



VELVET BROWN

TUBIST SPECTACULAR

BY ANDREW SCHINDER

Elephantine. Lugubrious. Lumbering. Such are the hackneyed descriptors of the tuba, the instrument too often pigeonholed and relegated to the back of the marching band. In the hands of the finest jazz practitioners, though—Bob Stewart, Marcus Rojas, Jose Davila, the late Howard Johnson (1941-2021)—the tuba is smooth, versatile, elegant. Jazz tuba masters have proven that the tuba is one of the most fascinating and misunderstood instruments in the jazz idiom (and do they hate having it dismissed as “elephantine”). And then there’s tuba virtuoso Velvet Brown, who, by so successfully navigating the webs that weave together genres and styles, elevates the instrument even further beyond her colleagues’ brilliant innovations. Unlike the above-mentioned artists, the classically-trained Brown (who is also a master of the euphonium) does not identify as a “jazz” musician. She did not grow up immersed in jazz’ traditions and barely listened to it. And yet, her skill and artistry are such that when Johnson fatefully asked her to join his seminal tuba-forward ensemble Gravity as lead tuba, Brown slotted in with ease and played like she grew up sleeping with a copy of *Kind of Blue* under her pillow.

This month she will be among a murderer’s row of master tubists participating in a celebration of Stewart’s 81st birthday at Roulette—the long-awaited third edition of Stewart’s “Tuba Spectacular.” The first two were presented way back in 1980 and 1981, so this latest celebration decades later promises to be an exciting display of the instrument’s evolution. Fittingly, Brown will be performing a commissioned piece by celebrated contemporary classicist Jessie Montgomery, accompanied by string chamber group PUBLIQuartet (which was co-founded by Montgomery). “I’m primarily a classical musician,” Brown emphasizes, yet adds, “Let’s just get rid of terms and say I’m a musician, and I love both of these genres, and I want to excel when I have the opportunities to excel.”

Recording her first album, *Velvet*, in 1998, Brown also considers herself a soloist, first and foremost, and thus the album consists of brilliant solo tuba or piano-accompanied interpretations of modern and classical chamber pieces. Johnson heard the album shortly after its release, and that’s when he was inspired to invite Brown to join his Gravity. But she accepted with a bit of trepidation. “I don’t play jazz!” Brown had responded to Johnson. She was not the improviser she explains, but notes she could play the parts in the right style, and she learned to swing. Eventually, Johnson knew that there was something there. “The first time I met Velvet, she was just so musical,” says Stewart, who played with Brown, Johnson and Gravity on 2017’s exhilarating *Testimony*. “She just played the 12 notes, just like she’d been playing anything else.” Because Brown approached her projects musically and did a great job—Stewart came to regard her as a lead jazz player, not just a classical player. He notes she’s “very, very dynamic, very open to new ideas.” And so, even though jazz wasn’t her world per se, Brown was able to readily take to it, which was

exactly the reason Stewart invited her to participate in his “Tuba Spectacular” event.

According to Rojas, he and Johnson used to talk about Brown. “We sat in his apartment and listened to her play classical music on her album. [Howard] was just so blown away. I knew he was going to tap her to play in Gravity, and once she did, that was it. That chair was sewn up forever.” It just so happened that despite her judgment about jazz, Brown was, in fact, trying to find places where she could express herself in different ways. About her place in Gravity, Rojas says, “It’s a tricky chair; you have to be so accurate and so clear, but Howard loved her. He told me many times that she was the greatest lead player he ever had.” Somewhat of a convert, Brown recorded her own jazz album as leader in 2020, *Lonnie’s Lament*, with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra. The album bears the name of the renowned John Coltrane composition (from his 1964 Impulse! record *Crescent*), covered on her album, as well as both Brown’s late father and one of Brown’s sons, who died tragically two days after childbirth. It may be an outlier in Brown’s largely classical catalog, but it is exquisite. “Velvet is fantastic,” says Davila. “Her work with Howard and other people, and all her solo works, are outstanding. She really encapsulates the strong desire to advance herself as a soloist and expanding the role of the tuba.”

Brown was raised in Annapolis, MD, her family immersed in both music and the city’s military community (the city is home to the US Naval Academy). Her father was a member of an R&B group that fell just shy of stardom, but he channeled his musical energies into starting a local youth drum-and-bugle corps that ultimately bore a deep positive impact on the young Velvet. Brown currently serves as the David P. Stone Chair, Professor of Tuba and Euphonium, and Associate Director for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at Penn State University. Given that she is a woman specializing in an instrument historically played by men and that she is a founding board member of the International Women’s Brass Conference, this last title is particularly meaningful. “The way that I approach my position for Belonging—I say it that way, rather than EDI—is that I help everyone feel like they belong,” Brown states emphatically. With a busy schedule, she prefers to lead by primarily lending support “more so than anything.”

Another aspect of her long teaching career comes with the fact that many, if not most, of her students have been young, Caucasian males. “I think that it’s been a wonderful situation for all of these students to have someone out of the norm—me, not being a male tuba player—teaching them,” she says. “Every week they see someone who’s not from their background. So we become like family, there’s this respect there.” Brown’s colleagues, as well as tuba aficionados, will certainly be paying her respect at this month’s Tuba Spectacular. “Velvet is a monster clinician,” adds Stewart. “She was very brave, getting out from the world of classical music and stepping into jazz. She’s very adventurous (and) I give her credit.”

For more info visit velvetuba.com. Brown is at Roulette Mar. 12 (part of “Tuba Spectacular: Celebrating Bob Stewart’s 81st Birthday”). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Velvet Brown—*Velvet* (Crystal, 1998)
- Velvet Brown—*Perspectives: Sound & Rhythm* (Crystal, 2005)
- Stiletto Brass Quintet—*Stiletto Brass Quintet with Doc Severinsen* (s/r, 2013)
- Howard Johnson and Gravity—*Testimony* (Tuscarora, 2017)
- Velvet Brown—*Lonnie’s Lament* (s/r, 2020)
- Velvet Brown (with Ron Stabinsky)—*Velvet Brown. Tuba* (Crystal, 2023)

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MARCH 2026 JAZZ CALENDAR

<p>TUESDAYS 8–11 PM Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests</p>	<p>WEDNESDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Jerome Sabbagh Quartet (3/4) Charles Altura Quartet with Ravi Coltrane (3/11) Pavillion with Solomon Gottfried (3/18) Rico Jones (3/25)</p>
<p>THURSDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Adam Kolker + Jeremy Stratton with guests: Baptiste Herbin (3/5) Gary Versace (3/19) Glenn Zaleski (3/12) Carmen Staaf (3/26)</p>	<p>FRIDAYS 8 & 9:30 PM Julieta Eugenio (3/6) Patrick Cornelius Quartet (3/13) Marty Ehrlich Trio (3/20) Samir Böhringer Quartet (3/27)</p>
<p>SATURDAYS 6–7:30 PM DUET SET(S), followed by 8 & 9:30 PM sets: Tony Malaby Quartet (3/7) Sonelius Smith Trio (3/14) Caleb Wheeler Curtis/Kresten Osgood (3/21) Carmen Staaf/Lorin Benedict Quartet (3/28)</p>	

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Mar. 5-7	Eddie Allen Quartet with Misha Tsiganov, Gregory Jones, Jerome Jennings
Mar. 12-14	ELEW with David Hawkins, Bar Filipowicz
Mar. 18-19	Ai Murakami Quartet with Frank Basile, Ray Gallon, Paul Sikivie
Mar. 20-21	Yayoi Ikawa Trio with Lonnie Plaxico, Kenneth Salters
Mar. 26-28	Misha Piatigorsky Trio with Danton Boller, Samvel Sarkiskyan
Mar. 4, 11, 25 *7:30-10:30 pm	Jam Session led by Michael Skekwoaga Ode

*7, 9 pm sets unless otherwise noted

\$30 music charge for all sets
gluten free kitchen

“Improvisation is Genius”