

# SARA SERPA

## CRYSTALLIZATION OF SOUNDS & IDEAS

### BY THOMAS STAUDTER



EBRU YILDIZ

One of the jazz world's most vital forces of today, Sara Serpa, a Portugal native based in NYC since 2008, is a composer, improviser and cultural activist who uniquely approaches the voice as a literal instrument. Serpa has woven her wide experiences and remarkable journey—which include a life-altering education, fulfillment in partnering-parenting and forceful advocacy for women and non-binary artists—into an ongoing level of achievement that few creative artists attain or can sustain. Her influential and daring wordless soundscapes are emphatic and mesmerizing, easily recognized by listeners as individual. Now in her mid 40s, Serpa is striding boldly forward, “following my own vision,” she says. A prodigious collaborator, last year she and pianist Matt Mitchell released a stark and exquisite duo recording, *End of Something* (Obliquity), which landed on many critics’ “best of” lists. This follows a recent stretch of sweepingly creative efforts on recordings with dauntless improvisers including bassist Linda May Han Oh, flute player Jamie Baum, cellist Erik Friedlander and saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock.

Serpa’s four-night residency at The Stone this month, with various artists and in various contexts, concludes with her Mitchell duo. Other featured collaborations will include two trios: one with guitarist (and her husband) André Matos and pianist Craig Taborn, the other with cellist Friedlander and laptop artist Ikue Mori. She’ll also be accompanied by some of the personnel from her 2021 album *Intimate Strangers*, including fellow vocalist Aubrey Johnson and Pakistani-American composer, multi-instrumentalist Qasim Naqvi, all illustrative of Serpa’s commitment to, as she says, “Work harder and reflect more on what all this is about.” For a musical artist whose days include early morning composing sessions, when possible, time shared with Matos and their 12-year-old son Lourenzo, and then teaching at The New School, discipline and time management skills are required attributes. She makes sure to reserve time for rest (especially important for vocalists) and accepts the fact that “I am not a superwoman.” Though many would beg to differ.

Born and raised in Lisbon, Serpa started on classical piano and choir singing when she was seven years old, finding the latter “magical, a place to lose your ego and achieve a goal through teamwork.” Her musical studies carried through to formal training in classical music at the Lisbon Conservatory of Music, two years of studying drawing and a college degree in Social Work, during which time, while in her early 20s, a chance meeting with a pianist led her to vocal lessons at the Hot Club School, a leap both backwards and forwards. Fascinated by the “liberation” she found in the improviser’s art, Serpa took another leap in 2005 enrolling at Berklee College of Music and then matriculating at the New England Conservatory of Music for a master’s degree. “A perfect environment to learn how to take risks and develop my creativity,” she says. Tutelage there began with vocal guru Dominique Eade, then with all-star faculty members Danilo Pérez, Jerry Bergonzi, John McNeil, Ken Schaphorst and, most significantly, Serpa mentor, Ran Blake, the Third Stream-

leaning pianist with whom she later recorded three duo albums. Eade recalls Serpa arriving to an early lesson with a Lennie Tristano head she wanted to work on, and being impressed by her “exquisite voice,” as well as her musicality, curiosity and intellect. “There was no doubt that there’d be a long artistic trajectory in Sara’s musical career,” Eade recalls.

Launched into the US jazz scene, Serpa’s fertile musical development can be tracked across a dozen albums as leader or co-leader, as well as numerous guest spots. Highlights of the journey include her 2008 leader debut *Praia*, an expression of her “adaptation to the USA”; her work with the *a cappella* vocal quartet Mycale limning John Zorn’s *Book of Angels* a few years later; three albums with Matos—her steadiest collaborator and accompanist over the years (their most recent release is 2023’s *Night Birds*); and 2024’s masterful *Encounters and Collisions*, a multi-media work that included an insightful memoir with her own drawings.

Sensing a need for a support system that would nourish and empower women and gender-expansive musical artists, and in answer to the prevailing male network that advances careers, Serpa and composer, vocalist, performing artist and multi-instrumentalist Jen Shyu launched Mutual Mentorship for Musicians (M<sup>3</sup>) in 2020. The two were part of the “We Have Voice” initiative, which brought together over a dozen musical artists to create a Code of Conduct in 2018 to promote safer workplaces in the music business. With a focus on helping others up the ladder, M<sup>3</sup> has in a short space of time supported eight cohorts of mentoring groups, totaling 92 artists. The initiative also bestows annual Luminary Awards to older performers, publishes a magazine created with texts from M<sup>3</sup> members and hosts an annual festival. “In a way, what we created with M<sup>3</sup> is out of what we missed and lacked when Sara and I embarked on our musical careers and moved to New York,” Shyu says, adding that they have endeavored to replace the power dynamics inherent in the music industry with a fully beneficial mutuality in which everyone learns from and supports each other. “We wanted to see how mentorship would work with women,” Serpa says. “I have been genuinely envious of how my male peers have benefited from their close connections. It was time for us to address this absence and begin to evolve.”

Serpa’s trajectory as vocalist, collaborator and instigator reveals a crystallization of sounds and ideas. Observes the now-nonagenarian Blake, “(She) has had an impressive career, carving new paths. I appreciate her sense of minimalism and her ability to embrace the new whilst at the same time not being afraid to travel back.” Says Matos, “As Sara has become more comfortable and confident with her singing and composing, she has connected more directly with her own creativity.” To that, Mitchell adds, “Doing something she loves and believes in, her music comes out in a fashion that’s hard to ignore and is utterly original...I admire her strong musical personality and identity. Her sense of pitch is

immaculate, and she makes great timbral choices—just a beautiful voice to listen to.”

For more info visit [saraserpa.com](http://saraserpa.com). Serpa curates and performs at The Stone at The New School May 27-30. See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Sara Serpa—*Praia* (Inner Circle Music, 2008)
- Ran Blake/Sara Serpa—*Kitano Noir* (Sunnyside, 2013-14)
- Sara Serpa—*Close Up* (Clean Feed, 2017)
- Sara Serpa—*Recognition* (Biophilia, 2020)
- Sara Serpa/Matt Mitchell—*End of Something* (Obliquity, 2023)
- Sara Serpa—*Encounters & Collisions* (Biophilia, 2024)

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**MAY 2026 JAZZ CALENDAR**

<p><b>TUESDAYS 8–11 PM</b> Weekly Jam Session House Band: Diego Voglino with guests</p>	<p><b>WEDNESDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Marwan Allam (5/6) Noah Garabedian Quintet (5/13) Kush Abadey (5/20) Jerome Sabbagh + Melissa Aldana (5/27)</p>
<p><b>THURSDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Glenn Zaleski (5/7) Ben Monder (5/14) Bass Hit with Marty Ehrlich, Jerome Harris (5/21) Steve Cardenas (5/28)</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; width: fit-content; margin: auto;"> <p><b>NO COVER</b> ONE DRINK MINIMUM</p> </div>
<p><b>FRIDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Peter Watrous (5/1) Marcio Philomena Quartet with Hélio Alves (5/8) Yuhan Su Trio (5/15) Dan Weiss (5/22) Igor Lumpert Trio (5/29)</p>	
<p><b>SATURDAYS 6–7:30 PM DUET SET(S),</b> followed by 8 &amp; 9:30 PM sets: Wallace Roney, Jr. Quartet (5/2), Rob Garcia Sizzle Ensemble (5/9), Caleb Wheeler Curtis Quintet (5/16), Emiliano D’Auria Quartet (5/23), ConraPunctus with Mike McGinnis &amp; Carmen Staaf (5/30)</p>	

## JAZZ GENIUS

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<b>Apr. 30-May 2</b>	Eddie Allen Quartet with Roberta Piket, Gregory Jones, EJ Strickland
<b>May 6, 13, 20, 27</b>	Jam Session led by Michael Shekwoaga Ode <b>*7:30-10:30 pm</b> (\$10 which includes one drink. ALL musicians welcome!)
<b>May 7-9</b>	Planet Bluu Trio with T.K. Blue, Yayoi Ikawa, Paul Beaudry
<b>May 14-16</b>	Marcos Varela Trio with Leo Genovese, Jeff Hirshfield (5/14) with Jon Davis, Jerome Gillespie (5/15) with Peter Zak, Billy Drummond (5/16)
<b>May 21-23</b>	David Kikoski Trio
<b>May 28-30</b>	Ethan Iverson Trio

**\*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”**