

TOMEKA REID

INSPIRED TO IMPROVISE

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Tomeka Reid is simply a singular and generational talent. An acclaimed cellist, she is also an edgy, daring composer who has combined her love of different musical genres into a syncretic blend that defines her compositional language. Both classical training and a full embrace of the avant garde have helped define her musical pedigree and have been critical components in developing her instrumental, as well as compositional, fluency. As a soloist, Reid is lyrical, playful and expansive, sometimes using overdubbing or prepared cello for greater textures and colors. In the space of a few measures, whether in her own or others' ensembles, and regardless of instrumental configuration, she can navigate hard bop, free jazz, the blues or a cello concerto. In each case, they sound natural and unforced, particularly in the cellist's longstanding, eponymous quartet, arguably her most well-known project: with Mary Halvorson (guitar), Jason Roebke (bass) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums).

Growing up around Washington, DC, Reid's musical influences were diverse. "I grew up listening to a lot of rock music," she recalls. "I was a big Smiths and Cure fan. I loved Elvis Costello, music from the DC punk scene, Earth, Wind & Fire, Stevie Wonder. I thought The Pretenders were really cool because Chrissie Hynde was this badass female rock star." Reid studied cello at the University of Maryland, where one of her professors, Sais Kamalidiin, introduced her to jazz performance and improvisation and suggested she try playing other music besides classical music. "But I was so behind on the classical repertoire that I needed to just focus on that, even though I wish I had followed his advice more," she says. "My last year [at Maryland] I played with him a bit. He played flute and would give me these books with bass lines, and he would play the melody. That's how I started getting into playing more jazz-type music."

The summer of 1998 turned out to be a life-changing experience for her. "I was obsessed with living in Chicago, so I lived there for the summer. To keep up with my classical playing I started playing in this orchestra literally called Classical Symphony, and that's where I met (flute player) Nicole Mitchell. There were like five Black people in the orchestra and I was one." Between meeting Mitchell and being in that orchestra, Reid was convinced enough to move permanently to Chicago, which came with an invitation to join Mitchell's band and Reid's 2002 recording debut (on Mitchell's Black Earth Ensemble's *Afrika Rising*). She then became familiar with the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) and the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC): "It was a whole new world, because I had no awareness of this music or these musicians. It was very much a real, eye-opening experience and the perfect place for me to be. I was taking it all in. Then people would ask me to play with them, and I would say 'I don't know what the heck I'm doing, I don't even know what this music is.' But I kind of figured it all out. It was really exciting, and scary."

Reid began studying for her master's degree at DePaul University, and navigating the Chicago avant

garde scene with the AACM, which she acknowledges was quite a challenge: "I feel very fortunate, and it's so wild because it was something I kind of fell into. It wasn't until I read *A Power Stronger Than Itself* [by trombonist-electronicist and AACM member George Lewis] that I fully understood the weight of the organization. I'm coming out of the university, where all of your music is on sheet music, so it was really interesting to be in these musical situations where the musicians are just writing scribbles on pages or writing clusters of notes and you're trying to figure it all out." Contrary to what's taught in school, Reid saw the value in this different kind of learning, which she reckons might be more valuable, "because it's very real." One of her collaborators and mentors then was Roscoe Mitchell, the legendary saxophonist, Art Ensemble of Chicago co-founder and founding member of the AACM. He described Reid as a "second generation" member of the AACM. "She's an excellent musician," Mitchell recently said over a phone conversation. "What does that mean to me? That she's a thorough musician, doesn't leave a stone unturned. She's like me, you know?" Reid has since played, recorded and toured with Mitchell in various configurations, including as a member of the Art Ensemble of Chicago for the group's 50th anniversary in 2018 (*We Are On The Edge*, Pi Recordings) and *The Sixth Decade - From Paris to Paris* (RogueArt, 2020).

Since the cello is frequently viewed as a "fringe" instrument in jazz, Reid initially encountered some resistance and skepticism about her presence on the bandstand. "So many people would get on me like 'Oh, you don't know jazz language.' Well, how would I? The typical pedagogy for cello is not to do diminished bebop scales. If you're not exposed to that by someone, how would you learn this?" Feeling there was that kind of (negative) energy in the straight-ahead scene, Reid says she consequently gravitated more toward the AACM side, because there was more free improvisation. "They're more accepting, and the whole point is to just make music. You wanna' make music, explore sound, and you want to create something new and fresh, and you want to create your own language. You want to have your own voice."

In 2022 she received the prestigious MacArthur "Genius Grant" Fellowship, corroborating the qualities which have made Reid one of the most important figures and instrumental voices of the last two decades in contemporary jazz. Halvorson (also a MacArthur "Genius" Fellow) deeply admires her long-time friend and collaborator as "one of the hardest workers, really singular-minded musicians. I think there's a real curiosity and openness and a lot of positive energy that she puts out there, and I think that comes back and informs her music." Halvorson also observes that Reid is first and foremost a generous, community-minded person. "I think Tomeka and I share a love of integrating a lot of different musical influences," Halvorson adds. "She has R&B and jazz influences, as well as classical and avant garde, and she's able to put this stuff together in a way, in her own music, that just feels very much her own. Nothing's forced and nothing's self-conscious."

The other aspect of Reid's composing that Halvorson especially loves is that "they're really fun to improvise on, and I think that's also a hard thing to do: to create a composition that makes you inspired to improvise. Her compositions really let the improviser step out and create something out of her framework."

As for Reid, she enthuses: "I really love playing in my quartet. I'm definitely a team player and the quartet is a project that each member is truly invested in." Just over a decade ago, her quartet released its self-titled debut, and this month sees the group's fourth album, *dance! skip! hop!* (Out Of Your Head). In addition, January also sees the release of *Dream Archives* (ECM), a cooperative trio with pianist Craig Taborn and drummer-vibraphonist Ches Smith. Reid shares and plays with the same joy, regardless of whether she's leading her own band or playing with any of the long list of collaborators she's closely worked with over the years—from Mike Reed, Joe Morris, Angelika Niescier, Ingrid Laubrock, Alexander Hawkins, The Hemphill Stringtet and Myra Melford to the late jaimie branch. "I like making good music and I like doing it in a community with people that are just really about the music."

Considering how much Reid loves the music, and the creative process, she understood that there would be certain sacrifices involved along the way. And because she chose to accept them, jazz lovers, and Reid herself, have become that much more enriched. "I guess I knew once I fell in love with this kind of space of jazz and improvised music. It's not like I don't want to make big bucks—we should make big bucks—but what is the lifestyle that I really want to see for myself?" She observes that although money is real, and a necessary source of comfort, that "happiness is also real—and joy. I want to do something that can sustain me financially and mentally. The experiences that I have with this music are more important to me than having material things, or what other people think of as success. I don't want that. This is what makes me happy."

For more info visit tomekareid.com. Tomeka Reid Septet performs "In Tribute to Duke Ellington" Jan. 8 at Dizzy's Club (part of Unity Jazz Festival). Reid is also at Zinc Bar Jan. 9 (with The Hemphill Stringtet) and Baby's All Right Jan. 10 (as leader), both as part of Winter Jazzfest. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Mazz Swift, Tomeka Reid, Silvia Bolognesi—*Hear in Now* (Rudi, 2010)
- Tomeka Reid Quartet—*Tomeka Reid Quartet* (Thirsty Ear, 2014)
- Joe Morris/Tomeka Reid—*Combinations* (RogueArt, 2018)
- Artifacts (Tomeka Reid, Nicole Mitchell, Mike Reed)—*...and then there's this* (Astral Spirits, 2019)
- Angelika Niescier, Tomeka Reid, Savannah Harris—*Beyond Dragons* (Intakt, 2023)
- Tomeka Reid Quartet—*dance! skip! hop!* (Out Of Your Head, 2025)