

# QUEEN BEE

JAZZ HIVE HARMONY

BY KEN WAXMAN

When it comes to releasing music, there are major labels with varied catalogs and almost no creative music; mid-sized labels with large catalogs of cutting-edge sounds and middling distribution; and micro labels with small numbers of carefully-curated releases and limited reach. New York-born, San Francisco Bay Area-based bassist-composer Lisa Mezzacappa, founder/administrator of the Queen Bee imprint, proudly slots her label in the last category. Still, she's spent the past year exponentially enlarging her small catalog by releasing new projects, one session a month, in CD, vinyl and digital forms. Mezzacappa, who describes herself as Queen Bee's "label-mistress," figured that to celebrate her milestones of February 2025's 50th birthday, and 2026's 25th year as a Californian, she would create this series, the 12-in-12 project, with ensembles ranging from duos to large bands. Additionally, the musical spectrum is pure improvisation to through-composed pieces. And she plays on all of them. "I play in so many fabulous ensembles led by creative jazz bandleaders

and composers," she says. Her first aim, she explains, was to lift up those voices and help those musicians get their music out there. "It's unabashedly a vanity project. Please tell me what small label isn't!" she challenges.

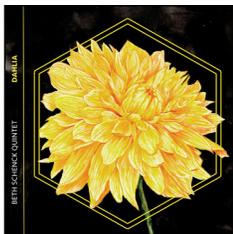
Initially, the idea of starting a label in 2013 was simple. "I decide to put out a record; I do the work that's needed and find a way to pay for it—and repeat," she says. Mezzacappa also reveals that this year is the first time she's worked extensively with other artists, adding that for West Coast musicians, the opportunities to have a recording released on an established label have always been few and far between. Many labels have a limited number of releases and a long backlog, and much interest from artists. "So like many of us, once things started to move in a more DIY direction, I decided to cut out the middleman," she says. "To have a label now is to have a Bandcamp account." The line between having a tiny label and self-releasing has become increasingly blurred, so there are fewer obstacles to getting the music out. The Queen Bee name honors her late grandmother who "took care of everyone in a very, caring but tough-love kind of way." So that title pays tribute to that spirit, and Mezzacappa's desire to "continue in that vein during my artistic life."

Another Bay Area resident, drummer Jordan Glenn says he became involved at the bassist's request, and

for more than a decade has worked with her in many groups. The live recording of his nine-piece Beak band, on which both played, was available, and Mezzacappa asked to include it as part of the label's 12-in-12 project. Glenn agreed and has been featured on four other Queen Bee sessions since. The experiences lived up to his expectations "and then some" he enthuses. "Lisa really cares about supporting her friends and wants others to hear their music," he adds. "She's tireless, works closely with everyone on their records and has an attention to detail and quality that serves the final product." The way Mezzacappa does so is by creating volunteer-run situations with artists financing their own releases and retaining all return on sales. As a self-described "midwife" she provides expertise in project management, administrative support, and promotional and publicity outreach, and enlists others with distribution experience. Mezzacappa is focused: "I try to create a collective structure around these releases where we're supporting each other, promoting each other's work, and feeling our records are connected as part of a community snapshot, rather than one-offs."

Pressings are limited to a few hundred copies at most. Since the 12-in-12 project has come to an end,

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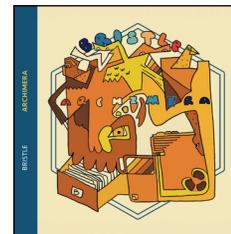
Dahlia  
Beth Schenck Quintet



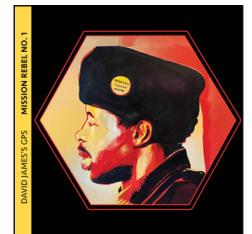
Cosmicomics  
Lisa Mezzacappa Six



No Ins & Outs  
duo B.



Archimera  
Bristle



Mission Rebel No. 1  
David James' GPS

## VOXNEWS

# JAZZ HERSTORY

BY TESSA SOUTER

March is International Women's History Month, a time to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions women have made throughout history. Arguably nowhere is this more important than in jazz. Since the '30s, women have dominated the airwaves as jazz vocalists. Yet one can't help but wonder why legendary artists such as Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald composed so little—if at all. Perhaps it was due, in part, to a lack of visible role models. In the 19th century, authors Anne, Emily and Charlotte Brontë first published their novels under male pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously, and Jane Austen's early work was credited anonymously as being written "by a lady" (which was probably assumed to be a male pseudonym). Once the true identities of these writers were revealed, many more women were inspired to write—and today, over half of all published authors are women. Similarly, in jazz, women composers often disguised their gender by using male names or initials. Mary Lou Williams, initially published under M. L. Williams, knowing the assumption would be that the composer was male. While conditions are improving, there is still a long way to go when it comes to representation and role models—not helped by the fact that, according to a recent study by journalist, researcher and scholar Dr. Lara Pellegrinelli, just 15% of all jazz faculty and only 8% of instrumental jazz faculty in the US are women.

Congratulations to multiple GRAMMY-winner, singer and songwriter Samara Joy, who won the Best Jazz Vocal Album GRAMMY this year for *Portraits* (Verve).

And to the members of *säje* (vocalists Erin Bentlage, Sara Gazarek, Johnaye Kendrick and Amanda Taylor) who celebrated their third win (in as many years) for "Big Fish" in the Best Arrangement, Instruments and Vocals category. Songbook Ink has released a follow-up to 2024's *Flying High: Big Band Canaries Who Soared*. Its *Flying High: Still Soaring: A Tribute to the Voices That Taught the World to Swing* is a Women's History Month tribute to the big band "canaries" who toured during the Swing era, as well as to the contemporary artists carrying that legacy forward. The album features pianist-vocalist **Champion Fulton**, trumpeter-vocalist **Bria Skonberg**, who will be at Dizzy's Club (Mar. 20-22), vocalists **Tahira Clayton**, **Carmen Bradford**, and multiple GRAMMY-winner (and songwriter) **Nicole Zuraitis**, who won the 2024 Best Jazz Vocal GRAMMY for *How Love Begins*, a 10-song album featuring her original compositions, and who will be at The Jazz Loft (Mar. 27). The album release celebration at Birdland (Mar. 27-29) will feature **Champion Fulton**, **Imani Roussele** and **Laura Anglade**. Making her debut at Birdland, actress, singer and director, **Elizabeth Gillies**, celebrates the Great American Songbook (Mar. 9).

SEE YOU THERE...Second-generation American, GRAMMY-nominated vocalist and composer **Somi** (born in Illinois to parents from Rwanda and Uganda), a highly imaginative and soulful singer, returns to Dizzy's Club (Mar. 6-8), for the second installment of the Mother Africa Salon, a deeply personal look at how African sound, story and tradition flow through jazz. Expect a mix of original music and reimagined classics. Also at Dizzy's (Mar. 10), don't miss **Georgia Heers**, third place winner in 2024's Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Competition, blessed with a beautiful voice and a deep understanding of jazz. More don't-misses at Dizzy's this month: **Vanisha Gould** (Mar. 16), whose latest album, *She's Not Shiny, She's Not Smooth* (La Reserve) is

a wonderful celebration of vulnerability, imperfection and authenticity. Latin GRAMMY-nominated vocalist, composer and bandleader, **Claudia Acuña** returns with a magical blend of South American folk traditions with jazz and world music (Mar. 19). Lovers of straight-ahead jazz should make sure to catch **Judy Carmichael** (nicknamed "Stride" by Count Basie), who will delve into favorites from Gershwin, Fats Waller, Cole Porter and more (Mar. 24). **Shelley Nicole** brings her Abbey Lincoln tribute, "The Tao of Abbey Lincoln" to Nublu (Mar. 31). At Birdland, guitarist-vocalist **John Pizzarelli** (Mar. 3-7), **Kurt Elling**, with the Future of the Jazz Orchestra (Mar. 18-21). At Mezzrow: **Deborah Davis** (Mar. 12), **Michelle Walker** (Mar. 15), **Naama** (Mar. 15), **Pucci Amanda Jones** (Mar. 26) and Brazil-born, NY-based **Jamile** (Mar. 8), who will hopefully be singing selections from her beautiful new album *Pursuit of a Pulse* (Cellar Music). At the Jazz Forum: **Kate Baker** (Mar. 8), **Camille Thurman** (Mar. 13-14) and GRAMMY-nominee **Karrin Allyson** (Mar. 27-28). At Arthur's Tavern, the emotionally resonant **Richard Cortez** (Mar. 9, 23). At Zinc Bar: 2022 Ella Fitzgerald Jazz Vocal Competition winner, **Julia Danielle** (Mar. 3), pianist-vocalist **Kelly Green** (Mar. 10), **Kieran Brown** (Mar. 18), **April Varner** (Mar. 23) and **Champion Fulton** (Mar. 24). **Meshell Ndegeocello** and her group will perform at Pioneer Works (Mar. 29). Jazz vocalist and NEA Jazz Master **Dee Dee Bridgewater** performs at Schomburg Center's Women in Jazz Festival (Mar. 30) and will be honored with the ASCAP-Bob Harrington Lifetime Achievement Award at the 41st Bistro Awards at Chelsea Table + Stage (Mar. 16). Vocalist and composer **Aubrey Johnson** celebrates her latest album *The Lively Air* (Greenleaf Music) at Birdland (Mar. 22). And the highly-imaginative vocalist-improviser-composer, **Kyoko Kitamura** appears at Downtown Music Gallery (Mar. 24).

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created a hush, and when tenor and trumpet twined together in a rising, rousing climax.

At Zinc Bar, **The Hemphill Stringtet** performed Julius Hemphill's arrangements for the World Saxophone Quartet and three of his string arrangements of Charles Mingus tunes. You'd think that a string quartet would have difficulty matching the brio and bluster of a saxophone quartet, but cellist Tomeka Reid's impeccable timing became a decisive factor, lofting and swinging the others, owning the lower register in a way that would have made the late Hamiet Bluiett (WSQ's baritone saxophonist) proud. Next was vocalist **Laura Anglade**, whose dark eye make-up and fashionable accoutrements suggested an icon of the silent silver screen. Her voice, relaxed and delicate, stayed with you, each note carefully sculpted and burnished, nothing thrown away. On Peter Nero's "Sunday in New York" she sang an extended, inventive scat solo.

French trumpeter **daoud**'s quartet set at Bitter End (part of the annual French Quarter events, under the WJF umbrella) navigated mercurial mood swings, from tender to titanic, as he, head bobbling like a dashboard ornament, pulled the pulse back even as Quentin Braine's volatile drumming pushed it forward, Remi Bouyssi re's bass booming loud enough to shake your chest cavity. One of the final sets for the Manhattan Marathon portion was **James Brandon Lewis**' Trio (with electric bassist Josh Werner and drummer Chad Taylor) at Drom, which proved to be the perfect nightcap to an eventful evening. Beginning with a strong but sensitive, Coltrane-esque treatment of Eddie Harris' "Alicia", the leader gathered power and momentum as the set progressed. Multicolored spotlights bounced off his tenor saxophone bell like a scintillant Christmas tree, returning at last to a tender soliloquy on the ballad "Within You Are Answers", a set highpoint despite Lewis' noticeable struggles with a problematic reed.

The next night was dedicated to WJF's Brooklyn Marathon, which generated the same cognitive dissonance: too many (great!) shows, too little time. First up was the Russ Gershon-led **Either/Orchestra** at Brooklyn Bowl, playing all-Ethiopian repertoire and featuring Ethiopian vocalists Munit Mesfin and Bruke Tesfaye. The infectious world-beat groove of the band was enhanced by video jockey Will Glasspiegel's live-edited visual effects splaying over bare brick walls, synced to and layered against the hall's myriad sights and bowling pin sounds to create a surfeit of sensory stimulation. Brother/sister team **Samora** and **Elena Pinderhughes** dropped a love-bomb on the crowd at National Sawdust. Their intelligent, accessible songs, sung with pliant, expressive voices that sounded even sweeter when blended in harmony, proffered messages of hope and perseverance, apropos for an audience apprehensive about the country's political climate change.

At Superior Ingredients, **David Binney**'s Action Trio blended prerecorded loops with live improv, the alto saxophonist's fingers abur over the keys as he shredded through prodigious solos. Drummer Louis Cole almost stole the set with slippery but solid beat-keeping and hyped-up spoken word segments. Next on the same stage, vibraphonist **Joel Ross**' sextet performed pieces from his new release, *Gospel Music* (Blue Note). His tricky but tuneful arrangements, often punctuated with rolling accent patterns, were lifted and sustained by his effervescent solos, a constant delight. Trumpeter **Adam O'Farrill**'s Elephant, appearing at Loove Annex, defied category. There were familiar musical references, recognizable structures, but now amalgamated in a thoroughly original way, played with a level of precision and panache that promises great things for this project. Pianist Yvonne Rogers' protean touch, delicate yet decisive, perfectly partnered with the leader's equally protean trumpet playing, expressed in echoes, shakes, ripping sheets, stratospheric flights

and low feral roars.

**Freedom Riders**, held at Le Poisson Rouge on WJF's penultimate night, served as a musical manifesto of resistance against, as festival founder Brice Rosenbloom put it, "forces trying to divide us and spread unfortune." Anchored by bassist Ben Williams' tenacious approach, the assembled collective of youthful lions dug deep, musically and spiritually. The acme came midway during vocalist **Dee Dee Bridgewater**'s charismatic cameo on Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit". It was a moment of communitas and transcendence, when anything seemed possible, when—at least for that moment—our deeply divided nation felt a little more like "Our Country, 'Tis of We."

For more info visit [winterjazzfest.com](http://winterjazzfest.com)

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**Tom Skinner** held an added quiet strength by representing a musically polar opposite approach: concentrating on subtle gestures and flowing ease, calming, meditative and sensitized to tonal colorations. Skinner maintains his jazz activities by the side of The Smile, now that Shabaka Hutchings' Sons of Kemet is disbanded. The drummer's spread of musicians are well-selected for this intended mood shaping: cello, piano, bass and twinned tenor saxophones were poised for thoughtful actions, though Chelsea Carmichael gave her flute preferential treatment beside Robert Stillman's tenor. Lulled into drift, listeners' ears were tenderly consumed, until Skinner hit a massive bass-drum boom and Tom Herbert opened up a chunky electric bass line, flute and tenor joining for a wiry and winding procession. These pieces lie in the verdant regions of filmic grandeur, an extended ritual groove, as keyboard player Jonathan Geyevu moved over to the drum kit, joining Skinner for a mallet-softness interlude. "The Maxim" was a highlight, lifted from the new *Kaleidoscopic Visions* album, with Kareem Dayes sounding as if he was playing a West African n'goni rather than cello. Then the climax arrived: Carmichael hoisted her tenor and embarked on a step-by-step ascension that completely contrasted with the rest of the set, lifting proudly above the sonic forest, slurred in its seeking progress. "The Journey" arrived as an encore, with its inherent stop-start itchiness.

Earlier the same day, a lunchtime set displayed the positive state of Belgian jazz, with Ghent pianist **Orson Claeys** leading a shining band of bass and drums, plus the trumpet of Daniel Migliosi, who acted as if the nominal leader, so prominent were his repeatedly frontal solos on the horn. To compensate in advance, he'd made a delayed onstage appearance, after the others had been setting up an entry-vamp. The themes were breezy, mellow and approachable, lightly funky with a crisply-muted trumpet solo encouraged by the leader's pushing piano lines. The mute was removed and the drums frolicked playfully, until an *a capella* trumpet solo returned. Claeys pulled out a bluesy feature, followed by a bass spotlight over brushes on drum skins. A chunky spill issued forth out of this delicacy, and Migliosi came back with a clarion call. The bandleader revealed sharp arranging skills in performances of "Emphasis of a Dream", "Primrose" and new pieces "Drift" and "For Ambrose", fleetly moving with an atmospheric stage lighting hue. As if by surprise, Wayne Shorter's "Footprints" brought forth Fender Rhodes for the end run, the ensemble sound getting ever-spacey.

The evening before, an actual trumpet leader did hold sway. **Milena Casado** worked the divide between acoustic jazz and sampled electro-jitter. Her live set was an improvement on her debut album from last year (*Reflection of Another Self*), with its horn special effects tamed slightly. On the recorded work, Casado (from Spain, but NYC-based) tends to ladle on the knob-twiddled soup overmuch, whereas the onstage combo

now had more room to express its jazz core. Casado also suffers from an overabundance of interest in audience involvement, to the point where she's on the verge of bullying the crowd into participation—jokingly, but with serious intent. Behind (or beneath) all of the fx clutter, the trumpeter played some winning solos, and it's not as though electronic or sampling interference is frowned on by this scribe, just that her chosen palette is sonically ill-judged. Unfortunately, this band also featured the dreaded EWI, played by Morgan Guerin, not exactly being the Marshall Allen of the instrument. As compensation, the drumming of Jongkuk Kim was continually resourceful in its imagination. "I Don't Care What You Think" provided a fanfare-rouser closer, cutting the crap for a spaciouly burnished solo before heading towards a luminous piano feature with some detailed drum contemplation.

For more info visit [flagey.be/brusselsjazzfestival](http://flagey.be/brusselsjazzfestival)

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she wants to step back though. "Recently people have approached me with their records to put out, but I need a break." Mezzacappa has a goal, though. Her hope is, after a bit, to transform her concepts and label into a collective where a committee of artists decide what to release in any given year and pool efforts to make that happen. Oakland-based composer Nathan Clevenger, who has worked with Mezzacappa for twenty years, says he was "immediately on board" when she suggested releasing *Astrolabe*, a 74-minute composition for his 12-piece ensemble. "I have nothing but positive feelings about the label and the integrity and hard work Lisa invested in every step of the project," he affirms, adding that, "The Bay Area scene I grew up experiencing is a huge influence on my work. It feels appropriate that this album sits next to the work of so many inspirational local colleagues."

The environment that Mezzacappa and Queen Bee inhabit is one of music's evolution: record stores have mostly closed and the majority of listeners have moved on to streaming. The consequence, she notes, is that "little labels are special for the ways they curate different corners of the jazz scene." She also notes there's been a democratization of music distribution via platforms such as Bandcamp, which she observes is "how you can get to know a regional musical scene that's artist-directed like that in the Bay Area." Another observation, from Clevenger, is that currently "it's hard for artists or labels to get reviews, with the dwindling space for both in our current media environment." He acknowledges Mezzacappa's dedication to drawing attention to the 12-in-12 releases, an activity he notes is missing from other labels he's been involved with. Clevenger was also hoping that the novelty of the 12-in-12 project might be a hook for press coverage. "I've had more press for this album than my previous few," he says. This documentation is also done without any directives or quotas either. For instance, Beth Schenck is the only female bandleader featured on the 12-in-12 releases. "I do my best to support women bandleaders and composers in my community," Mezzacappa says, adding, "I was on another nice record by a woman bandleader-composer this year, but the 12 slots were already filled."

Overall, Mezzacappa feels that nonprofits and institutions have a responsibility to be representative and be sure their programs and initiatives are accessible to a wide range of artists from different backgrounds. As she enters the next realm of her work beyond the 12-in-12 project, Mezzacappa continues to view the label as a "rising tide" intended to support fellow artists, creative thinkers and collaborators who define the West Coast scene.

For more info visit [queenbeerecords.bandcamp.com](http://queenbeerecords.bandcamp.com)