

CALLIGRAM

WE KNOW IT WHEN WE SEE IT
BY JEFF CEBULSKI

Nearly three years into their shared record label vision, Calligram co-founders Geof Bradfield and Chad McCullough retain their initial enthusiasm, even if the task of maintaining a label has complicated their respective playing and teaching careers. “Chad and I are way too busy with our own careers,” explains Bradfield, who is a noted Chicago saxophonist, composer and professor at Northern Illinois University. “Fortunately we have compatible skill sets. Chad [does] the graphic design for the label. I do things like keeping the media, radio, mailing lists intact, reaching out to critics, answering emails and taxes at the end of the year, all the fun stuff, right?” McCullough, a trumpeter who teaches at DePaul University, adds, “You *could* do it all yourself, and then you would have the pressure of putting out enough records to make a living, and the quality would go down. What makes it possible for me is that we can work together pretty seamlessly.”

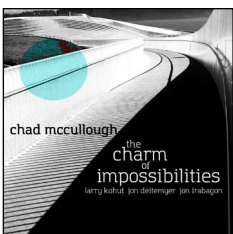
What they also share is a vision for placing a spotlight on the Chicago jazz community and creating a platform for the plethora of talented musicians that inhabit the Windy City, including themselves. Says Bradfield, “That’s really why we started it. We’re all involved with projects with various people who then put their record out on their own, or they might take it to another small label almost always outside of Chicago. Why shouldn’t we do this in-house and connect all these things that are already related anyway?” Since that decision, Calligram has released 24 albums featuring Chicago-based artists and a few outsiders that attracted the founders’ interest. How do they determine the “like-minded” artists? Says Bradfield: “It’s like what that senator said about pornography: we know it when we see it! Sometimes we listen and say, this doesn’t really fit in with the rest of the things in our catalog. Sometimes we get submissions out of left field relative to our existing releases. We’re interested in people who are thinking – thinking broadly or fascinated by a lot of different music.” A lot of the past year’s releases have either or both co-founders as players and have been pretty closely aligned with the label’s esthetic, which includes friends and members of their shared community. Such an example, on which

both Bradfield and McCullough appear, is the two-flugelhorn sextet found on *Arc and Edge*, by flugelhornist James Davis’ group Beveled.

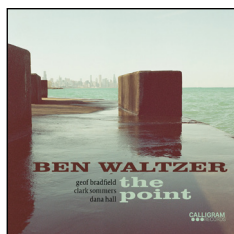
Highpoints for the still-young label additionally include last year’s *Colossal Abundance* (by Bradfield), which displays the saxophonist’s penchant for themes based on his interest on things Southern: the African Diaspora, African rhythms, blues and roots music, performed by an all-star band (Greg Ward-alto, Anna Webber-flute and tenor, Russ Johnson-trumpet, Scott Hesse-guitar and the dynamic “house” rhythm duo of Clark Sommers-bass and Dana Hall-drums). Two other stellar albums from the label include *Reveal* (from the label’s first-year of operations), a unique progressive quartet led by trumpeter Johnson with violinist Mark Feldman, and Chicago drummer-percussionist Juan Pastor’s *Memorias*, which is the label’s first Latin-based album.

For 2025, three of the label’s eight releases also feature out-of-the-country artists. In 2019, McCullough sat in with a band at a café in Macedonia, an experience that led to the acclaimed quartet album, *Transverse*.

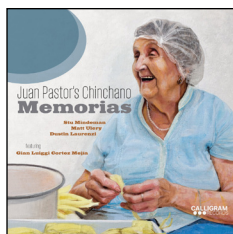
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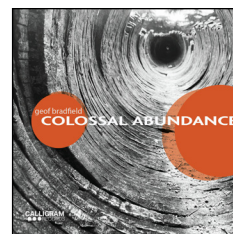
The Charm of Impossibilities
Chad McCullough



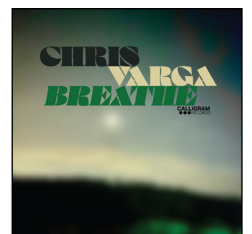
The Point
Ben Waltzer



Memorias
Juan Pastor's Chinchano



Colossal Abundance
Geof Bradfield



Breathe
Chris Varga

VOXNEWS

HAPPY HOLLY-DAYS

BY TESSA SOUTER

Perhaps no city is more synonymous with Christmas than New York. The season begins with the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, continues with the lighting of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree in early December—overlooking its iconic outdoor skating rink—and culminates on New Year’s Eve, when the ball drops in Times Square. Saks Fifth Avenue, Bergdorf Goodman and Macy’s department stores all compete for the most elaborate holiday window displays, while whole neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn transform into winter wonderlands, with front yards filled with glowing reindeer and entire houses ablaze with lights from top to bottom.

And then there’s New York jazz, for which the city is arguably even more famous. Put the two together and you get Mel Tormé’s “The Christmas Song” (composed during a heatwave in LA) and “White Christmas”, written (also in LA) by New Yorker Irving Berlin as a kind of love letter to home. Even if these songs weren’t born in the city, they are forever linked to it in the public imagination. Nat “King” Cole recorded “The Christmas Song” three times—twice in Hollywood—but his best-known version was recorded at NYC’s Capitol Studios in 1961. And countless holiday movies, from *Miracle on 34th Street* and *It Happened on 5th Avenue* to *When Harry Met Sally*, feature classic seasonal songs, further cementing the association. No wonder NYC’s Christmas jazz offerings are always stellar.

If you want full-on Christmas, look no further than Birdland: “Christmas with **Champion Fulton**” (Dec. 23–27); “A Swinging Birdland Christmas” (Dec. 21–22) with **Jim Caruso**, **Billy Stritch** and **Klea Blackhurst**; and/

or the irrepressible **Gabrielle Stravelli** (Dec. 6, 13, 20). **Johnny O’Neal**, who is also always a good time, will be at Zinc Bar (Dec. 24). **Marilyn Maye**’s New Year’s Eve extravaganza returns to Birdland Theater (Dec. 31), while **Jazzmeia Horn** rings in the New Year at Smoke (Dec. 31).

An annual holiday tradition since 1985 is singer-composer-arranger-producer (and nine-time GRAMMY nominee) **Anne Phillips**’ “Bending Towards the Light: A Jazz Nativity”, at St. Paul and St. Andrews Church on Manhattan’s Upper West Side (Dec. 22). It’s the traditional Christmas story told through jazz, and over the years has featured such luminaries as Dave Brubeck, Lionel Hampton and Tito Puente as kings and shepherds. This year’s Three Kings are Paquito D’Rivera, Maurice Chestnut and (Queen) Ingrid Jensen.

More on the Christmas front: the nonprofit series Jazz at the Ballroom presents two festive holiday shows in support of the new album *Swinging in the Holidays*, featuring **Champion Fulton**, **Benny Benack III** and others. Catch the live performances at the Two River Theater in Red Bank, NJ (Dec. 20), and at 54 Below (Dec. 21) with **Champion Fulton**, **Wyatt Michael** and **Olivia Chindamo**. Vocalist **Vicki Burns**—who wowed audiences with her recent Halloween show at The Green Room 42—celebrates the release of her EP *Almost Christmas* at Mezzrow (Dec. 7)—the title track being a brand new addition to the Christmas canon with Roger Schore’s gorgeous lyrics added to “Almost Christmas” (Eddie Higgins) and “Christmas Time is Here” (Vince Guaraldi, Lee Mendelson). Vocalist-composer **Marcus Goldhaber** proudly joins the long tradition of Jewish songwriters contributing to the timeless Christmas songbook with his new original, “I Can’t Wait for Christmas”—a piece very much in the spirit of classics such as “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” and “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”.

But if Christmas leaves you cold, there are plenty of alternative and non-holiday-themed shows on offer.

The acclaimed vocal group **The New York Voices**—Peter Eldridge, Kim Nazarian, Darmon Meader and Lauren Kinhan—are, after 38 years together, “hanging up the microphones” to pursue solo endeavors. Still great friends, their musical rapport remains exceptional, so don’t miss what may be their final tri-state performances as part of their “Grand Finale Tour”: Ramapo College in Mahwah, NJ (Dec. 13) and Birdland Theater (Dec. 19–21).

Also at Birdland Theater, rising star **Ashley Pezzotti** (Dec. 24–28) brings standards and originals in the spirit of Ella and Sarah. **Jane Monheit**—raised on the Great American Songbook—returns to Birdland (Dec. 9–13). Her career took off when she became first runner-up at the 1998 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocal Competition, and she has toured nearly nonstop since. Audiophile favorite, UK-based South Orange native **Stacey Kent** appears at Birdland (Dec. 16–20). Expect her signature mix of American and French standards, Brazilian music and original compositions, presented in an intimate trio setting along with her husband, saxophonist Jim Tomlinson, and New York pianist Art Hiramara.

SEE YOU THERE... **Anaïs Maviel** and The Rhythm Method’s *listen to the rain* album release is at The Blanc (Dec. 13); **Sara Serpa**’s *End of Something* album release show (a duo with pianist Matt Mitchell) is at Firehouse 12 (Dec. 5) and Close Up (Dec. 8); also at Close Up, **Lucy Wijnands** and **Tyreek McDole** (Dec. 17), and **Vanisha Gould** with Emmanuel Michael (Dec. 22). **Sarah King** is at Zinc Bar (Dec. 3). The highly imaginative **Hilary Gardner** and The Lonesome Pines “trail songs” project is at Birdland Theater (Dec. 7). **Mary Foster Conklin**, as part of a special encore performance of “Mirrors Revisited 50th Anniversary” at Urban Stages (Dec. 11), will be singing from a unique catalog of dark art songs first recorded by **Peggy Lee** in 1975 after her GRAMMY win for “Is That All There Is?”.

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

“I was just there last week playing with them...we’ve listened to the same music our whole lives and we’ve studied the same music and looked up to many of the same musicians...There are weird, shared connections that you have with people all over the world when you start to talk about music and the arts that don’t need to be site specific.” The two other international affairs include Canadian guitarist Kevin Brunkhorst’s quintet album, *After the Fire*, a forward-looking, seven-tune suite initiated by an early COVID-19 era house fire that created deep reflection, and *Onta*, from Scottish drummer Alyn Cosker, a sprawling, sometimes ambient assemblage with vestiges of homeland tropes involving 16 musicians.

Back home, the Calligram founders think Chicago is in another heyday “in terms of the quantity of high-quality musicians, including a lot of great upcoming young musicians in different corners of the scene,” adds Bradfield. “I’ve been here on and off since 1988, and this is the strongest the scene has been. There’s no comparison. You probably have to go back to the ’70s to find a comparable scene in Chicago. It’s a hub.” While it’s still true that NYC remains a magnet for aspiring jazz musicians, Chicago has welcomed back many. Bradfield notes: “There was a time when that talent drain was inevitable, but I don’t think that’s true anymore. I see some of the reverse happening or people saying, hey, I don’t like paying \$3K a month and living with nine other dudes in my 30s. Maybe Chicago is not so bad!”

Bradfield and McCullough’s goals are to release eight albums every year. Essentially, they receive ready-made product inquiries that they ultimately judge for inclusion. After successful years creating their artistic community and producing their selective offerings via Calligram, the two have plenty of reason to look forward to 2026.

For more info visit calligramrecords.bandcamp.com

(JAZZFEST BERLIN CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

Ramon Lopez. Over two sets, charts from the bassist and pianist served as springboards for quicksilver conversations in which Guy’s caressed slurs swelled into abrupt squalls, and Sanchez’ tempestuous flurries presaged reflective lyricism. The bassist drew a full arsenal of colors from mallets, metal rods, bow and volume pedal, while Lopez threaded tabla flourishes through his restless pulse. Their collective exuberance was infectious, mirrored in an enthusiastic crowd held rapt by the volatile interaction.

A rammed Quasimodo staged two electrifying shows, the first closing the opening night, featuring saxophonist **Tim Berne**’s trio with Gregg Belisle-Chi (guitar) and Tom Rainey (drums)—the group behind *Yikes Too*, appearing under the name Capatosta. The lineup’s small scale belied its reach: Rainey’s endless rhythmic sleights dissolved any sense of fixed meter, while Belisle-Chi matched with tones that chimed, splintered or snarled in turn. Berne’s alto traced long, wiry lines that expanded on his written themes in solos, which rarely boiled over but nonetheless scalded. The resultant exchanges married power, precision and attitude into a fertile *ménage à trois*. Four days later, closing the festival, saxophonist **James Brandon Lewis**’ quartet delivered a performance no less compelling. Thoroughly road-tested at the end of a two-week tour, the band was both relaxed and cohesive. Exposure had done nothing to dull the way in which they tackled the repertoire, ranging from whispered prayer to impassioned anthem, with Lewis in particular liable to explode in overblown urgency. Aruán Ortiz (piano) spoke in shards and echoes that at one point settled into a hypnotic groove reminiscent of Craig Taborn in his pomp, abetted by Brad Jones (bass) and the elastic interplay of Chad Taylor (drums) with his rhythmic

appetite for adventure.

Opening night’s electricity crackled from German alto saxophonist **Angelika Niescier**’s Beyond Dragons trio, a taut and combustible alliance with Tomeka Reid (cello) and Eliza Salem (drums). It proved a tour de force curtain raiser and a fitting vehicle for the leader’s unspooling runs and sudden rhythmic pivots, as crisp detonations and tappy invention vied with tensile unisons adorning multipart compositions. Other festival highlights included guitarist **Mary Halvorson**’s Amaryllis sextet, glistening with labyrinthine shimmer and rhythmic elegance, sparked by the constituent voices asserting exuberant disorder within the wily architecture. Vibraphonist **Patricia Brennan**’s Breaking Stretch septet united percussive complexity with vaulting horns. They barely let up throughout an effervescent set, in which the leader’s inspired writing carved niches for concise, characterful solos, with saxophonists Mark Shim and Jon Irabagon particularly noteworthy. Danish reed player **Signe Emmeluth** conducted Banshee, her seven-woman ensemble, through a quick series of artfully arranged vignettes, which thrived on astringent contrasts. Plentiful doubling of instruments and copious electronics guaranteed a rich palette, but especially striking was one episode where everyone abandoned their instruments for a strident vocal interlude, made all the more memorable by live processing.

It was perhaps singer **Amirtha Kidambi**’s Elder Ones who most directly confronted the question animating this year’s festival: where do you run when the world’s on fire? Her fierce vocal imprecations—lifted by the entangled saxophones of Matt Nelson and Alfredo Colon and grounded by the loping pulse of bassist Lester St. Louis (bass) and Jason Nazary (drums)—transformed a call to action into cathartic art. Otherwise, the conviction repeated throughout the panel discussions with participating artists was that music with improvisation in its DNA was itself a continuing act of resistance, one shared and supported by listeners. Under the discerning leadership of Nadin Deventer, Jazzfest Berlin affirmed that such music endures as both refuge and a rallying cry.

For more info visit berlinerfestspiele.de/en/jazzfest-berlin

(HUDSON JAZZ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

the get-go. Guitarist **Miles Taylour Sweeny** led a trio through a punchy extended jam in the outside dining area of a small, homestyle eatery, before settling into a swinging “On the Sunny Side of the Street”. Moments later, **Julius Rodriguez** was thrilling a much larger audience at Hudson Hall, his quartet full of hard-charging confidence as it ran through material taken from the leader’s sophomore Verve album, *Evergreen* (2024). His gospel-fueled piano playing, often reminiscent of Herbie Hancock, anchored melodies that gave Brandon Volel (trumpet) lots to remark on, with Philip Norris (bass) and Joshua Watkins (drums) totally on the mark throughout. Their tribute to Roy Hargrove, “Where Grace Abounds” (from Rodriguez’ 2022 debut album *Let Sound Tell All*), was simply stunning, with astonishing piano runs that delighted the audience. Afterwards, about half the crowd then tramped over to the Second Ward Foundation’s education center (in a converted school) for a dance party led by **BIGYUKI** (aka Masayuki Hirano), a Japanese keyboardist-producer known for his entrancing musical collages. Festival curator Cat Henry bravely hit the dance floor first, and soon afterwards it was packed.

The “Sounds Around Town” commenced early on Saturday morning at the Farmer’s Market, where the **Phat, Inc.** quartet, led by electric keyboardist Leo Belsky with vocalist Ondina McDonald, delivered slinky interpretations of Erykah Badu and Lenny Kravitz, while tenor saxophonist Maxwell Barnes added solos

and punctuations that sounded like Ben Webster. A phenomenal guitarist, **Sam Bernhardt** led an energetic trio in a pocket park and then joined a group with Adriana Tampasis (flute), Justin Geyer (keyboard) and an inventive Marco Spodek (drums) in a different park on the eastern end of Warren St.—their surprise-filled set, laden with group improvisations, recalled early Return to Forever and It’s a Beautiful Day. Back at the pocket park, the **Aquarium** quintet, with Steven Bonacci (saxophone) and the superb Michael Knox (bass), gathered a nice crowd, as did vocalist **Sivaan Barak** at a nearby restaurant. Barak handled the blues, Brazilian sambas and the classic “Walk On By” (Bacharach, David) in exquisite style, while pianist Nico Bald wrestled with a misbehaving spinet.

Acclaimed in Canada, where she has earned three JUNO Jazz Album of the Year awards, vocalist and composer **Caity Gyorgy** (last name pronounced “George”) surely won a bevy of new fans. The Saturday night marquee concert with her quartet was a cornucopia of enchanting songs, mostly originals, often advancing in jaunty and swinging rhythms to spotlight her formidable scatting and precise enunciation. She slowed down for a beautiful, show-stopping reading of “April Fooled Me” (Kern, Fields) accompanied just by pianist Mark Limacher, which belied her youth: her timbre, the way she sold the song, how she held the final note, they all suggested the Calgary native is already a deep soul and undoubtedly heading toward global jazz stardom. Woozy from such musical excellence, some audience members staggered eastward and packed into a small theater space with the younger Bard musicians to hear bassist **Tristen Jarvis**’ Deep Tones for Peace quartet. Backed by a surging rhythm section, tenor saxophonist Ishmael “Drew” Martin exploded with energy and brio, his tumult of Trane-like ideas and dizzying notes eagerly applauded.

A third day was a test for sore feet. **Maia Jarrett**, an appealing vocalist, fronted a trio with her father, virtuoso bassist **Noah Jarrett**, and pianist Leo Belsky on the sidewalk outside a community center; back down Warren St., **John Esposito** (piano) and Tarik Shah (bass) ran through standards such as “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” at a restaurant; and Sam Bernhardt was back at the pocket park with his trio. In mid-afternoon, **Alphonso Horne & The Gotham Kings**, another one of the festival’s top attractions, brought a raucous, New Orleans party to The Caboose, a sun-filled performance space at the west end of town. The trumpeter-vocalist took the audience on a journey from Louis Armstrong traditional jazz to the popular sounds of Stevie Wonder with stops along the way for gospel, a Latin-tinged “St. Louis Blues” and Crescent City mainstay “Big Chief”, with C. Anthony Bryant’s powerful baritone lifting several songs. Pianist William Hill III introduced “St. James Infirmary” with a Bach-inspired cadenza while tenor saxophonist Boyce Justice Griffith sparred with Horne throughout. A joyous “When the Saints Go Marching In” concluded the set, naturally, with the audience parading through the ‘Boose behind the two horn players.

The festival finale that vibraphonist **Joel Ross** delivered with his Good Vibes quintet at Hudson Hall took the audience on a less familiar journey than the other featured artists. He built long melodies that sounded like the soundtrack to an epic film, dug into riffs before tacking back out and created sustained loops of music that were like Möbius strips with his band mates. Pianist Micah Thomas took charge on occasion, the rhythm section in full boil, and Ross engaged in some cat ‘n’ mouse playing with him. But without discernible song forms or structures, the music stood as a challenge to the audience—and a tacit acknowledgement that the world of jazz encompasses a freedom of expression that can be as simple as one note struck on the vibraphone over and over and over again.

For more info visit hudsonhall.org/event/hudson-jazz-festival