



# JOHN BEASLEY

## WITH AND FOR MILES

### BY JEFF CEBULSKI

*Born in Louisiana and raised in a family of musicians, John Beasley has gained global attention as a pianist, arranger, conductor and music director. Inspired by late modern jazz bands and orchestras, as well as pianist Herbie Hancock, Beasley became ensconced in the LA music scene and quickly rose to prominence, receiving the first of his 14 GRAMMY nominations in 2009 for his album *Positootly!* (*Resonance*). He eventually formed his dream big band, MONK'estra, which celebrates and reimagines the work of Thelonious Monk and others, with his version of Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" winning one of his two GRAMMY Awards. Beasley's unique arrangements and popularity led to connections with European big bands and orchestras, and Beasley now spends significant time performing and leading a variety of those groups along with other ensembles. This year he will be leading five projects contributing to the worldwide celebration of Miles Davis' centennial.*

**NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD:** When I think of your career, it's hard not to think of you in binary terms. You have a real presence in Europe, but you have enough ethos to be a center of celebration of modern American jazz. There must be some sort of central relationship between those two realities.

**JOHN BEASLEY:** Music is really universal. Over the last 15 years, I've had a lot more projects in Europe, particularly with jazz orchestras and philharmonics. There is sustained, meaningful government support for creative music—not just jazz, but contemporary classical music, dance, the arts as a whole. There are cultural ministries that understand the value of art in people's lives, communities and global culture. We used to have that here. In the '50s, our government created "jazz ambassadors" and sent Louis Armstrong, Duke, Basie, Dizzy, Brubeck to Europe and other regions to promote US values of freedom and democracy and share our culture. European audiences embraced jazz and have long been serious listeners—they have become connoisseurs of jazz. Ironically, their deep appreciation and passion for jazz keeps me rooted in the ongoing story of American jazz.

**NYCJR:** A standout release from 2024 was your duet album with Swedish saxophonist-flute player Magnus Lindgren, *Butterfly Effect* (ACT Music). How did you begin your performing relationship with him?

**BEASLEY:** I met Magnus at the Java Jazz Festival in Indonesia around ten years ago. Clark Terry had just passed away, and they put a tribute band together, and Magnus was on the set. From his first notes, I felt an immediate musical connection. I shared my MONK'estra big band project with him, which he wanted to present as Artistic Director of the Konserthuset [Stockholm's concert hall] Blue House Big Band. Since then, we have collaborated on two projects per year, including the album *Bird Lives* (ACT Music, 2021), earning three GRAMMY nominations with one win. We've been making music ever since.

**NYCJR:** You're known as a pianist, but also you are of course recognized as an arranger and music director. How does that work for you?

**BEASLEY:** I talked to (pianist Dave) Grusin one time about how to keep your chops up on the piano when you're under deadline to write. He said everybody struggles with this. I mean, if I play piano a little bit, it triggers the writing. The writing triggers the piano. It all comes from the same place. When I look at arranging for, let's just say, large ensemble work, it's sort of like I play as a pianist in a band—it's improvisation. You can say I control the narrative of the harmony, right?

My bridge into jazz was Quincy Jones' *Walking in Space*, and then the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra. Those bands caught my ear and made me want to be a jazz musician. Initially I wanted to be an arranger more than a pianist. I was attempting to write big-band charts when I was 13, 14 years old, trying to be like them. Then, I heard (Herbie Hancock's) *Maiden Voyage* and (Miles Davis') *Nefertiti* and I thought, this is great—I want to play piano, I want to be Herbie Hancock. And I went down that path for a long time. At 22, after I had moved to LA, I started doing session work. Those early arranging skills came in handy. Later, in 2013, I formed my MONK'estra big band, reimagining Monk's music. Mack Avenue Records offered me a three-album deal, leading me to tour extensively. That led to European orchestras inviting me to bring arrangements and conduct, which spiraled into more projects.

**NYCJR:** In regard to the MONK'estra, I can imagine how Monk's music absolutely leads to other forms of thought and creativity. Is that the thing that drew you to him and then to create the orchestra?

**BEASLEY:** Actually, MONK'estra started as a fluke. Charles Owens, who was leading Cal State-LA's Luckman Jazz Orchestra, hired me to arrange Monk's "Ask Me Now" and "Epistrophy". While writing, I realized how pliable Monk's music is. His harmonic language already invites adventurous voicings. Like all great composers, you can play Monk's music with different types of grooves and tempos.

**NYCJR:** What's the difference between working with Monk's music and working with Miles' music?

**BEASLEY:** Philosophically, there's no difference. I try to let my mind wander, stay honest and capture whatever sparks my imagination. Practically, though, they're very different projects. MONK'estra, a 17-piece band, is about orchestration and reimagining the music on a large scale. My newly-formed Unlimited Miles Sextet band shifts the focus from orchestration to the arc of the concert—how the material flows, what pieces to juxtapose and avoiding the feeling of a museum piece.

Miles' music is fundamentally about personal expression: how the band interprets a song on a

particular night, the space for solos and the collective energy in the moment. What I'm having fun with is creating connective tissue across eras. For example, I might start with "Moon Dreams" from *Birth of the Cool*—not exactly a ballad, but incredibly beautiful and harmonically forward-thinking. When it reaches that more modern, almost contemporary-classical section, I'll jump ahead 30 years, open things up, maybe even bring in "Sanctuary" and then pivot into "Fat Time" from *Man with the Horn*. The music evolves organically, moving seamlessly through decades. I love mashups and finding ways to present Miles' music through the

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lens of our generation, taking both the musicians and the audience on a kind of journey, almost like walking through a house of mirrors.

**NYCJR:** I'm curious, what are your top three Miles albums?

**BEASLEY:** I did a deep dive into *Seven Steps to Heaven*, the first time I heard Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams and Ron Carter as a band. *Nefertiti* is a desert-island record. *Amandla* is meaningful to me because we played that music when I was in Miles' band in 1989.

**NYCJR:** What was it like playing with him?

**BEASLEY:** I was 28 or 29 at the time, and I'd already spent six or seven years playing with Freddie Hubbard in between studio work. Playing with Miles was a far-fetched dream, which I never ever thought would happen. I was lucky to meet Miles' nephew, Vince Wilburn, who asked me to send a tape. When Miles called me, I thought it was a prank call. Anyway, I was old enough to understand that I had to be humble and serious. On the first day of rehearsal, he walked in, came straight up to me, and as we shook hands, neither of us blinked for a while. I wanted him to check me out and know that I was sincere—I was there to learn, to be a good band member, but also not to be pushed around. In hindsight, I didn't need to do any of that. He turned out to be incredibly supportive, funny and a great teacher. That moment was pivotal, and after that we had a really good relationship.

He was probably the most dedicated artist I've ever been around. This was a time when he wasn't feeling well physically. He had a cot backstage, right off the stage, and some nights, he'd have to lie down for a few minutes and then come out to finish the concert. After every show, he would listen to recordings, either that night or the next morning, and had comments for each musician about what he wanted to tweak or change a few things, or how he wanted me to approach something differently. One night, right before we went on, he grabbed my hand and said, "Listen man, if you can't comp like Ahmad Jamal, then don't play." I was like, okay. To this day, I still think about that. At first, I thought, I don't even know if I've ever heard Ahmad comp unless it was for a bass player. But then I started to understand what Miles meant. Ahmad might play lightly for a minute, then stop, then come in with a big statement—and then get out of the way. That instruction has so many layers. It taught me about space, restraint and intention: stay out of the way until it's time to speak, and when you do, make it count.

**NYCJR:** You're going to be an integral part of a significant celebration of Miles' music this year here in

the US. Then you're going to be traveling into Europe again, doing something similar.

**BEASLEY:** I have five Miles Davis projects this year! The first one is reimagining *Tutu* and *Amandla*, with Marcus Miller and Holland's Metropole Orkest, in mid-March. Ten days later, I kickoff a 12-city tour with the Unlimited Miles band from late March through May, including a five-day stop at Birdland (Mar. 31-Apr. 4): "Unlimited Miles: Miles @100" with Sean Jones, Marcus Strickland, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Ben Williams and Terreon Gully.

In July and August, I'll be re-imagining *Filles de Kilimanjaro* with Hamburg's NDR Big Band in Germany. Then in September, I'm doing a concert with Frankfurt's HR Big Band, featuring tenor saxophonist Isaiah Collier. In October, I'll head to Stockholm with Magnus Lindgren for a revival of three legacy concerts that were held at Stockholm's Konserthuset concert hall, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary: Miles and Coltrane both played there in 1960 with Wynton Kelly, Paul Chambers and Jimmy Cobb, followed by Coltrane with his quartet, and later with Miles again with Herbie and Wayne. The concert hall has preserved the original setlists from those performances, and there's even YouTube footage of some of those concerts. We're using those historical setlists to create a program that honors that legacy, with Nicholas Payton (trumpet), Jaleel Shaw (saxophone), John Patitucci (bass), Greg Hutchinson (drums) and Magnus. It's a way of connecting the past to the present in a very tangible way.

**NYCJR:** Can you share any thoughts on February being Black History Month?

**BEASLEY:** I look forward to Black History Month and am glad to celebrate Black history all year and every year. In February, I'll be marking Black History Month on Valentine's Day with Dianne Reeves—a real storyteller—in Rose Theater at Jazz at Lincoln Center. As a human being and jazz musician, I owe so much to the Black community; in fact my entire career. I was deeply immersed and moved by Black-American music from a very young age. Because of that, when I moved to California at the age of 14, I actively sought that out. I had been told the Leimert Park neighborhood in LA was a major center of Black music and community, especially jazz, so that's where I went. I remember being welcomed openly. If you could play, were genuinely interested in learning, and were respectful, that was enough, you were accepted. That meant so much to me and has had a lasting impact to this day. That kind of openness, unfortunately, isn't something Black people have consistently received in the broader white community. It's striking to me how much trauma and injustice African Americans have endured in the US, and yet how much grace and generosity they continue to show. I think about that often, and it continues to shape who I am, both as a musician and as a human being.

For more info visit [johnbeasleymusic.com](http://johnbeasleymusic.com). Beasley is at The Appel Room Feb. 9 (part of "The Nearness of You" concert in honor of Michael Brecker) and Rose Theater Feb. 13-14 (with Dianne Reeves). See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Thelonious (Marty Krystall, John Beasley, Buell Neidlinger, Billy Osborne) – *Thelonious* (K2B2, 1986)
- John Beasley, Robert Hurst, Vinnie Colaiuta – *Surfacing* (Beasley Music/EWE, 2000)
- John Beasley – *Letter to Herbie* (Resonance, 2008)
- John Beasley – *Positootly!* (Resonance, 2009)
- John Beasley – *Presents MONK'estra, Vol. 1-2* (Mack Avenue, 2016-17)
- SWR Big Band, Magnus Lindgren, John Beasley – *Bird Lives* (ACT Music, 2020)

#### (LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

*Golden Flower*, the former on Elemental Music, the latter on Resonance, both on which the pianist participated). Then, there's "Al Kifha", a post-bop scorch, absolutely ferocious and razor-precise, a quartet firing on all proverbial cylinders. "You know," Feldman remembers, "I had the pleasure of working with Kenny in the '90s and hearing him play so many times, listening to this album brought back so many great memories."

Feldman is justly proud of the Muse campaign, from their being cut by engineer Matthew Lutthans at The Mastering Lab in Salina, KS, to Optimal Media pressings and the Stoughton Press jackets. The liner notes deserve special mention, and Feldman waxes eloquent. "These writers are storytellers, and I can't overstate their importance. I absolutely love getting the chance to deal with these great minds in our community." Of this batch, *The Free Slave*—recorded in 1970, originally released in 1972 as Muse's third-ever album—is treated to the most overtly philosophical essay, courtesy of Shannon J. Effinger, who scores a direct hit, firing from William Blake's bow of burning gold: "Duke Ellington famously said, 'If jazz means anything, it is freedom of expression.' However, if that is true, why has its 'freedom' been questioned since its inception?" Effinger explores issues of liberty, community and authenticity via a wonderfully broad historical understanding of the music and its guardians, one of which, Baltimore's Left Bank Jazz Society, was the group directly responsible for Brooks' uplifting and irrepressibly soulful live recording from the Famous Ballroom in April 1970. Woody Shaw (trumpet), George Coleman (tenor), Hugh Lawson (piano) and Cecil McBee (bass) dialogue with an audience raising the temperature as much as anyone in the group. "Hey come on Roy, we understand you, do your thing man," they encourage as the drummer launches into the samba groove of "Five for Max". It's so easy to be carried along in the energy current as Shaw's blues-and-bop phrases and Lawson's largely chordal musings pave the way for the drummer's tonally inflected solo.

Feldman uses *The Free Slave* as a launchpad for another flight of fancy. "I have to put in a word for the numerous other independent labels, like Inner City, Xanadu and Beehive, giving us all that great work in the '70s. How can people say that 'fusion' was killing off creativity in this music? It's just not true!" Nothing proves him right more than these three recent reissues, and it appears that they form the iceberg's tip. Just reissued in January are Woody Shaw's *Love Dance* (1975) and Joe Chambers and Larry Young's *Double Exposure* (1977). Beyond that, Feldman won't divulge. He is keenly aware of the risks and strategies associated with putting out luxury, limited editions such as these, always watching the marketplace for clues and trends, but his end game is to bring the subject of his passion to as many listeners as possible. "My primary goal is to help people to discover this fantastic music and keep our community growing." Feldman can cherry pick from a catalogue of Muse gems, with multiple releases by such figures as saxophonists Ricky Ford and Houston Person, trumpeters Jack Walrath and Wallace Roney, guitarists Pat Martino and Larry Coryell, bassists Richard Davis and Buster Williams, drummers Michael Carvin, Louis Hayes and Barry Altschul, vocalists Etta Jones and Sheila Jordan plus many, many others. The investigation continues, and those appreciatively reaping the rewards will wait and muse on a bright future.

For more info visit [instagram.com/timettravelerrecordings](https://instagram.com/timettravelerrecordings). Muse artists performing this month include Lonnie Plaxico at Zinc Bar Feb. 9 (with Tsutomu Nakai), Louis Hayes and Steve Nelson at Dizzy's Club through Feb. 1, Philip Harper at the Cellar Dog Feb. 5 and Smalls Feb. 27, Buster Williams at Smoke Feb. 1 (with Nicholas Payton), Benny Green at Mezzrow Feb. 13 and 14, and Ron Carter at Dizzy's Club Feb. 24 (with Nancy Assis). See Calendar.



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