

THE HARLEM CHAMBER PLAYERS AND THE LEONARD DAVIS CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS PRESENT

AMERICAN LANDSCAPES

18TH ANNUAL BLACK HISTORY MONTH CELEBRATION

THURSDAY FEB. 5, 2026 • 7:00 PM




Featuring the Pulitzer Prize winning composer-conductor Tania León, WQXR radio host Terrance McKnight, choreographer Leyland Simmons with dancers from Harlem School of the Arts, violinist-composer Eddie Venegas, and violinist Josh Henderson. With string orchestra comprising members of The Harlem Chamber Players.

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RSVP IS REQUIRED.

HarlemChamberPlayers.org



JAZZTOPAD

BY DAVID CRISTOL



Wadada Leo Smith @Jazztopad Festival

Poland's progressive-minded Jazztopad Festival had its 22nd edition (Nov. 14-24), with concerts in the ample Narodowe Forum Muzyki, gigs and improvised sessions at the Mleczarnia club and in private homes, plus initiatives for children as well as artist talks. Listeners were treated to several highlights, which even included several world premieres.

The 1,800-seat main hall welcomed the opening show by the **David Murray Quartet**, primarily offering material from the group's 2025 avian-themed *Birdly Serenade* (Impulse!). Murray (tenor, bass clarinet), who has fronted a number of quartets since the mid '70s, for his current quartet surrounded himself with pianist Marta Sánchez (piano), who impressively didn't try to emulate previous Murray cohorts such as Dave Burrell or Don Pullen, the ubiquitous Luke Stewart (bass) and the driving Chris Beck (drums). The group actually transformed into a quartet plus one: Murray's wife, vocalist Francesca Cinelli was called upon for narrative in both French and English. The compositions drew on elements from jazz, blues, Latin and Caribbean music, with a relaxed feel and concise solos. The ending had the leader declaiming Black Power lyrics over a funk workout.

The next day, **Luke Stewart** and **Marta Sánchez** performed as a duo for the first time, in the same hall reorganized in its reversed stage guise. The physicality of Stewart's handling of the bass, his use of oblique techniques and flair for rhythmical designs contrasted with the ethereal and melodic nature of Sanchez' pianism. Each took extended solo turns of a probing and rather brooding ilk. Next up, Chicago's Kahil El'Zabar led the audience through a set where rhythm and humor reigned supreme. His **Ethnic Heritage Ensemble**—El'Zabar (percussion, vocals), Corey Wilkes (trumpet), Alex Harding (baritone) and Ishmael Ali (cello)—found each member also playing small percussion and contributing chants. In a reluctant-to-start version of "Summertime", only the first two chords remained, nagging and unresolved, making for a cleverly created tension.

The group brought together by **Jakob Bro**, to premiere *Fox on Hill*, represented a gathering of continents and cultures, from US jazz and beyond. With trumpeter **Wadada Leo Smith**, Midori Takada's Japanese percussion and the guitarist's own northern European roots, along with the Polish Cello Quartet (which was very much at the core of the set), the deliberately low volume and slow pace induced great focus from the musicians as well as the audience. After simultaneously minimal and mighty gongs introduced the first piece, Smith intoned velvety sustained notes,

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bright flutters, muted tones and acoustic effects, like the sheer sound of air passing through his trumpet. The strings built an alluring coat of sound for stretches, with sparse enunciations from Smith and Bro, as the work demanded. After partnering with Craig Taborn at NYC's Jazztopad edition, bassist **Ksawery Wójcikski** was paired with Birmingham, England reedsman **Xhosa Cole**, who's recently released an album of Thelonious Monk's music and currently works with pianist Pat Thomas. The lighting and deck chairs dispatched around the players encouraged meditative listening. After a start at the threshold of silence, unforced notes began to naturally appear. A pattern emerged and the pair delved into a generous modal improvisation, Cole spontaneously quoting from John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter. The playful and diverse set also included a medieval-sounding hymn and a tune with a North African flavor.

Hailing from Australia, bass clarinetist, tenor saxophonist **Jeremy Rose's Disruption!** proved a festival high point, with its setup of two drummers, Simon Barker and Chloe Kim, in unison or in dialog, and around whom the musical edifice was built. "The drums have the ability to transform brainwaves and accompany protests and rituals," according to Rose. In addition to field recordings, the electrified tenor à la Eddie Harris was bathed in a cloud of resonance. The rhythm-heavy aesthetic reminded of '90s-era Ginger Baker with a dash of the Kodo Taiko Percussion Ensemble.

"Ethnic Cleansing—An American Tradition" premiered at Lincoln Center earlier in the year. During the talk he gave prior to the concert, saxophonist **Immanuel Wilkins** didn't mince words, referring to the US lynchings during the Jim Crow-era as well as the current outrages in Palestine as inspiration for the composition. Strangled sounds, dissonances and a sober lyricism proved consistent with the subject matter and an extensive, unaccompanied alto solo formed the suite's central segment—a brave new direction for the Blue Note recording artist.

Joanna Duda (piano), **Sunny Kim** (vocals) and **Helen Svoboda** (bass, vocals) presented *The Great Reset*, a collaborative electro-acoustic suite about the threshold humanity is at, each track reflecting on current destructions and political aberrations, and expressing changes the three women hope to see. The unifying theme was translated into striking music and fierce lyrics, rendered through various effects from all members, whose instrumental prowess proved impressive. Some Boomers fled towards the exit doors, maybe feeling a pang of guilt! **Ghosted** coasted with lethargic guitar loops and atmospherics over immovable mid-tempo grooves. The stubborn repetition, not always airtight at that, proved discouraging to the most patient listener, with neither deviation or surprise.

Charles Lloyd and the festival have had a strong relationship. It was the saxophonist's sixth visit to Wroclaw. A live performance at Jazztopad released as *Wild Man Dance* actually signalled the tender warrior's move to Blue Note after a long, prolific stint with ECM. Lloyd's Sky Quartet is named after *The Sky Will Still Be Here Tomorrow*, and as on that recording, had Jason Moran (piano) and Larry Grenadier (bass), with Kweku Sumbry (drums) the newcomer. Unhurried ballads made up the lion's share of the repertoire, which also included the bustling "Harvest" from 1972's *Waves*. Lloyd's fluid playing, easygoing demeanor, full tenor sound and reliable sidemen made this a pleasant stroll through serene waters, even as no new ground may have been broken.

The weekend afternoons were spent at the Concerts in Living Rooms series. Eight houses hosted several sets and lineups each, with unannounced players from both the local pool of talent and festival headliners, such as Stewart, Sánchez and Harding. Address locations were also kept secret until the day of the sessions. Musicians

who played together would likely not have crossed paths otherwise, some of them only meeting and shaking hands seconds before playing. The hospitality was priceless, though an overabundance of cameramen sometimes endangered the sought-after connection between artists and onlookers.

The Mleczarnia is an old-school café, whose basement was home to the late evening jam sessions centered around ace trio **Sundogs** (Mateusz Rybicki, Zbigniew Kozera and Samuel Hall); and which welcomed every patron from wavering dabblers to major guests. The venue also hosted three official gigs: Canadian quartet **Kneejerk** displayed more vigor than subtlety; Amsterdam-based quintet **Önder** explored the low register with two bass clarinets, bass and bass guitar; and the leaderless **Presencia**—Camila Nebbia (tenor), James Banner (bass) and Moritz Baumgärtner (drums), which made the best impression. All substance and no fooling around, the trio offered thoroughly written sections, with openings for shape-shifting. Ever-churning forward, the three commanded undivided attention in the fully packed café. Their set was one of several artistic achievements at Jazztopad, assuredly one of the key European festivals of the season, its programming choices rewarded by a sizeable attendance with most concerts sold-out.

For more info visit:
nfm.wroclaw.pl/en/festivals/jazztopad-festival

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with others, a few miles east of Holbrook, AZ, on his way to San Francisco to meet up with Jones, he fell asleep at the wheel, crashed into a pickup truck and was killed.

Oddly enough, for a musician who recorded so much, Watkins led only two sessions: the mostly blowing session *Watkins at Large* (Transition, 1956), recently reissued by Blue Note's Tone Poet series, and *Soulnik* (New Jazz, 1960), the much more progressive of the pair. The latter includes Yusef Lateef (flute, oboe), Hugh Lawson (piano) and Lex Humphries (drums), with Watkins on pizzicato cello. Steve Siegel (whose *Jazz Profiles* article is an excellent source of information on the bassist) notes that "Watkins never plays with his bow and must have chosen the cello primarily for its six-octave range, versus four octaves for the bass, which allowed him the much more expressive presentation." Dismissing liner notes that Watkins eschewed the cello (before first playing on the instrument only days before the *Soulnik* recording), Hayes insists that "Doug played the bass and cello equally well." Another perplexing detail that Siegel reveals, is that according to several sources, at the time of death, Watkins was carrying an airplane ticket to Japan. Although the Jones' San Francisco gig was closer to that country, whether the bassist wanted to visit Japan or establish a musical career there will never be known. This and other episodes in Watkins' life remain mysteries. But we can still listen to the high quality bass work he left behind.

As Hayes states: "Doug had a unique sound and interpretation of the music. He made many famous recordings with other people, and I'm sure he would have made more on his own."

For more info visit bluenote.com/artist/doug-watkins

Recommended Listening:

- Horace Silver—*And The Jazz Messengers* (Blue Note, 1954-55)
- Sonny Rollins—*Saxophone Colossus* (Prestige, 1956)
- The Jazz Messengers—*The Jazz Messengers* (Columbia, 1956)
- Doug Watkins Quintet (featuring Yusef Lateef)—*Soulnik* (Prestige-New Jazz, 1957/60)
- Tina Brooks—*Minor Move* (Blue Note, 1958)
- Donald Byrd—*Fuego* (Blue Note, 1959)

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century, Tacuma (Ornette Coleman's longtime bassist for almost four decades, from the mid '70s until the saxophonist's passing in 2015) developed a bass quartet in the '90s called *Basso Nouveau*, which included Brown on upright electric stick bass and acoustic bass guitar, Tacuma on four-string electric bass, along with Veasley on six-string bass guitar and Warren Oree (another veteran Philly bassist, who passed away in 2020 at age 76) on acoustic upright bass. That group would release the appropriately-titled album *All Basses Covered* (Moers Music, 1996). Decades prior to that, Brown was Tacuma's bass guitar and music instructor, and, in the words of Tacuma, he was also "a mentor, uncle, close friend, one of the greatest bassists of our generation—and one of the most lovable human beings."

Innovative and hard-working, kind and broad-minded, there's a continuum for Brown, which dates back to his parents' generous natures. There's the life philosophy that he has always lived by: "I would never really feel that I was the best that I can be. I always felt that there was room for growth and that I had to continue to grow. You have to continue to be humble." And that is the key to Brown: remaining humble.

Recommended Listening:

- Pat Martino—*Desperado* (Prestige, 1970)
- Catalyst—*Perception* (Muse, 1972)
- Max Roach Quartet—*Scott Free* (Soul Note, 1984)
- Tyrone Brown String Sextet—*Song of the Sun* (Naxos Jazz, 1999)
- Dave Burrell (with Tyrone Brown)—*Recital* (CIMP, 2000)
- Gary Karr/Tyrone Brown—*Bass Brothers* (AMATI Productions, 2016)

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The BMHC is supported, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature, New York State Assembly Member Chantell Jackson, New York State Senator Jose M. Serrano, public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, Citi Foundation, Cowles Charitable Trust, Howard Gilman Foundation, Laurie M. Tisch Illumination Fund, and The New York Community Trust.

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