



# MELANIE DYER

**STRINGS AND NEED FOR CONNECTION**  
BY SOPHIA VALERA HEINECKE

Melanie Dyer began playing viola at age nine, notably training with the late William Lincer, principal violist of the New York Philharmonic (1943-72), among others. She moved to NYC in 1981, eventually founding the group WeFreeStrings in 2011 in Harlem at her home. The strings ensemble became part of Bb Universe, a parlor series featuring underground public performances, open rehearsals, film, theater and activism. Dyer is also notably a composer, concentrating in creative, improvised and through-composed music, and is an integral member of Siren Xypher (with pianist Mara Rosenbloom and “vocalizer” Kyoko Kitamura), which the M<sup>3</sup> Festival presents at Roulette this month.

**THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD:** The feeling that beauty, joy, suffering and hardship coexist throughout our lives—that contrast helps us make meaning. That is so present in William Parker’s liner notes for his ten-disc set, *Migration of Silence Into and Out of The Tone World* (Centering, 2018-20), in which you play on the tenth and final side with the Universal Tonality String Quartet: with cellist Dara Bloom and violinists Jason Kao Hwang and Gwen Laster.

**MELANIE DYER:** William is a mystic. He communicates wisdom and beauty. I was thinking about how I got into the free jazz and creative improvisation scene. For me, it was finding the Arts for Art community. Cooper-Moore baptized me, and William is the Holy Ghost. Gwen Laster saved me, because of some very traumatic shifts in my family life: I have four kids. I lost my home. I had stopped playing. Gwen was supporting me as a friend, as a sister string player. Her hiring me got me back into the string community. I was always on the horn line when I was playing at local clubs, such as Harlem’s St. Nick’s Pub and Boston’s Connolly’s Stardust Room. Then, I ended up embracing and being embraced by the free improvisation community. Even with all those years of matriculating on bandstands, that’s where I found my voice.

**TNYCJR:** On the WeFreeStrings debut, *Fulfillment*, “Hope and Fulfillment” was written for your children.

**DYER:** For all of the kids, yeah. WeFreeStrings started rehearsing in that same brownstone. That was one of the ways we, as a collective, organized performances. So we would get together and rehearse. We had parlor performances that were well attended. We always had food. I believe in food. Most of my rehearsals, I try to feed musicians. Then I lost that house, and my family became very unmoored, but when we finally settled in, and I started playing again, I wanted to bring back WeFreeStrings. I called Charles Burnham and I was like, “hey man, you wanna record this?” And his response was, “What took you so long?” The tracks on *Fulfillment* were my first compositions, my first attempts at composing. It was also my first attempt at understanding how to create a dialogue through free improvisation. Raising my children in that house is an

integral part of my creative voice and that dialogue. The paraphrases are free improvisations, and the other five tunes have a written framework.

I think the first meetings Fred [Ho] convened for Scientific Soul Sessions were at our house, on 126th Street. That’s where all of the ideas were put on the table. There was much discussion about the social and political: bringing Israeli refuseniks, who talked about their experiences in the IDF, their refusal to take part in what they were being ordered to do in Palestine; Indigenous leaders who came to speak about land sovereignty. The representatives were talking about issues within their own nations and communities, and a woman asked the question: How do you change consciousness, elevate consciousness on a mass level? They said: “Music. Music is the way that we, as human beings, can change consciousness on a mass level.” Sun Ra said something very similar about trans-molecularization. We know that music changes us. We know that it makes us feel differently, that we can learn things, not always through words. These are transformations that occur within us on an imperceptible level.

Years ago, I was listening to Michio Kaku, the physicist, discussing vibrations. Vibrations travel endlessly like any other matter. You travel endlessly through this earth and you’re in a constant state of evolutionary motion. Musicians are vehicles for something greater than the sum of our parts, communicating through us. I’ve experienced that on the bandstand. When you got a rhythm section and they’re carrying you, you reach this point where you really feel yourself as that vehicle. You’re having this out-of-body experience, playing stuff that you didn’t even realize could happen through you. It’s an experience that I am constantly reaching for. And I want to be ready for it when it happens. Hence, the practice room, scales, trying to expand one’s vocabulary, being on the bandstand with other people, paying attention and learning from them. That’s where I’ve learned most of what I know outside of studying viola repertoire and orchestral repertoire. Every time I get on the bandstand, it’s a lesson.

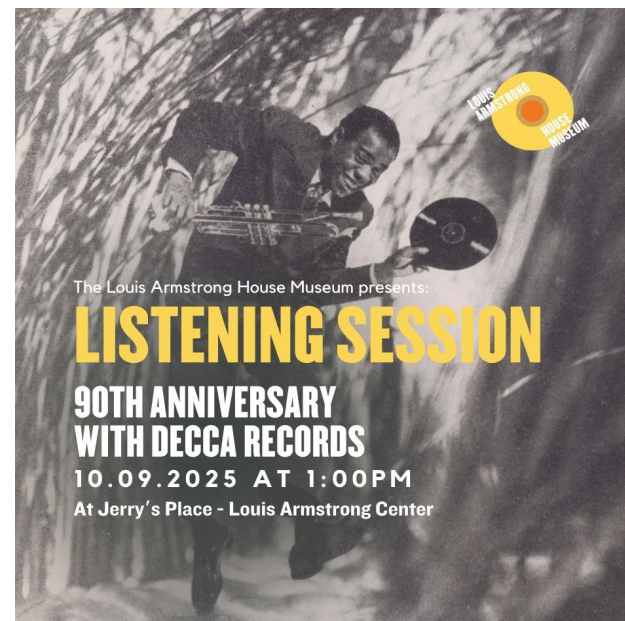
**TNYCJR:** The expertise that you possess in moving back and forth between this high-level improvising world and also the conservatory world—it’s not defined by one art practice or another.

**DYER:** Since I was a kid I wrote poetry and short stories. I’ve always done visual art. When I was 14, I apprenticed with a silversmith. I have always sought different creative outlets. In 2022, I started working on a jazz oratorio *Incalculable Likelihood*. The stories that come through the oratorio: exploring family, memory and community. This idea of resilience, of triumph over literal centuries of oppression, because there is this connection. It’s not just a connection among human beings. It’s really a connection among everything that lives, that draws or emits energy. This last year has been a crazy convergence of grace that has allowed me to do

work I never thought I would be doing. I was introduced to Mabou Mines as a violist for the Vicksburg Project. I received the Jerome Hill Artist Fellowship and a Ragdale residency in Chicago. Getting this support allowed me to do the concert version, which premiered at Vision Festival. *Incalculable Likelihood* is my first composition for a 12-piece ensemble (it will be presented at Mabou Mines Dec. 5-6).

My compositions tell me what they want to become. The idea for the oratorio came from a set of cassette tapes of my grandmother singing 17 hymns she wrote for Temple Bethel in Belleville, VA. I inherited these

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 30)



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(DC JAZZFEST CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

cross-genre musical ventures (e.g. he continues his decades-long association with Sting), he delivered a great performance with his longtime quartet of Joey Calderazzo (piano), Eric Revis (bass) and Justin Faulkner (drums). Their set included “Long As You Know You’re Living Yours”, from the group’s recently released Keith Jarrett tribute, *Belonging* (Blue Note). Bassist **Marcus Miller**, who continues to carry the jazz fusion torch, performed a rollickingly funky set (featuring trumpeter Russell Gunn and saxophonist Donald Hayes in the frontline), ending in the most Washingtonian way possible, by bringing out a District legend: Sugar Bear of Washington’s Experience Unlimited (also known as EU), the go-go/funk band most popular in the ‘80s and early ‘90s. Together they performed EU’s 1988 crossover hit “Da Butt” (which Miller wrote). The crowd lapped it up. It wasn’t jazz, but it was a blast.

Unlike Miller’s fusion, Sunday’s co-headliner could not have been more straight-ahead in honoring the jazz tradition. Legendary bassist **Ron Carter**’s quartet gave the audience a characteristically masterful performance. The band was in a jovial mood, too, with Carter treating the audience to some dry humor, eliciting genuine laughs, though not before playing for 45 minutes without pause, a feat for anyone, even those of us who aren’t 88 years young like Carter. Serving as DCJF co-artist-in-residence, he also serves on the festival organizer’s Board of Directors.

While the local political climate was never far from thought throughout the festival, the artists mostly avoided making overt political statements (although local pianist-vocalist Eric Byrd proudly showed off his Barack Obama socks). One notable appearance was vocalist **Christie Dashiell**, who recently participated

on an album update of Max Roach’s seminal *We Insist!* with drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. Dashiell mostly stuck to her recent *Journey in Black* album, though, delivering poetic, meaningful reflections, often in hushed tones (though sometimes interrupted by sound bleed from another festival stage). Other notable artists participating in the festival included young straight-ahead piano star Emmet Cohen, veteran guitarist John Scofield, beloved husband-wife gospel duo The Baylor Project, alto saxophone master Gary Bartz and vocalist extraordinaire Jazzmeia Horn. Local bassist **Corcoran Holt**, who served with Carter as another co-artist-in-residence of the festival and led late-night jam sessions after the main performances, also fronted a supergroup featuring Billy Harper (tenor), Sean Jones (trumpet), Steve Turre (trombone, conch shells), George Cables (piano) and Jeff “Tain” Watts (drums).

Local trio, **The String Queens**, three Washington public schoolteachers, treated the audience with their various musical interpretations. DCJF also partnered with several embassies to bring international jazz stars to Washington, including Italian pianist **Dado Moroni**. International jazz bands were additionally heard competing in the finals of Washington’s annual DCJazzPrix competition, with last year’s winner, the **Hiruy Tirfe** Quartet, performing on the final day of the festival. There were also some remarkable educational offerings, including a dream panel of Allen, Carter and Cables, as well as the festival’s Artistic Director (as well as author and NEA Jazz Master) Willard Jenkins, moderated by DCJF President/CEO Sunny Sumter. The panelists, all absolute treasures, imbued several lifetime’s worth of jazz experience to attendees, who were privileged to have been in their presence.

The festival concluded with a tribute to the recently departed and much-loved and venerated Latin jazz icon **Eddie Palmieri**, featuring Palmieri band alumni (including trumpeter Brian Lynch, trombonist Jimmy Bosch, bassist Luques Curtis and Little Johnny Rivero on congas) with some of his family also in attendance. The band was tight and energetic, performing brilliant renditions of such classics as “Puerto Rico” and “EP Blues”. The tribute turned out to be a perfect way to conclude a marvelous festival, with audience members dancing in the aisles and the same warm, loving feeling continuing to permeate all concerned, as it had from the start.

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

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Botswana to London to Stockholm and back to London, where he was discovered in 1987 at Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club, performing on piano and saxophone. But by this time he was already dealing with diabetes and mental health issues. Nonetheless, in 1991, he recorded his debut album as leader, *Celebration* (World Circuit) with, among others, Courtney Pine (soprano), Jean Toussaint (tenor), Marvin “Smitty” Smith (drums) and Michael Bowie, who would become Mseleku’s longtime bassist. He gained critical praise and got the attention of French music entrepreneur Jean Phillippe-Allard, who brought Mseleku to the US and became a key influence. There he met and played with the likes of Joe Henderson, Randy Weston, Abbey Lincoln and Elvin Jones. In NYC, he lived with Kendrick, part of Allard’s Gitanes troupe, who introduced Mseleku to a wide range of New Yorker pianists. Says Kendrick, “We learned as much music from Jean Phillippe as much as the [other, better known] cats.”

From 1992-97, Mseleku released four albums for Verve/Polygram, mostly post-bop explorations with African-tinged hybrids: *Meditations* consists of two long solo pieces that established his spiritual inclinations and his lilting African-scatting voice; *Timelessness* with guests including Henderson, Lincoln, Elvin Jones and Pharoah Sanders; the trio excursion *Star*

*Seeding* (with Charlie Haden and Billy Higgins) and *(Beauty of Sunrise)* featuring cornetist Graham Haynes. According to Hawkins, “Ntuli Street” (one of the tunes on *Timelessness*) has Wynton Marsalis’ fingerprints on the arrangement. After that fruitful period, Mseleku made one more attempt to establish himself in South Africa. But his stated vision for his music to “support a change in the consciousness of the world as the solution to our problems” was stymied by the travails of post-apartheid change and his increasing mental and physical problems, exacerbated by the loss of his prized Coltrane mouthpiece in a robbery and his Steinway upright in a bad business deal.

Ultimately, Mseleku returned to London in 2003, reestablished himself, and recorded *Home At Last* that year. His diabetes restricted him from moving forward, though, and he was found dead in 2008. His final 2003 recordings surfaced in 2021, over a dozen years after his passing, with the posthumously released solo piano album *Beyond the Stars* (Tapestry Works). Bheki Mseleku’s musical footprint and legacy continues to be felt and honored to this day, with a tribute being held this month at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

For more info visit [facebook.com/groups/604998146297601](https://facebook.com/groups/604998146297601). A Bheki Mseleku tribute is at Rose Theater Oct. 24-25 (featuring Nduduzo Makhathini and Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- The Drive — *Can You Feel It* (RCA Victor, 1975)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Meditations* (Samadhi-Verve, 1992)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Timelessness* (Verve, 1993)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Star Seeding* (Verve, 1995)
- Bheki Mseleku — *(Beauty of Sunrise)* (Verve, 1995)
- Bheki Mseleku — *Beyond the Stars* (Tapestry Works, 2003)

(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

cassettes and have been sitting on the tapes for about three decades. I started thinking about the possibility of our existence, of being here at all, at this time, in this space, together. Who are the people that led up to our existence? I think as a Black person in the US there’s only so far you can go back. Black memory, our histories, our stories are the most powerful weapons we have against erasure. Not weapons, but the most powerful resistance. This interconnectedness, this great sacred web that connects all of us. This environment, this atmosphere of extreme fear, can only be met with extreme courage, radical courage, in whatever form you can engage, with whatever resources you have. Building spaces where we can continue to tell the truth. I’m convinced that in the times that we’re living in now, we have to combine art, medicine, food, all of the necessities that may be restricted. This is really a time for knowing your neighbors. making sure that we have certain kinds of necessities. Open doors, open pantries, open closets, whatever, because not too long ago, something like this would have seemed unimaginable. But I do believe in redemption, and I do believe in resilience. I have to.

For more info visit [melanievioladyer.weebly.com](http://melanievioladyer.weebly.com). Dyer is at *Roulette with Siren Xypher* and *with Vertical Sounds* Oct. 4 (part of M<sup>3</sup> Festival). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Salim Washington — *Live at St. Nick’s* (CIMPol, 2007)
- WeFreeStrings — *Fulfillment* (s/r, 2017)
- WeFreeStrings — *Love in the Form of Sacred Outrage* (ESP-Disk’, 2021)
- Ununu (Todd Capp, Kurt Ralske, Melanie Dyer, Anna Gruman) — *Ununu* (Innova, 2021-22)
- Sun Ra Arkestra — *Lights on a Satellite* (In+Out, 2024)
- Gwen Laster New Muse 4tet — *Keepers of the Flame* (Muffymarie, 2025)

