



JEFF PARKER

EXPLORING STATIC SPACES

BY ANDREW SCHINDER

The CT-born, VA-raised, genre-smashing guitarist Jeff Parker—who works with jazz, electronic, rock and improvisational groups—studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston before moving to Chicago in 1991. At age 58, he's been at the forefront of sonic innovation for decades, yet he's just getting started: at the end of last year, the L.A.-based (since 2013) Parker and his longstanding jazz combo, ETA IVtet, released their debut studio album, *The Way Out of Easy*, to widespread acclaim. In addition, the quintessential post-rock band Tortoise, of which Parker is a longtime member, has just released *Touch* (its first album in almost a decade) and will be performing in NYC this month as well as collaborating with the Chicago Philharmonic this fall for a series of concerts. Parker also continues his active session work, with recent appearances on albums by trumpeter Marquis Hill and pianist Paul Cornish, among others.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: You live in Altadena, CA. How have you, your family and your community been holding up since the Southern California fires earlier this year?

JEFF PARKER: Oh, we're good. We actually didn't lose our house. We just moved back in, maybe six weeks ago, so we've been displaced for about eight months. We're doing all right. It's just been a strange year, with the weird political climate we're living through.

TNYCJR: It's a strange year for everyone, and I can only imagine how strange it is for someone in your position, whose job it is to make art. On a similar note, you've done a really great job carving a niche for yourself and developing a fan base while—and correct me if I'm wrong—making few, if any, artistic compromises. You've achieved success while seeming to stay true to yourself as an artist.

PARKER: I always just look at what I do as making art. When in school I learned the tools that I needed to pursue a career as a working musician. And I never really turned down any gigs. I ended up in all kinds of different situations, whether playing pop to avant garde or electronic music, and I looked at it all the same. I try to elevate whatever situation I might find myself in. And sometimes those situations are for commerce, for me to make a living. But I understand that I'm making art too.

TNYCJR: Where do you see yourself at the intersection of art and commerce? During the recording process do you ever feel that you're going in one direction or the other?

PARKER: I like people to relate to what I'm doing. I'm very conscious that music, for me, it's bigger than just what I'm doing. I like to make music that connects with people, but not to water it down and make it into something that they expect. It has to come from me and the ideas that I have.

TNYCJR: That's what makes your music exciting and always a great listen. So you moved to L.A. over ten years ago. How has your music changed with your relocation? And what lasting impact do you think Chicago, where you previously lived, has had in your music since?

PARKER: What changed with me moving to L.A. was more about the community and the other musicians I was collaborating and interacting with. The sensibility here is much more different than in Chicago. So I don't think I really changed anything about what I was doing, but the landscape changed. And that made the music different. Los Angeles is an industry town. I was really happy that I had moved to L.A. at a later part in my career, after I had 25 years of being ensconced in the Chicago creative music community, which is very left-of-center. It's off the beaten path, with a lot of improvisation and a lot of edge. And I came to L.A. with that experience, so I didn't have to compete in a more commercial music space. I was glad that I had my creative music experiences behind me, which is such a big part of what I do.

TNYCJR: And then you have that background that you can use to navigate the L.A. scene. I'm sure there are some benefits, such as the ability to make contacts, but maybe in terms of the creativity aspect of your artistry—I imagine Chicago, based on where it is, gives you the freedom to do so much more than places like L.A. or New York.

PARKER: I still think Chicago is the creative music capital of the world. Chicago has never had to cater to the whims of the New York scene or the commercialism of Los Angeles.

TNYCJR: "Freakadelic" from *The Way Out of Easy* is a banger. Your album *The New Breed* is very beat-centric, with a lot of hip-hop influences. *Forfolks*, on the other hand, is more quiet and meditative. So when you embark on a new project, do you know in which direction you're going to go in terms of the vibe at the outset? Or do you sort of see where the creative process takes you?

PARKER: It's more of the latter. A lot of my music is grounded in concepts. I would say the music I've been making, maybe the last 12 or so years, has been exploring these static spaces, where there are a lot of loops, a lot of repetition, a very intentional kind of plane. You find a zone and you stay in it, and it's kind of what it's about. I discovered the meditative headspace when I started to explore production and making beats and sampling things, and getting into this zone where not a lot really needed to happen to be able to exploit this useful space.

TNYCJR: Continuing with your process, your recent albums, *The Way Out of Easy* and the live *Mondays at*

the Enfield Tennis Academy, were recorded with the ETA IVtet, where you are the purported leader. Can you talk about the collaboration between you and your bandmates when constructing albums like those with a group?

PARKER: I was pretty firmly the leader of those groups, even though we're all kind of making the music together and it's all improvised. We never did talk about the music we're making, but I gave the band some conceptual and musical direction. And once we started improvising in a certain way, I kind of made

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 32)

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NOVEMBER 2025 JAZZ CALENDAR

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THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with guests: Steve Cardenas (11/6) Julian Shore (11/13) Marc Copland (11/20)	
FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Jerome Sabbagh (11/7) Julieta Eugenio (11/14) Julian Shore (11/21) Alden Hellmuth (11/28)	
SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(S), followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets: Peter Watrous (11/1) Caleb Wheeler Curtis (11/8) Main/Crammer/Stinson (11/15) Danny Fox (11/22) Ember (11/29)	

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

the decision for us to really exploit this thing that we had discovered rather than going back to playing standards, which is what we were doing before. I was like, “I’m going to bring my drone stuff from now on and we can get into that.”

TNYCJR: So when improvising with the ETA IVtet, do you have a framework for the compositions in advance, or do you just sort of start jamming?

PARKER: We just start, we just kind of go! We never talk about it.

TNYCJR: So to get results like you’ve been getting, you obviously have to have real chemistry.

PARKER: Yeah, we’ve played almost every Monday at the ETA for seven years. And really for the first five of it at least, we were just playing standards. But then maybe the last two or three years that we played the club, we were just improvising.

TNYCJR: How were you affected by the closure of the ETA (Dec. 2023)?

PARKER: Oh man, I was super bummed. It was kind of like my home in L.A. I didn’t really play anywhere in the city except ETA. Especially after the band started to get more popular, I would get asked to play in different places. I’d say no, if you want to hear me play around town, you have to go to ETA on Mondays. And when it closed, they only gave us two or three weeks’ notice, so we didn’t even really have a chance to try and fight to keep it open.

TNYCJR: You’ve done countless session recordings. How does your preparation for session recordings compare to the preparations you do for your leader recordings? Do you just kind of give yourself over to the session leader’s vision, or do you expect to have input in the recording given your stature as a musician?

PARKER: It’s a little bit of both. I’m being asked because at this point people know what I do, and how I approach my sound, and they’re asking me to come and do that in their music. And often times, they’re not giving me a lot of direction. Sometimes the session work involves preparation where you might have to rehearse somebody’s music that might be difficult. With my own music, I’m kind of the same way with the people who I ask to play with me.

TNYCJR: You’re playing the Durations Festival at Brooklyn’s Public Records in November. When preparing for a festival slot, do you take the theme or the context of the festival into account?

PARKER: I just prepare for it, you know, for what I’m doing. I’m playing solo for the Durations Festival. I assume they ask me to do it because they know what I do. So I’m just going to go—and do what I do.

TNYCJR: Can you talk about your usage of electronic instrumentation in your music and how electronics and technology help you create your art?

PARKER: I’m an electric guitar player, so I’m very much in the world of electronics, where I embrace using certain technological aspects; that’s a very big part of my processing. And a lot of that has come from my experience being in Tortoise, the way that group makes music—it’s almost, for lack of a better word, electroacoustic. It’s traversing analog and digital worlds, where you’re using electronics or digital music platforms to compose music that contains analog sounds, but using the digital realm to organize music.

TNYCJR: On the topic of Tortoise, when you joined the band, they were already in existence. Can you talk about what it was like to join an established band and the related challenges?

PARKER: I was a fan of Tortoise before I was even in the band. We were all friends and part of a larger music community. When I heard their music, I thought it was really unique and was really struck by what they were doing and their sound. And when they asked me to play with them, I was pretty conscious not to disrupt what they were doing. I was trying not to intrude, but rather enhance what they were doing musically.

TNYCJR: You have new music with Tortoise coming out for the first time in almost a decade and the group comes to NYC this month for three nights at Bowery Ballroom. What was it like rejoining the band and revisiting what is arguably your most well-known project?

PARKER: We hadn’t gotten together in a while, but we enjoy each other’s company and that’s always inspiring. And it was good. We just kind of pick up where we left off.

TNYCJR: You’ve accomplished so much, and just based on your output from even this past year, you show no signs of slowing down. What do you hope to accomplish as you continue to progress as an artist, and what goals do you make for yourself?

PARKER: I just want to keep growing. I want to keep finding situations that I can learn from, and add to my musical experiences. I’m really fortunate to be able to do these great kind of things.

For more info visit jeffparkersounds.com. Parker plays solo at Public Records Nov. 9 (part of Durations Festival) and is at Bowery Ballroom Nov. 14-16 (with Tortoise). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Tortoise — *TNT* (Thrill Jockey, 1997)
- Chicago Underground Trio — *Flamethrower* (Delmark, 2000)
- Jeff Parker — *The Relatives* (Thrill Jockey, 2004)
- Scott Amendola Trio — *Lift* (Sazi, 2009-10)
- Jeff Parker, Eric Revis, Nasheet Waits — *Eastside Romp* (RogueArt, 2016)
- Jeff Parker — *Forfolks* (International Anthem-Nonesuch, 2021)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

well, “What I always do is to pay for photos, video and design and give 10% free copies as royalties,” he explains.

Another Jersika impetus is its hands-on approach. Auzine notes that he’s “released on other labels, but the uniqueness of Jersika is its openness towards my ideas. They take care of all the practicalities, thus allowing me to focus on music only, which is very rare these days. Then there’s the flexibility and the quality of their work.” Mockūnas agrees: “They want to be a part of the process from the very beginning to the end.” In a world of streaming, why only release LPs or tapes? “For me vinyl is king,” admits Ameriks. “I think the invention of vinyl is in some way similar to the piano. Today you can play synths and imitation piano even on your phone but the real piano stays. Today we can listen to music everywhere and vinyl will never be the mainstream format again. But when it’s time to listen for real, I choose vinyl. The human factor is so big in vinyl production. When it’s done well it sounds different and takes more of your attention. I have nothing against CDs but I think they are the first step to streaming. Why should I

listen to a CD if I can do it with hi-res digital files? If there would be a serious distribution offer for CD releases though, I would adapt my catalogue.” Adds Mockūnas: “Of course releasing a vinyl album is special. The artwork looks much nicer, the sound is also specific, not necessarily better sometimes. But you have to accept it. I also like their philosophy of sound. It’s usually analog recordings—just like in the old days.” Adds Ameriks: “The emphasis on vinyl is very logical, especially in the Baltics, because the CD market is not really here anymore, which is different than in Germany for example. There’s also a certain hype about vinyl.”

Jersika’s reel-to-reel sets are an expensive option, costing about 450 euros (around \$530) each, but as Ameriks explains “there are people in the audiophile community who want to hear all-analogue recordings: the first copy from the master tape.” In the opposite vein, all Jersika releases are available on streaming platforms and digital versions can be purchased, although Ameriks notes those sales contribute little to the label’s bottom line. One area in which Ameriks would like to expand is into film and video. The label has a YouTube channel that offers album teasers, chronicles, conversations, concert videos, broadcasts and documentaries. “We’ve already made three documentaries and it would be great to continue,” he says. Since Ameriks aims to promote Latvian jazz internationally, no artist has a Jersika-exclusive contract. “For me it’s absolutely OK that artists release their music themselves or on other labels,” he says. “Actually I will be very glad if a release on Jersika helps an artist make a deal and sign with some bigger and legendary label someday!”

For more info visit jersikarecords.com

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