

KŌU RECORDS

BIG BLUE-SKY THINKING

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

In an era of nonphysical media, when music purchases are stored in a so-called “cloud” and can be played on an array of linked devices, vocalist-composer Charmaine Lee and producer-composer Randall Dunn—an engineer who has worked with such exacting artists as Sunn O))), Sqürl and Jóhann Jóhannsson—are all about physical product. Not just the format in which recordings are stored (plastic or petroleum discs or magnetic tape) but the ways in which file storage formats are stored. Lee and Dunn began working together with *Elevator Music*, a 7-inch record by Lee and electronicist Ikue Mori, which was released in 2024 as the first on Lee’s Kōu Records (the name coming from the Korean word for “mouth”). Dunn mixed and mastered it, which led to conversations about how recorded music could be presented in memorable ways on physical formats. “Initially I had this idea of super-small scale, but speaking with Randall, he really encouraged me, ‘Don’t just think about the product, think about the process,’” Lee recalls. In short order,

she had a partner in the label.

With only five LPs and that first single under its belt, Kōu is already a label with an identity. Obi cards wrap the spines (the label only deals in vinyl and download) of the thick, gatefold jackets. The spines themselves follow a matching color scheme, making them recognizable on the shelves and recalling the visual identities of such labels as Impulse!, Black Saint and Soul Note. As with those labels, it’s a branding that can elicit trust in listeners. The consistency carries a suggestion that if you want one, you should have them all. That consistency carries into concert promotion as well. A two-night label spotlight at Roulette this month will include live visuals by Mark Dorf framing sets by sound artist Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe, guitarist David Torn, the duo of violist Eyvind Kang and singer Jessica Kenney and a string quintet led by cellist Aliya Ultan. “It’s all about context,” Lee says. “It’s all about deepening the platforms. We’re really excited about live events extending that mission into the live space.”

But Kōu isn’t all about looks. Dunn and Lee work with the artists to conceive a sound and identity for each release, reflecting both label and artist aesthetics. As a result, the concept extends beyond individual albums to the feel and look of a “season” of releases. “We have a very specific way of constructing these

cohorts,” Lee explains. “It’s very contextually driven.” So far, all of the releases are solo recordings, but there are plans to expand to small groups in the near future. All of the albums are mixed and mastered by Dunn at Circular Ruin. Kōu works with other studios for initial recording, but Dunn and Lee are present for the sessions. “There’s so many, really beautiful tracking rooms we didn’t want to interfere with what they’re doing,” Dunn says, who enthuses like a fan, mentioning such celebrated producers as Teo Macero and Rudy van Gelder. He speaks of bringing that sort of care in the control room to more unusual efforts, such as singer Kenney’s *Uranian Void* or Lee’s own *Tulpa*, in hopes that artists are encouraged to take a leap of faith with him. “I grew up with the concept that weird music could have production values,” he says. “The biggest thing to me is being able to eliminate doubt with the artist.”

Studio costs are alleviated by having Dunn on board, and with a background in finance and nonprofit management, Lee handles much of the business administration. The two work together on artistic curation. All of their dynamic is abetted by the fact that “we’re also highly ambitious, OCD people,”

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Looks Far Woman
Aliya Ultan



Pneuma
Henry Fraser



now I imagine a place not the same
David Torn



Ratsnake
Chloe Kim



Tulpa
Charmaine Lee

VOXNEWS

VOCAL PRIDE IN JAZZ

BY TESSA SOUTER

NYCJR celebrates Pride Month in June. And there is a lot to celebrate, even in these difficult times. According to a 2024 article in *JazzTimes*, “Homophobia in Jazz” by James Gavin (himself gay), Dizzy Gillespie was once quoted as saying: “I don’t even know a jazz musician who’s a homosexual—not a real jazz musician.” So, it’s perhaps not surprising that LGBTQIA+ artists’ contributions to jazz over the years have been obscured until relatively recently. There’s still a long way to go but, thankfully, LGBTQIA+ jazz musicians no longer have to hide. Indeed, “representation, queer folklore and storytelling are now more important than ever,” says **Richard Cortez**, whose beautiful baritone is fast-becoming one of the most ubiquitous male voices on the NYC scene. His new EP release, *i. spring*, the first of four seasonal installments, pairs Spring-themed songs with archival family recordings. Cortez at The Django (Jun. 15) is one of four queer jazz vocal performances at the venue this month. Others include **Charles Turner** (Jun. 10), drag king **Lee Taylor** (Jun. 23) and **C. Anthony Bryant** (Jun. 29).

At Dizzy’s Club, Jazz at Pride returns with a night of music and storytelling celebrating queer musicians, curated and hosted by drummer, vocalist, composer and arranger **Bryan Carter** (Jun. 10-11). Guitarist-vocalist-

songwriter **Dida Pelled** celebrates the release of her new album, *I Wish You Would* (La Reserve), with the top-notch band featured on the record: Sullivan Fortner, Tony Scherr and Kenny Wollesen at Joe’s Pub (Jun. 17).

During his little-documented British years, iconic gay jazz vocalist **Mark Murphy** transformed from a promising young jazz singer in the vein of Jack Jones, into the wildly inventive vocal artist who would later redefine the genre and influence probably every male singer to come after him. A new release of previously unheard music, *Live at Club 43* (Jazz Rewind-Hindsight), captures Murphy in 1966, six years before his breakthrough Muse recordings. Housed in a cellar bar in Manchester, UK, Club 43 was a haven for modern jazz in its day. Audiophiles take note: this is a 180g vinyl release!

READING...James Gavin, biographer of jazz vocalists **Peggy Lee**, **Lena Horne** and **Chet Baker** has hit it out of the park again with *Cool Heat: Anita O’Day and her Dangerous Life* (Equinox)—a riveting must-read about “free spirit” **Anita O’Day’s** rollercoaster life and career. LISTENING...After a 30+ year hiatus (due to health issues) and with the help and encouragement of vocalist-educator Jay Clayton (1941-2023), **Lisa Rich** has returned. Her latest is *I Still Rise* (Tritone, 2026), proving that the comeback was no fluke.

SEE YOU THERE...**Queen Esther** with Wayne Tucker and the Bad Mothas (Jun. 3) and **Svetlana** and her big band (Jun. 10), both part of the 2026 Art is All Around free downtown lunchtime series at the Red Cube, in front of the Noguchi Museum. “Here’s to the Ladies Who Swing and Bling: North to Shore,” featuring **Antoinette Montague**, is at Newark Culture Club (Jun. 17), who will surely pay tribute to her fallen music comrade and close friend, the late pianist

Danny Mixon (1949-2026). **Ledisi** celebrates Dinah Washington at Central Park Summerstage (Jun. 10), part of Blue Note Jazz Festival. **Jen Shyu** is at the Abrons Art Center (Jun. 24), part of Vision Festival. Trumpeter-composer Peter Evans at Roulette (Jun. 3) presents the US premiere of longstanding group Being & Becoming with the addition of three singers—**Alice Teyssier** (flutes, voice), **Mazz Swift** (violin, voice) and **DoYeon Kim** (gayageum, voice). **Ekep Nkwelle** is at the just-opened Pocket Jazz Club (Jun. 24), followed by **Alicia Olatuja** (Jun. 25). **Lezlie Harrison** appears at another new venue Jazzcultural (Jun. 10), as well as at City Winery Loft (Jun. 1). **Susan Tobocman** will be at Flute (Jun. 24). **Stacey Kent** returns for her regular annual Birdland run (Jun. 2-6); **Michelle Lordi** with husband-bassist Matthew Parrish, plays the early set (Jun. 6). The fun vocal harmony trio **Duchess**, with **Hilary Gardner**, **Melissa Stylianou** and **Amy Cervini**, celebrate their fourth full-length album, *A Marvelous Party* (Jun. 6). **Eric Comstock** and **Barbara Fasano** appear with a quartet (Jun. 27). **Natalie Douglas** presents her fifth annual Juneteenth concert a few days early (Jun. 15). **Cyrille Aimee** returns for a five-day run (Jun. 23-27). And **Lucy Yeghiazaryan’s** sextet will be downstairs at Birdland Theater (Jun. 26-28). Over at Close Up, bassist-vocalist-composer **Devon Gates** (Jun. 6) and **Alex Koi** (Jun. 11). Powerhouse singer **Emily Braden** continues her monthly residency at Birds (Jun. 13). At Zinc Bar, Argentinian jazz singer **Gabriela Anders** (Jun. 24) makes an all-too-rare appearance. Music on the Inside (MOTI), a non-profit that provides music and mentorship for incarcerated and at-risk individuals, will hold a Juneteenth Jazz Jubilee with special guest vocalists **Marion Cowings** and **Catherine Russell** (Jun. 23).