

## MARILYN CRISPELL

## SOUNDING LIKE HERSELF

BY THOMAS STAUDTER

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Spring 2024 was especially busy for pianist-composer Marilyn Crispell. She had a run with Trio Tapestry which included dates at Blue Note Tokyo, an appearance at Rochester International Jazz Festival, plus a stop in Chicago to record the free-jazz quartet album *spi-raling horn* (Balance Point Acoustics/Irritable Mystic) with bass clarinetist Jason Stein. Then the news reached her in July: she was among the 2025 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) Jazz Masters Fellowship awardees. Crispell felt deep gratitude, but also amazement that she was even chosen. Long associated with the avant garde subset of jazz, she is renowned for her intense, unbridled musical artistry and acknowledges that forging her own way throughout her long career may have weakened any chance of mainstream popularity (which was never an issue for her anyway). “Instead of ‘playing the game,’ I always chose to do something that was meaningful to me,” she says, “even if it didn’t seem meaningful to anyone else.”

At the 2025 NEA Jazz Masters Tribute Concert, held in Washington, D.C., Crispell was described by pianist and host, Jason Moran (then-Artistic Director of the then-named Kennedy Center), as “one of the most adventurous pianists around.” He noted that Crispell’s participation during the late ’70s in the Creative Music Studio (run by Karl Berger, Ingrid Sertso and Ornette Coleman) in Woodstock, NY, eventually led to a long tenure with visionary saxophonist Anthony Braxton, playing in his Creative Music Orchestra and quartet from 1982-95. Expanding on her notable achievements, Moran added pertinent details of Crispell’s “enriching” associations with the likes of Reggie Workman, Roscoe Mitchell, Barry Guy, Babatunde Olatunji and Wadada Leo Smith, as well some of her first records in the early ’80s (which include two live solo albums: *A Concert in Berlin* on FMP and *Live in Berlin* on Black Saint) and her playing in the 1986 New York City Opera premiere of the Anthony Davis and Thulani Davis opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*.

A video presented at the Jazz Masters event included Crispell speaking about her improvisational ethos, beginnings as a young piano student, career exploits and recent collaborations with younger musicians, then shifted to her performance that evening, which comprised a short “prelude” of improvisations that segued into a rhapsodic and deeply emotional eight-minute-long reading of John Coltrane’s “Dear Lord” with Coltrane alum, bassist Workman. The number is one Crispell has regularly included and revisited in live sets over the years: from several superb solo albums (*Live in San Francisco* and *For Coltrane*), to duo with Art Ensemble of Chicago’s Joseph Jarman (*Connecting Spirits*) and in trio with Workman and drummer Paul Motian (*Live in Zurich*). “I played with Reggie for so many years, in different groups and ensembles, and learned so much from him,” she says. “And John Coltrane started it all for me. ‘Dear Lord’ is such a beautiful expression. My performance was a statement too. It was mainly Black musicians who mentored me and saw my potential. So, I wanted to do something that spoke of my gratitude.”

There’s also a back story to the story: living on Cape

Cod in 1975 after her divorce from trumpeter-painter Gareth Crispell, she discovered a copy of Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*, put it on the turntable and played it repeatedly one night in what the writer and “stream of consciousness” modernist Virginia Woolf called a “moment of being.” McCoy Tyner’s solo in the suite’s third part, “Pursuance”, mesmerized her, so she began transcribing it. But it was Coltrane’s spirit that Crispell truly connected with: “I could feel his presence in the room, and I understood his unconditional love,” she remembers. “Instantly, I decided that I wanted to be a part of whatever music or culture this was from.”

Originally a trained classical pianist, Crispell (née Braune) was born and raised in Philadelphia, until at age 10, her father was transferred to Baltimore. She’d already started piano lessons at age seven, but didn’t become a serious student until receiving guidance from Grace Cushman at Peabody Preparatory. At a Vermont summer camp, a young Marilyn learned theory, harmony and improvisation. She continued her classical piano studies at the New England Conservatory, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Music (majoring in piano) in 1968 and marrying the following year. Living in Boston, she mostly stopped playing the piano for a half-dozen years while she worked as a hospital ward secretary.

But after her *A Love Supreme* epiphany, Crispell studied for two years with pianist and legendary music guru, Charlie Banacos, before veteran saxophonist Charlie Mariano hipped her to the Creative Music Studio. So she headed to Woodstock at age 30. Her soon-to-be life-changing musical bond with Braxton was additionally augmented and well-served by close collaborations with others in residence at the Woodstock music collective—Oliver Lake, Wadada Leo Smith, members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago and her particular pianistic lodestar, Cecil Taylor. “When Anthony [Braxton] hired me,” Crispell says, “there was something to learn all the time and I was taken out of my comfort zone.” But aspects of her classical background also served as a good preparation for playing with him—namely, sight reading, theory and composition studies. “At that point,” she says, “I was not thinking about a career, only that I was part of the music and with people where I felt I belonged.”

Before Braxton disbanded the quartet (with bassist Mark Dresser and drummer Gerry Hemingway), Crispell had attended a jazz festival in Stockholm (SOLO Festival 1992), where a group with Swedish bassist Anders Jormin performed. There, she reports, the music opened a new level of aesthetics for her: with spaces, quiet lyricism and sweet melodies. “A door was opened, and suddenly it was important for me to explore the lyrical side of things, which I had kept under wraps for too long.” A few years later, in 1995, Crispell approached ECM Records founder-producer Manfred Eicher about the music of composer and synthesizer pioneer Annette Peacock—and another door was opened. *Nothing ever was, anyway: Music of Annette Peacock* was released in 1997, and those who knew Crispell solely from her “energy music” (to use her phrase) were in for a surprise. With bassist Gary Peacock and Motian, she

opted for a quieter approach. Subsequent releases on ECM advanced her “late style,” including two more trio dates—*Amaryllis* (2001) and *Storyteller* (2004), plus a duo with clarinetist David Rothenberg (*One Dark Night I Left My Silent House*, 2010) and another one with Gary Peacock (*Azure*, 2013). The just-released *Memento*, a gorgeous duo recording with Jormin on ECM, fits right in there as well. As do Lovano’s three remarkable Trio Tapestry albums to date. “Marilyn approaches her art improvisationally, where she can be in a piece of music and at any moment feed its energy and also feel what the other musicians are feeling,” says Lovano, with whom she’ll be performing later this month into early-May at the Village Vanguard. “She creates music within the music, her piano just singing, and each of her compositions is an idea.”

Pianist Kris Davis, whose trio recording from last year, *Run the Gauntlet* (Pyroclastic), is dedicated to Crispell and five other women pianists, observes that she’s “heard how Marilyn’s playing has changed over the years.” She adds, “Now I’d say she sounds more like herself. She loves Cecil Taylor—I get that from her earlier records—but playing hard and fast and loud was, for her, a way to find a place in the scene, back when women in that world had a lot to prove. Now her sound is more open and vulnerable.”

Crispell has received other recent, artistically affirming accolades, including a Jazz Legacies Fellowship (a lifetime achievement honor from the Jazz Foundation of America and Mellon Foundation), as well as the Instant Award in Improvised Music 2025, which was presented to the pianist at Jazzfest Berlin last year. She continues to teach and mentors younger musicians. A busy concert schedule also continues to be an insistent celebration of creative expression for both long-time fans and young jazz heads just discovering her music. “Marilyn is a master pianist who I continue to be amazed by every time I hear her play,” says pianist Angelica Sanchez, who collaborated with her mentor in duo on 2020’s *How To Turn The Moon* (Pyroclastic). “She is such an inspiration to me. I look at her and know there is nothing I can’t do because Marilyn has done it already.”

For more info visit [marilyncrispell.com](http://marilyncrispell.com). Crispell plays solo at National Jazz Museum in Harlem Apr. 16 and is at Village Vanguard Apr. 28-May 3 (with Joe Lovano Quartet). See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Marilyn Crispell—*For Coltrane* (Leo, 1987)
- Anthony Braxton—*Quartet (Santa Cruz)* 1993 (hatART, 1993)
- Marilyn Crispell, Gary Peacock, Paul Motian—*Nothing ever was, anyway: Music of Annette Peacock* (ECM, 1997)
- Marilyn Crispell, Mark Dresser, Gerry Hemingway—*Play Braxton* (Tzadik, 2010)
- Joe Lovano Trio Tapestry—*Trio Tapestry* (ECM, 2018)
- Marilyn Crispell, Thommy Andersson, Michala Østergaard-Nielsen—*The Cave* (ILK Music, 2022)