



# ELI YAMIN

## BOPTIZED IN THE BLUES

### BY TOM GREENLAND

"It's not just a song for me/Take a breath and you will see/Why the blues has the power to be/A healing song, a healing song."

So sang sixteen remarkably talented middle-schoolers last June as they concluded a rousing performance of the jazz musical *A Message from Saturn* at Lehman College in The Bronx. Their parents and friends, seated on the auditorium's risers, couldn't help but smile and sing along. They'd just been "boptized" in the blues spirit. Pianist-vocalist-educator Eli Yamin co-wrote the musical with Clifford Carlson at Louis Armstrong Middle School (LAMS) in Queens. The play—inspired by Mary Lou Williams and Sun Ra—premiered in 2001. This performance featured students from Yamin's after-school program, Jazz Power Youth (JPY), backed by the Intergenerational Arkestra, a professional quintet featuring Ra alumni Bruce Edwards (guitar) and the late David F. Gibson (drums), who tragically passed only two months later.

Yamin isn't only a great teacher-composer, he's an expressive singer-pianist. His new *Squeeze in Tight*, with Zaid Nasser (alto), Elias Bailey (bass) and Gibson (drums), features former and current students on several tracks. There is a cover of Elizabeth Cotten's finger-picked "Freight Train", which moves from dreamy piano figurations to a churchy backbeat, as well tunes associated with Little Walter ("My Babe") and Elvis Presley ("Heartbreak Hotel") spurred by Yamin's saucy, Southern-fried singing. His originals range from rhythm and blues (the title track) to swing/bebop ("Listen to the Young Cats") and gospel ("Let His Love Take Me Higher"), soulful expression the common thread among them.

So where does Yamin get his blues power? "I'm trying to get our young people in proximity to the veterans of the music, to get them to feel the vibration," he explains. "I invent all these different scenarios to make that happen, like a jazz musical where Sun Ra Arkestra members are playing with 12- and 13-year-old kids, with a common purpose to tell the story. The kids don't even realize what's going on, but they're getting this boptization, this boptism! [laughs]" Yamin learned this firsthand, gigging with veteran drummer Walter Perkins in a trio at Jamaica, Queen's Skylark Lounge, where he witnessed the power of jazz to renew and replenish weary club clientele at the end of their working week. "Blues has always been my home base," he confirmed.

Boptized at three, Yamin tried to play piano as soon as his hands could touch the keys. He went crazy for WBGO FM radio at 12, and listened to blues vocalists and guitarists, trying to copy those sounds on piano. At 13, he spun jazz LPs on his school radio station. His style was inspired by pianists Bross Townsend, Herman Foster and Dorothy Donegan, who played tremolos that made the piano "sing like a fat tenor saxophone." He learned harmony from pianist-jazz educator Barry Harris, who "created a community for learning where people had to let go of their ego, their pride and what they already knew. He helped us relinquish all that,

open ourselves up and feel part of it." Yamin likewise tells his own students: "This tradition is yours, you're part of it."

In high school, he hung with actors, attending shows at a local theater promoting black music and art. In college, Amiri Baraka, a mentor, invited Yamin's band to perform at music/poetry productions in the poet's basement. At 17, Yamin DJ-ed jazz at Rutgers College (now Rutgers University), and at 18 he was an on-air host at WBGO, where he produced jazz history programs and DJ-ed shows for seven years. There he met Benny Carter, Dizzy Gillespie, Milt Hinton, Hank Jones, Max Roach, Phil Woods and other luminaries; he also went to the homes of Art Blakey, Ray Barretto, Roy Eldridge, Abdullah Ibrahim and Abbey Lincoln for interviews, endearing himself to these jazz elders with his youthful but sincere enthusiasm.

Yamin moved to Manhattan in 1990, leading blues and swing bands, serving as MD on a tour of Duke Ellington's *Sophisticated Ladies*, and landing his first teaching job at a nursery school where he engaged tots by combining songs with stories and movement. After a European tour with legendary tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet, Yamin worked with elementary school kids. For five years he produced traditional musicals at LAMS, but beginning in 1998 co-wrote and produced five new jazz musicals with Carlson. Besides boptizing the students, the musicals provided income for working musicians and a forum that would "help the rest of society see the value of jazz and jazz musicians." In 2005, after earning a master's degree in education, Yamin student-taught at LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts, mentoring musicians such as alto saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin. He was then hired as the first director of Jazz at Lincoln Center's (JALC) Middle School Jazz Academy. JALC head Wynton Marsalis encouraged him to teach "free jazz," to help students get an effective sound, develop confidence and project their energy. Yamin developed a curriculum emphasizing African-American cultural roots and aesthetics, foregrounding the blues in a larger social context, as a whole way of looking at the world, "as a way to encourage students, especially our African-American kids, who've had so much of this music taken out of their schools, to see themselves in it."

After more than a decade at JALC working with children and adults, "Dr. E" (his current moniker, acquired after earning his DMA in Jazz Piano in 2022 from SUNY Stony Brook) wanted to bring his know-how back to his Inwood, upper Manhattan neighborhood, to combine theater and voice and jazz, and to be a mentor to any future Lakecia Benjamins (who came through Sergio Larios' music program at IS143 Middle School in Washington Heights). His solution was the now well-established Jazz Power Initiative, a non-profit, accessible-to-all, after-school program for children and adults, which produces numerous workshops and 25-30 mostly free concerts per year.

For anyone needing a boptism and rebirth in the blues, look no further.

For more info visit [jazzpower.org](http://jazzpower.org). Yamin's album release concert is at ACTS at The Eliza Sep. 12 and he plays with the Duke Ellington Center Big Band at the Duke Ellington Memorial Sep. 28 (presented by American Tap Dance Association and Duke Ellington Center for the Arts). See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Claire Daly — *Swing Low* (Koch, 1999)
- Solar — *Suns of Cosmic Consciousness* (Aztac, 2005)
- Claire Daly Band — *Rah! Rah!* (s/r-Ride Symbol, 2008)
- Eli Yamin — *You Can't Buy Swing* (s/r, 2008)
- Eli Yamin/Evan Christopher — *Louie's Dream (For Our Jazz Heroes)* (s/r, 2012)
- Eli Yamin and Blues Band — *Squeeze In Tight* (s/r, 2025)

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SEPTEMBER 2025	JAZZ CALENDAR
<b>TUESDAYS 8–11 PM</b> Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests	<b>WEDNESDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Caleb Wheeler Curtis Trio + David Adewumi (9/3) David Berkman Quartet (9/10) Marc Copland Trio (9/17) Kanoa Mendenhall (9/24)
<b>THURSDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with guests: Marc Copland + Tony Martucci (9/4) Owen Howard (9/11) Gary Versace (9/18) Ben Monder and Tom Rainey (9/25)	<b>NO COVER</b> ONE DRINK MINIMUM
<b>FRIDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Jerome Sabbagh (9/5) Alex Goodman (9/12) Alfredo Colon (9/19) Sylvester Germaine (9/26)	
<b>SATURDAYS 6 &amp; 7:30 PM DUET SET(s)</b> Dan Weiss (9/6) Tony Malaby (9/13) Adam Cruz (9/20) Devon Gates (9/27)	



**Akua Dixon, Cellist,  
Composer, Conductor, Educator  
with Poet Betty Neal  
Sunday, September 14 4:40 pm  
Soapbox Gallery \$20**



**Save the dates!!!**

**10th Anniversary Celebration with  
THE MAKANDA PROJECT  
October 26 - Park Slope**

**ROBERT RUTLEDGE QUINTET  
November 9 - Soapbox Gallery**

**GHA'IL RHODES BENJAMIN  
December 14 - Soapbox Gallery**

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