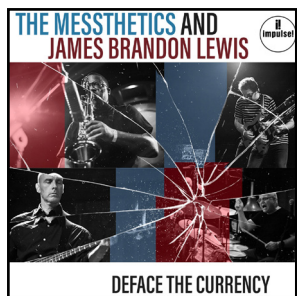


recently discovered a tape affirming the success of the date. *Circle The Heart* presents his sole duo performance with fellow reedman and significant inspiration, Julius Hemphill. Both grew up in St. Louis, although Hemphill had already left by the time the young Ehrlich became involved with members of the city's Black Artists Group (BAG). Ehrlich later joined, first, Hemphill's NYC-based big band, and then his (post-World Saxophone Quartet) sextet. Ehrlich believes the idea for the program to comprise his originals, apart from the encore, emanated from Hemphill. Whatever the genesis of the decision, it was a good call. Ehrlich's five tunes supply ample structural grounding for ensuing improvisation, while remaining accessible and varied. He writes contrapuntally for the most part, with unison passages and vamps used sparingly. Both men wield alto and soprano saxophones, as well as flute, with Ehrlich additionally playing bass clarinet. Their timbres converge more than expected, each favoring supple articulation, though Hemphill leans into blues tonalities while Ehrlich gravitates more towards lyricism.

The opening "Tribute" mixes an elegiac chamber vibe with light-hearted skipping digressions. In their elegance, the subsequent extemporizations could be composed. Not so the exhalations, blurts and squeaks that introduce "Pliant Plaint", before tightly coiled alto saxophone eruptions ultimately unfurl into a boppish theme. The somber title cut offers a marked shift in texture as Ehrlich pitches reiterated bass clarinet patterns against his partner's airborne flute. The piece turns more wayward still as Hemphill's vocalized overtones encourage a whinnying response. However, the highlight is the penultimate "The All Told Alto Blues", full of declamatory, swinging and playful interplay. Hemphill's "Border Town" provides the encore, alternately wistful and sprightly, and a fitting valediction.

Since Hemphill's death in 1995, Ehrlich, along with fellow altoist Tim Berne, has done much to ensure his mentor's legacy endures. Among his endeavors, the curation of the Hemphill boxed set, *The Boyé Multi-National Crusade for Harmony* (New World, 2021) stands out, but this newly-released archival release not only underscores the great reedman's talents—it constitutes a notable issue in its own right.

For more info visit relativepitchrecords.bandcamp.com. Julius Hemphill's *Music for Six Saxophones* led by Marty Ehrlich is at Brooklyn Music School May 3 (part of Long Play Festival). See Calendar.



Deface the Currency
The Messthetics and James Brandon Lewis
(Impulse!)
by Ken Waxman

A left-field swivel for tenor saxophonist James Brandon Lewis, his second session with the Washington, D.C.-based The Messthetics trio could be characterized as punk-jazz, but with extemporization replacing excess. That doesn't mean *Deface the Currency* is any less combative or clamorous as a hardcore rock or jazz disc, it's just that there are more musical peaks and valleys in the presentation. The basic contrast resolved involves suturing the extended reed textures of Lewis, who leads his own tight-knit quartet in free-jazz settings, with the shattering string punches from the electric bass of Joe Lally and the aggressive back beat of Brendan Canty,

both of whom have a day job as members of the hardcore band Fugazi. Bridging the two solitudes is inventive guitarist Anthony Pirog, whose rock roots haven't stopped him from working with the likes of improvisers William Hooker and Ches Smith.

Overall, there may be a hint of where the quartet is aiming with this disc, since the final extended "Serpent Tongue (Slight Return)" has psychedelic echoes. This is especially clear when the guitarist breaks free of the prestissimo exposition that balances on shaking and shattering notes and tones to confront Lewis' widening cornucopia of honking scoops and altissimo. Pirog's burred string fingering, which inflate into twangs and the use of fuzz pedals, screams—and especially the title is reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix' 1968 blues "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)". Otherwise, while there may be interludes that touch on gutsy ballad extensions, or Pirog sneaking the occasional C&W lick into an otherwise heavier and harder exposition, foot-tapping funk far surpasses fragility or formalism. This dynamic is especially apparent on "Gestations" where sawing electric bass lines set up the theme, variations of which are soon passed back and forth between the guitarist's shaking and elastic flanges and the saxophonist's high-pitched split tones and reed slurs. As the four-part narrative intensifies, it threatens to fragment into cacophony, but finally squirms into accommodation with thick low-pitched bass stops. Above all, it's apparent that none of the players are trying or demanding any of the others attempt a watered-down version of their individual style. But it's the tension and release that's obvious as opposite textures collide, which make *Deface the Currency* so gripping.

For more info visit impulserecords.com. The album release concert is at Le Poisson Rouge May 6. This project will also be at Tubby's (Kingston, NY) May 4 and Solar Myth (Philadelphia, PA) May 8. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



In The Brass Palace
Kurt Elling/WDR Big Band (Big Shoulders)
by Marilyn Lester

Buckle your seat belt and be advised: the first selection on the six-track *In The Brass Palace* will fairly blow you away. Two powerful forces of music, GRAMMY-winning singer Kurt Elling and the renowned WDR Big Band, enter galactic territory with Joe Jackson's 1982 megahit, "Steppin Out". The dynamic original was jazz/vocalese-adjacent, featuring a drum machine beat and repetitive synthesizer lines. Elling recorded a mellow version on *The Gate* (Concord, 2011), but retooled for the big band, the arrangement achieves vigorous rhythmic thrust via note substitutions and a shout chorus. And there's plenty of propulsion with Elling's off-the-charts scat. On the first night (Mar. 18) of a four-day residency at Birdland, the vocalist likewise began with a banger of "Steppin Out" with the Future of Jazz Orchestra, a big band of emerging young players curated by Jazz at Lincoln Center. About that burner and his steppin' out into big band territory—Elling announced, "It's just time." Word.

In Germany's muscular WDR Big Band, conducted by saxophonist Bob Mintzer, Elling has found the perfect collaborative partner. His abilities as a scatter and a master of vocalese allow him to improvise and integrate into the unit as another instrument—of the vocal kind. Common to album and live performance

was "They Speak No Evil", which is based on Wayne Shorter's "Speak No Evil", with lyrics by Elling, adapted from Robert Pinsky's poem *The City Dark*. Opening staccato brass statements lead to a vocalese repetition of "they never speak," punctuated by further declarative vocal phrases. The WDR version delivers occasional discordance and features an assertive trombone solo by Andy Hunter. Introducing the tune at Birdland, Elling praised Shorter as the bodhisattva of jazz. It's no surprise that Elling has a background in such matters; he very nearly became an ordained minister. These days it's the gospel of jazz he preaches, in a clipped vocalese of its own sort, infused with wit, humor and positivity—and a characteristic sense of swing. Fronting the Future of Jazz Orchestra, Elling was, as ever, a high-energy, forward-looking balm for our current existential socio-political climate.

Elling included the album's melodic "Desire" (aka Thad Jones' "Forever Lasting") in the live concert. In ballad mode, his somewhat gravelly, nasal tone features vibrato, but his splendid capacity as a storyteller is front-and-center. Duke Ellington gets a bushel of Elling love on the album with "I Like the Sunrise", the opening track of 1947's *The Liberian Suite*, sung by Al Hibbler. The tune is one of the relatively few that Ellington wrote lyrics for—a highly evocative piece capturing the feel of sunrise as a beacon of hope and promise. And being Ellington, the jazz phrasing is inherent in the melodic structure, completely understood by Elling, who delivers the tune basically untouched, as a masterful jazz hymn.

In *The Brass Palace* is a stunning achievement. The doors have opened wide for King Kurt Elling.

For more info visit kurtelling.bandcamp.com

Composers Concordance

May 2026 Events





'Animals Carnival'
Anne Akiko Meyers
& Gene Pritsker's
Sound Liberation

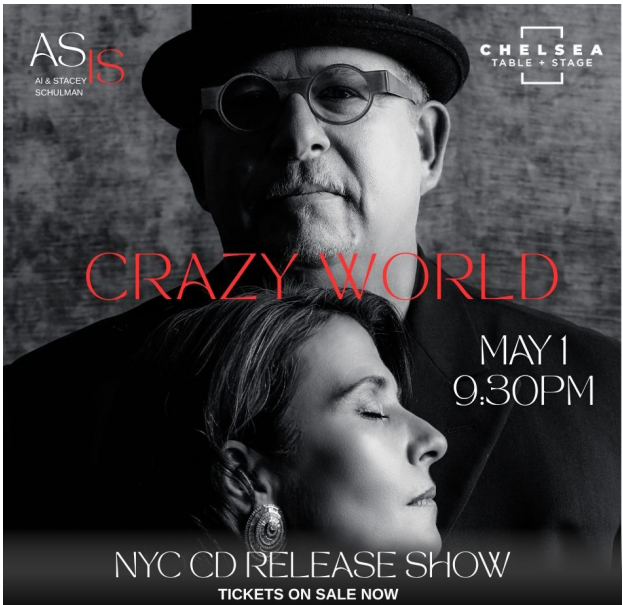
May 3rd, 6pm
Joe's Pub



14th Annual CompCord Festival - Comedy

- I. Sh*t L*szt - May 17th, @5pm - St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery
- II. Stand-up / Get Up - May 22nd, @7pm - im Kempner Fine Arts
- III. 16th Annual Comp-Play-Comp Marathon - May 24th at 5pm - Loft393
- IV. CompCord Polka Band -May 29th at 7pm - Loft393



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