert in mid-December 2024 at London's Café Oto, celebrated the label's five decades and *Shadow Figures*, the label's 50th release, with sets by a trio of pianist Steve Beresford, keyboardist Martin Hackett and vocalist Phil Minton, plus a solo by cellist Hannah Marshall (though neither Marshall or Minton have recorded for Bead, the label hopes to rectify that omission soon). *Shadow Figures* is the work of Spaces Unfolding (Neil Metcalfe-flute, Wachsmann-violin, Emil Karlsen-

drums and Pierre Alexandre Tremblay-electronics). Norwegian drummer-percussionist Karlsen is now also involved in Bead's continued growth with Wachsmann, who as part as the band Chamberpot, was on *Bead 2* and who has played on 18 other Bead releases. Wachsmann was, for most of the label's existence, the person who organized and coordinated the sessions. Karlsen, a longtime UK resident, has now become the label's administrator in addition to recording for it. Back in the '70s, recalls Wachsmann, "There was the emergence of amazing music which improvising musicians wanted to issue and control. A criteria for issuing an LP was that the musicians on it were convinced of its value, uniqueness and importance. Bead responded to these developments, and was loosely a collective. We responded to each other's proposals and the commitment and passions of the players. The aim was not to produce regularly to feed a market."

Eventually other musicians who had initially participated in Bead's organization fell away, with only the violinist and pianist Matthew Hutchinson remaining involved. "As each issue was owned by the players on it, the label did not build up a financial float and it became vulnerable to financial circumstances in the world at large," Wachsmann adds. "Much changed with the advent of CDs." Besides other factors, with which all labels had to cope, there were suddenly the challenges that came with recessions, downloading and

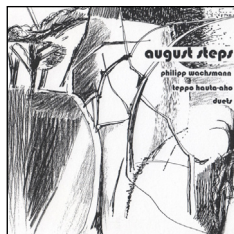
pirate copy entrepreneurs among other things. "So one had to adapt," says Wachsmann. Part of this adaptation was that the violinist was nearing octogenarian status (he turned 80 last August), and so he realized that someone else should help direct Bead. Enter Karlsen, with whom Wachsmann had already played in the London Improvisers Orchestra. In the course of creating the Tern trio (with Hackett and Wachsmann), Karlsen relates that the violinist "approached me about taking on a role with Bead. I remember him speaking about the changing landscape of recorded music and the need for the label to adapt. I was thrilled by the opportunity and accepted without hesitation." In the summer of 2022, Tern released its debut album *In Air*, which marked Karlsen's first project with Bead as both performer and administrator. "The history of Bead continues to be a source of inspiration, not constraint," Karlsen says. "I have always valued the roots of this music and understanding the social and political landscape from which it emerged. Being able to build upon the rich back-catalog is a true privilege, and I'm proud to play a part in the next chapter of Bead's history." He adds that Wachsmann's open and supportive attitude is something he not only admires, but an attribute that has played a crucial role in the sense of freedom he feels working with the label.

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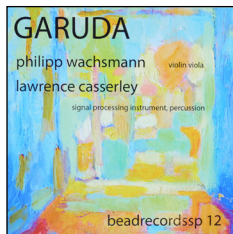
Chamberpot

Richard Breswick/Simon Mayo/Philipp Wachsmann/Tony Wren



August Steps

Philipp Wachsmann/Teppo Hauta-aho



Garuda

Philipp Wachsmann/Lawrence Casserley



Especially For You

Sjöström/Hirt/Wachsmann/Lytton



Eyre

light.box + Tom Challenger

## VOXNEWS

# THE POWER OF WORDS

BY TESSA SOUTER

This month VOXNews highlights three strikingly different albums by lyricists. *Lives of the Saints: Portraits in Song* (Sunnyside) is a collaboration between lyricist, author and producer **David Hajdu** and a roster of acclaimed musicians, including singer **Aubrey Johnson**, pianists Renee Rosnes and Helen Sung, and trumpeter Dave Douglas. Inspired by a book in his mother's library, *Lives of the Saints*—a collection of stories about Catholic saints—Hajdu set out to draw attention to ten remarkable women, including inventor-actor Hedy Lamarr, AIDS activist Mary Fisher and actor-singer-civil rights activist Lena Horne. Each song offers a lyrical snapshot, not of literal sainthood, but of their meaningful contributions to history. Aside from the poignant addition of "Song for My Sister (Barbara Ann Hajdu)"—a tribute to Hajdu's older sister who died young and is still sorely missed—it's a sort of personal prism on other people's lives, rather than an autobiographical outpouring.

At the other end of the spectrum, **Nnenna Freelon's** folk-infused *Beneath the Skin* (Origin) is a deeply autobiographical work, rooted in grief and transformation. The album addresses three profound personal losses: her late husband, renowned architect

Phil Freelon; her sister, Debbie; and the family dog, Basie. Acclaimed as a gifted jazz interpreter, Freelon shows herself here as a powerful songwriter and storyteller, channeling grief into a body of work that is both raw ("Widow Song") and redemptive ("Dark and Lovely", written for her granddaughters). These themes are further explored in her companion book, *Beneath the Skin of Sorrow: Improvisations on Loss* (Duke University Press), expanding the project into a multi-dimensional portrait of heartbreak and healing.

Portuguese transplant, vocalist **Sara Serpa's** *Encounters and Collisions* (Biophilia) is her first album of original songs, all exploring personal themes: migration, family, motherhood, language, missing home, the birth of her son, the death of her father. Known primarily for her experimental, wordless singing and improvising, this is Serpa's first foray into lyric writing. Originally conceived as a collaboration, the project shifted when she realized that the ideas she was responding to in the collaborator's work reflected her own personal journey. "It made sense that I would write about my story," she says. The end result is a deeply-felt exploration of identity and belonging. In contrast, and not a lyricist or a songwriter, UK jazz star **Emma Smith** takes a different path on her US debut, *Bitter Orange* (La Reserve). With her sultry tone and distinctly British accent, Smith pays homage to vocal legends Ella Fitzgerald, Julie London and fellow-Brit, Dame Cleo Laine. Nostalgic yet fresh.

### SEE YOU THERE...

**Richard Cortez** and his velvet baritone will be at the Zinc Bar (Jul. 22). His debut album *Mood Swings* (La Reserve) hit a million streams in its first three months

for good reason. Riding high on her wonderful new release *Dream with Me* (La Reserve), **Naama** will be at The Django (Jul. 7). Don't miss the still indomitable and amazing nonagenarian **Sheila Jordan** when she's back at Mezzrow (Jul. 7). At Saint Peter's Church Jazz Vespers, **Melissa Stylianou** appears with two guitarists, Gene Bertocini and Roni Ben-Hur, along with bassist Josh Marcum (Jul. 6), followed later in the month by **Erli Perez**, joined by Takaaki Oromo and Paul Gill (Jul. 20). Also at Saint Peter's Church, as part of their Jazz on the Plaza, there's **Catherine Russell** (Jul. 17) and **Ben Cassara** (Jul. 24), who will deliver a program of songs celebrating NYC with his quartet, including GRAMMY award-winning drummer Dan Pugach. Catch Pugach later in the month at Dizzy's Club with his partner in life and music, double GRAMMY-winner, **Nicole Zuraitis** (Jul. 24). Jazzmobile Summerfest celebrates the organization's 60th anniversary with Friday concerts at Marcus Garvey Park, including: **Allan Harris** (Jul. 11) who celebrates his latest release, *The Poetry of Jazz* (Blue Llama), a fascinating mix of poetry by Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas and more, blended with spoken word and song; and "don't-miss" **Charenee Wade** (Jul. 25) who fêtes Roberta Flack, Phyllis Hyman and Anita Baker. At 92NY's Jazz in July festival, the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra will feature guitarist-vocalist **John Pizzarelli** (Jul. 15) and will be celebrating Geri Allen and Mary Lou Williams, with rising star **Vanisha Gould**, as well as Nicole Glover, Aaron Diehl, Terri Lyne Carrington and Yasushi Nakamura (Jul. 22). Check out **Kate Baker's** Joni (Mitchell) and James (Taylor) Project, appearing as part of Pangea's Wednesdays series (Jul. 16). "It's the music I grew up on, but with a jazz twist," says Baker.

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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)

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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)