

MICHAEL FOSTER

QUEER SAXOPHONICS

BY JOHN PIETARO



ANNA YATSEVICH

Nothing could silence the voice of jazz. Birthed under fire, its pioneers, grappling for respect, largely disappeared the role of gay, lesbian and trans musicians. Even while seemingly invisible, composer-arranger-pianist Billy Strayhorn—Duke’s right hand—thrived while living a fairly “out” lifestyle. Over decades, through social and artistic advances, free jazz, punk-jazz and other experimental forms remained oddly narrow-minded for far too long. No matter that Cecil Taylor was known to be gay, his very avant gardism a barrier to industry trope, he was the exception to many rules. Consider: “*What happened to transgression and a bit of playful vulgarity? Sexual innuendo within jazz has always been there. Art should provoke.*” —Michael Foster.

Saxophonist Foster stands as an organizer, curator and performer of LGBTQIA+ culture within the wider avant garde. With roots in New York and then years spent in LA, he returned to NYC’s experimental music circle, helping to carve a new, queerer space in the scene. His performance-practice braves physical manipulation, often eschewing mouthpiece or replacing and augmenting it with various lengths of rubber hose or balloons. Is it in the service of LGBTQIA+ visibility or purely championing the bounds of new music? The real question is, why shouldn’t it be both? As Foster says, “I want to create a broader discourse for discussing improvised music than what currently exists, one that incorporates questions of interrelationality and power dynamics.”

The New York Review of Cocksucking, an obvious play on the noted literary broadside, is Foster’s duet with ersatz electronic composer-improviser Richard Kamerman. “We met through Tinder; his profile was filled with various broken electronics and objects à la ‘Voice Crack’, so I figured we had to at least have a coffee.” The duo mixes “broken or semi-functional electronics” with text and sampled voices and sounds. “A lot are from *Straight to Hell*,” explains Foster, referring to Boyd McDonald’s infamous zine that began in the ’70s, which published supposedly (sometimes dubiously) autobiographical stories of gay sexual encounters. “Almost anything can be a euphemism. Our idea was to make sexual identity a critical part of the work, but not so much a celebration as a critique of consumerism within the contemporary gay life. We’re less interested in ‘queer positivism’ than we are in examining how a queer perspective informs the work. How can free jazz scream differently? Can it be funny? I want context, another layer.” Also a conceptualist, Foster began his profession studying film theory, a lasting influence.

Foster and Kamerman created Queer Trash, a diverse curatorial forum for experimental LGBTQIA+ artists. Founded a decade back, the series aimed to bridge experimental performance with the queer community. “Maybe it’s less obvious in New York, but some began to perceive me differently,” he adds. “Sometimes in hosting queer events, I feel I’m seen less as a musician but as a gay man. I didn’t think I could

be seen as both simultaneously.” But this narrow view has slowly changed. In 2018 Queer Trash received the Suzanne Fiol Curatorial Fellowship at Issue Project Room working with Eames Armstrong, and then in 2019 an event via MoMA/PS1, featuring Joe McPhee, Sarah Hennies’ new work for Wind Ensemble and New York Review of Cocksucking.

The collective Queer Trash was founded in response to the lack of a dedicated queer platform in many of NYC’s experimental music scenes. It has hosted events at locations throughout the city, presenting both local and touring artists working across experimental aesthetics and practices. Foster reminds us that “there was post-modernism, now it’s post-post-modernism... everything’s available...anything’s possible.” His naturally radical edge has come to the forefront as the nation faces the current authoritarian rule: “Since Trump, I’ve been wondering how I feel about screaming without the saxophone has become the norm.” But Foster’s horns capture the spirit of jazz heritage. On soprano, in the mid-range of his straight horn (no pun intended), the echo of Sidney Bechet emerges in vibrato glory before multiphonics force through. He has made major inroads into NYC’s ever-growing free jazz/new music circle while aptly “queering” it. His trio The Ghost is a prime example. The 2023 album *Vanished Pleasures* bore a cover of leather imagery, and pays tribute to Jean Genet, Derek Jarman and Leo Bersani as much as free improvisation.

Foster’s “industrious tongue” has also collaborated with iconic no-wave poet-vocalist Lydia Lunch, as well as duos with Ben Bennett, Ted Byrnes, Leila Bordreuil; a quartet with Steve Swell, Michael Griener and Christian Weber; Barker Trio with Tim Dahl and Andrew Barker; While We Still Have Bodies (with Bennett and Weasel Walter); plus his work with McPhee, Shelley Hirsch, Sean Meehan, The Rita, Brandon Lopez, Webb Crawford, Michael Zerang, Nate Wooley, Pascal Niggenkemper, Mette Rasmussen, the late Michael Evans and many others. This month, Foster will be at Singers in Brooklyn with his “Michael Foster with Strings” project, featuring live bondage suspension artists, before hitting Tubby’s upstate in Kingston, NY, as well as Rhizome in DC, Red Room in Baltimore and the No Fun Festival back in NYC at Roulette in July. And he’s deep into a new Ghost record with covers of Thelonious Monk, Iannis Xenakis and a version of “My Way”, featuring trumpeter-vocalist Jacob Wick, in addition to the soon-to-be released *Selections from the Gutter* (Relative Pitch) with Griener and Weber.

“Art should provoke,” Foster affirms. “What’s often lost is just how this music has relevance to people’s lives. That can never be allowed to disappear.”

For more info visit michaelfoster.bandcamp.com. Foster is at Singers Jun. 2nd, and Lava Club Jun. 10 (with The Ghost). He is also at Tubby’s (Kingston, NY) Jun. 7 (with The Ghost). See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.

Recommended Listening:

- Michael Foster, Michael Evans, Pascal Niggenkemper — *MF | ME + PN* (s/r, 2014)
- Michael Foster, Steve Swell, Brandon Lopez, Weasel Walter — *Threes are the Only Trouble* (ugEXPLODE, 2017)
- Michael Foster/Ben Bennett — *Contractions* (Astral Spirits, 2019)
- Michael Foster — *The Industrious Tongue of Michael Foster* (Relative Pitch, 2022)
- The Ghost — *Vanished Pleasures* (Relative Pitch, 2023)
- Ted Byrnes/Michael Foster — *Solfège* (Torn Light, 2024)

YOON SUN CHOI

UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

Friday, June 5 - 7:30pm @ I-Beam - YSC's solo series *Alone Not Lonely*
Yoon Sun Choi, Brittany Karlson, Elsa Nilsson & Deidre Rodman

Friday, June 26 - 7:30pm @ I-Beam - Yoon Sun Choi Trio
Yoon Sun Choi, Jacob Sacks, Vinnie Sperrazza

Saturday, July 4 - Operation Gig - Yoon Sun Choi Quartet
Location/Time TBD - visit Instagram @yoon.sun.choi for more details

ERIK KAPIN

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Jun 4	Duduka Da Fonseca Brazilian Quartet
Jun 3, 10, 17, 24 *7:30-10:30 pm	Jam Session led by Michael Shekwoaga Ode (<i>\$10 which includes one drink. ALL musicians welcome!</i>)
Jun 5, 6	Michael Shekwoaga Ode Trio
Jun 11-13	Noriko Ueda/Ted Rosenthal Trio
Jun 25-27	Johnny O'Neal Trio with Joey Rainieri, Itay Morchi

*7, 9 pm sets unless otherwise noted
\$20-30 music charge for all sets
gluten free kitchen



FOR FULL SCHEDULE, SCAN CODE



“Improvisation is Genius”