



# LUCIAN BAN

## TRANSYLVANIAN BLUES & ROOTS

BY JOHN SHARPE

Since pianist Lucian Ban moved to NYC from his native Romania in 1999, he has established himself as a distinctive bandleader and composer who marries the jazz vernacular, from bop to free, with traces of an almost chamber music abstraction. Along the way he's forged enduring relationships with collaborators such as saxophonists Alex Harding and Abraham Burton and violist Mat Maneri in bands featuring heavyweights including tubaist Bob Stewart, drummers Nasheet Waits and Billy Hart, and reedmen Evan Parker, Louis Sclavis and John Surman, as well as fronting projects as varied as his reimagining of George Enescu's opera *Œdipe*, a solo piano album, and his post-bop driven *Elevation* quartet.

**THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD:** How did someone from a village in Romania fall in love with jazz?

**LUCIAN BAN:** I grew up in a small village on Béla Bartók's trail, actually where he collected his celebrated field recordings of folk music. Maybe from 13, I got interested in music. And then when I was 17, I became very interested in jazz by listening to a pianist that I did not know anything about. At that time he was Dollar Brand, now Abdullah Ibrahim, the South African master. His touch and his compositions, which are a bridge between American jazz and his home country, spoke to me. And somebody told me, that's jazz, you should talk to this person who knows about it. He was a pianist, and he knew how to play jazz piano, but he never undertook a career because you could never really undertake a jazz career in Romania. I stayed with this gentleman for five years of schooling. And then the regime fell in '89, and suddenly everything was open and I started touring, playing. Then Bucharest Music Academy started a jazz program, and I entered. I also studied in parallel classical composition. I knew by that time, the mid '90s, that I wanted to pursue this to the deep end. I realized I need to get to the US. So in 1999, I moved to New York to study at The New School, where I graduated.

**TNYCJR:** It must have been a big step to move to New York. How did that feel at the time?

**BAN:** It was a cultural shock. You can imagine, from a former communist upbringing, and then suddenly landing in one of the most intense cities in the world. I remember how I felt when I went to The New School the first day, and I had the misfortune to look in the rehearsal rooms. People would play there. And the first one I saw, the band was so good, I freaked out. It was Robert Glasper and the Strickland brothers (saxophonist Marcus and drummer E.J.). These were the best. We were in the same class, but I remember hearing how good they sounded. I said, "oh, my God, I made a mistake." But then things had a flow of their own.

**TNYCJR:** You met baritone saxophonist Alex Harding early on, and that relationship continues to this day.

**BAN:** One of my colleagues at The New School said, "we have to go listen to this amazing baritone player on the Lower East Side." And Alex was playing there in a trio and I talked to him and he was very warm. And he said we should do something. I was so impressed that he was so open to play with me, an unknown that approached him at a concert. We started playing and he started recording some of my compositions because he liked them. When he recorded his leader album for CIMP Records (*Harmology*), the owner was asking about me, "Who is this guy?" So Alex introduced me and he actually got me my first record deal, my American debut, and that's called *Somethin' Holy* (CIMP, 2002), our first duo album. And that relation continues through several projects and countless touring throughout the world. Alex Harding is actually the one who introduced me on the New York scene, to Bob Stewart, the great tuba player. We recorded and toured. And we just put out another album last year (*Blutopia*, Sunnyside). He also introduced me to Abraham Burton, Sam Newsome, Jorge Sylvester, Brad Jones, Mark Helias, Billy Hart, Reggie Nicholson and a lot of people that I got to work with. He was, and still is, a very important figure in my musical life. And we became friends, of course, but he also showed me something that's truly from the source. Alex Harding is one of the greatest blues players in modern jazz. He has a visceral connection to blues. So I got to learn with him on the bandstand.

**TNYCJR:** Another key collaborator has been the extraordinary viola player Mat Maneri.

**BAN:** I first worked with Mat in 2009 when the George Enescu Festival in Bucharest commissioned me to tackle some of Enescu's classical compositions from a jazz perspective. I was intrigued. Together with John Hébert, the great bass player, we put together an octet. Initially I wanted a cello player, Erik Friedlander. And it turned out that he couldn't do it. And then the great drummer Nasheet Waits recommended "you should get this amazing viola player Mat Maneri." I knew his name, I didn't know his music so much. But we got to Bucharest with this stunning group: Ralph Alessi (trumpet), Tony Malaby (tenor), Hébert (bass), Gerald Cleaver (drums), Mat (viola), Albrecht Maurer (violin) and the great Badal Roy (tablas).

There was not much time to rehearse because all these people are so busy. On the arrangement of the famous third sonata, for violin and piano, in Romanian folk character I remember writing "viola and piano improvise up front," but we never got to rehearse this. When we played it at the festival, we improvised and Mat and I felt an instantaneous chemistry. We both said, right after the concert, "we have to work more together as a duo." We did a little tour and with some other groups, and then played a duo concert in Transylvania that was recorded. Manfred Eicher loved it so much he put it out in 2013 on ECM as *Transylvanian Concert*. We developed a way of playing together. We are the same age, born in 1969, and even though we grew up in a completely

different situation, we see music and the world in similar ways. Playing together over 17 years throughout the world allowed us to develop this language where we can play from nothing. It's not free. We build structures. Mat is brilliant. He taught me more about freedom and he elevated me in terms of my composition and in my playing.

**TNYCJR:** Your recent activities have involved exploring your cultural heritage and especially the field recordings of Bartók. Can you talk more about that project and how that came about?

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

**BAN:** In 2018, an organization in Timisoara (the biggest city in western Transylvania), which produces concerts, said: “In three years Timisoara is becoming a European capital of culture, and as you know, Bartók collected folk songs in Transylvania, so would you, maybe with one of your collaborators, develop and reimagine this collection?” I was stunned by what I found. Between 1907 and 1917, Bartók brought back in a book over 3,600 songs and he called it his life work. It changed the way he composed. I’ve discovered an extraordinary repository from more than 100 years ago, a music that I didn’t know because folk songs from his collections did not survive. I’ve never recognized any one of them. Only once in our touring of Romania, the mom of somebody recognized one song and she was in her 80s.

When Mat and I accepted the project, which was over three years—and it involved workshops, commissioning—we both said whom we would like to invite, and immediately we both said the same name, John Surman, without even discussing it. We both loved John’s music for decades. And we also knew that with John Potter (of Hillard Ensemble) he investigated John Dowland’s folk music of England and several other projects. There’s a certain pastoral quality to Surman’s playing that comes out of the folk music of England. He has this uncanny way of playing the melody of folk songs in his own language and his own voice, but still maintaining the unique quality that makes the folk song a folk song. So he was an ideal partner for our project, as we would discover after that year, 2018, when we workshopped for nine days in Timisoara; we rehearsed and then we recorded *Transylvanian Folk Songs*.

**TNYCJR:** That’s a wonderful record.

**BAN:** But what happened, as we got to tour after the pandemic, is that John was extraordinary with us in that he didn’t act like a special guest, especially given his stature compared to us. He was fully immersed and it became an organic trio. And the music grew immensely. We feel so lucky, Mat and I; it’s one of the highlights of our musical careers. After starting in 2021, we got to tour Europe and play major halls and festivals, which was very nice. And the repertoire that we recorded in Timisoara changed radically over four years of touring, to such an extent that we had to give different titles to these melodies. We basically stopped playing the themes. Even though we had the set list, somebody would start playing a motive from the original theme, and then we were gone.

**TNYCJR:** And this is what is on the two superb new recordings of the trio, *Cantica Profana* and *The Athenaeum Concert*.



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**BAN:** It’s a major release event for Sunnyside Records because it’s both a CD and vinyl, and each one contains different material. The CD contains recordings from several festivals and concerts in Europe between 2022 to 2023. These recordings are from Strasbourg Jazz Festival, Luxembourg and Switzerland. We played many more festivals but these were recorded pristine multi-track. And then the vinyl is a recording from June 2024, one of John’s last concerts because he retired from touring. It was done in this stunning venue, the Romanian Atheneum in Bucharest.

**TNYCJR:** Usually performance codifies music, whereas this is the opposite, it’s changing all the time.

**BAN:** Exactly. Over these years of touring the music changed drastically and it became something else. A lot of extended techniques that none of us were doing in 2018 came to life, I think out of the sheer force of Bartók’s folk songs. What we discovered is that Mat can bring influences and techniques that he was using from different parts of the world all together, like South Korean or Indian or African stuff that he plays on viola and they work with folk songs from Transylvania. I started using a lot of extended techniques in terms of approaching the piano, like muting the strings and using it as a percussive instrument, or like some sort of cimbalom or dulcimer. So we would go in places that we didn’t before. John was almost trying to play microtonal too, because Mat was playing microtonal so much. It’s one of his marks. All this happened in these years of touring and it changed the music and it changed us.

**TNYCJR:** So, with John Surman no longer touring, what does that mean for the future of the Bartók field recordings project?

**BAN:** Well, we’re doing another installment this year with Gerald Cleaver and a great bass clarinet player from Rome, Marco Colonna, and we’re in talks to do another installment if we find the presenters and the interest. People keep wanting to do it because the projects come out really nice and powerful. We’ve been talking with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, with some other people too, to see if we can make it work in the future. And I’m looking forward to touring again with Alex Harding early next year, and with my group Elevation as well, in Europe.

*For more info visit [lucianban.com](http://lucianban.com). Ban plays duo with Mat Maneri at Barbès Sep. 13. See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Alex Harding & Blutopia – *The Calling* (Jazzaway, 2005)
- Albrecht Maurer, Lucian Ban, Mat Maneri – *Fantasm (The Loft Sessions)* (Nemu, 2012-13)
- Mat Maneri, Evan Parker, Lucian Ban – *Sounding Tears* (Clean Feed, 2014)
- Alex Harding/Lucian Ban – *Dark Blue* (Sunnyside, 2018)
- Lucian Ban – *Ways Of Disappearing (Piano Solo)* (Sunnyside, 2021)
- Lucian Ban, John Surman, Mat Maneri – *The Athenaeum Concert* (Sunnyside, 2024)

(CARAMOOR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

(“In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee”). Ryu can be mightily percussive in an outdoor setting, but she also has nuance and a keen interpretive awareness of what she’s playing. She also has plenty of soul. Back at the Sunken Garden, tenor saxophonist **Sisonke Xonti** brought his South African jazz sensibilities to the fore and, with bassist Tim Norton, created a synergy of voices. Norton explored the outer limits of his instrument from drumming with his bow to testing the tensile strength of its strings. The pair went through a cycle of tones and rhythms, pulling out a litany of tech stops on their respective instruments

along the way. It was over to Friends Field for the **Luther Allison** Trio with Mikey Migliore (bass) and David Alvarez III (drums) supporting the pianist. This youthful ensemble played a trad combo set employing the tried-and-true trio formulae on such standards as “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was”. And just as yours truly was departing to catch the next act, on came the morning’s singer, Imani Rousselle!

That next act was a surprising disappointment, especially for the august stage of the Spanish Courtyard. The billing was the **Jazz House Legacy Band**’s “Pays Tribute to Sarah Vaughan” set. But, as the seven members of the band entered, the leader announced there was no singer and that the program would be altered. The quality of the music offered pointed to moving on. That decision led to one of two festival highlights: **Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton**, a vocalist, raconteur, historian and multi-instrumentalist specializing in blues and jazz from pre-World War II. At one point, as he tuned his 1848 banjo, Paxton delivered an entertaining discourse on the Reconstruction era, race relations, and, of course, music, playing “Old Dog Blues”. Switching to harmonica he played an astounding, sound-effects-filled “Muscle Shoals Blues” and then on piano, a hearty “Michigan Water Blues”.

In Friends Field, a *Groundhog Day* moment was experienced with vocalist **Hannah Gill** and her sidemen, Luis Salcedo (guitar), Philip Ambuel (bass) and Adam Ray (drums) offering a set of languid standards. Gill delivered “Hard Hearted Hannah”, “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To” and a laconic version of Ellington’s “Love You Madly”. In the Sunken Garden, trumpeter **Adam O’Farrill** and harpist **Maeve Gilchrist** played a succession of seemingly random sounds, Gilchrist sometimes stumming her instrument, but more often assaulting it to deliver an atonal sonic palette of plucks and jabs along with riffs, blasts and squonks from her partner. The second highlight of the festival appeared in Friends Field in the form of drummer-percussionist extraordinaire, **Obed Calvaire**, with Godwin Louis (alto), Emmanuel Michael (guitar), Harold St. Louis (keyboards), Addi Laffose (bass) and Delisfort (piano). The group played the music from Calvaire’s 2024 album, *150 Million Gold Francs*, a musical exploration of Haiti’s “tragic past.” Selections included the title track, as well as “Just Friends” and “Haiti’s Journey”. Miami-born, the leader is of Haitian descent, and his and the group’s amazing artistry and cohesion came through in every selection, which included, at times, chants, ritualistic and Caribbean references, and, of course, a vibrant display from this virtuoso revealing the power of the drum, recalling Ellington’s 1959 suite, *A Drum Is a Woman*. Calvaire may have been leading a group under a tent on a stage in a grassy field, but he took us all to church.

The evening headliner in the Venetian Theater, **Arturo O’Farrill and the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra**, travelled north to perform at Caramoor the day before their Birdland Sundays gig. There was a great deal of narrative about the legacy of Afro-Cuban rhythms and much about his father, Arturo “Chico” O’Farrill (1921-2001), the Cuban composer, arranger and conductor, proponent of “Cubop” and a force in Latin jazz in New York. There were long homages, such as to “Mother Africa”, a long discourse on “what is Latin music,” because Latin America is a very big place after all, and a very long symphonic work by the leader. As the night grew long, audience members began to dribble out, perhaps eager to beat the traffic or exit the parking lot before that simple act got bogged down in logistics.

The take-away of this year’s CJF was that of surprising disappointment, particularly since the festival was curated by the august JALC. Lacking well-known and/or established artists, there was a serious lack of wow-factor and vibrancy. Still, it was a pleasant day out and attendees, especially those with young’uns frolicking on the lawns, were having a great time socializing to a jazz-infused musical backdrop.

*For more info visit [caramoor.org](http://caramoor.org)*