

# KÖU 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).

(GOTHAM FESTIVAL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

Lounge, singer-banjo player and entertainer **Bryce Edwards**, who's deeply immersed in the '20s, has the period's mannered singing style down pat. He's a one-man revivalist, unearthing such material as Walter Donaldson's 1920 song "'Tain't No Sin (To Dance Around in Your Bones)" —sourced from the sultry Lee Morse 1930 recording. Edwards also brought out the gifted theatrical singer, Reilly Wilmit, for some sweet duets.

Following Edwards in the 4th Floor Lounge, and filling the afternoon slots, were the solo piano of **Mathis Picard**—an extraordinary, classically-trained player who offered two originals of astounding complexity and pianistic skill—and the young trumpeter **Summer Camargo**. At 24, she stood out in the crowded festival program, bringing both high energy and interpretive smarts to her trio's renditions of music generations older than herself. She also proved to be an effervescent presence. Camargo's playing, with ample use of the mute, was assured, assertive, inventive and respectful of the source material—plus she barely needed a microphone.

In the 2nd Floor Ballroom, trumpeter **Alphonso Horne** and the Gotham Kings began with a robust New Orleans-style second line. This aggregation (in Kermit Ruffins' territory) had energy to spare and a really strong ensemble of musicians. Special mention should be made of **C. Anthony Bryant**'s uniquely-styled and phrased baritone vocals and the leader's thrilling high-note specialties. The music was deep in the Crescent City groove, and included a great gospel medley. Overlapping in the 3rd Floor Ballroom, **The Hot Toddlies Jazz Band**, whose lineup included festival organizer, drummer **Patrick Soluri**, were in fine fettle, and featured several singers: **Hannah Gill**'s warm vocals on "In a Mellotone" and "I'm Confessin'"; **Justin Poindexter** sang as well as played guitar; and trumpeter **Michael Cruse** stepped up for a stellar "St. James Infirmary Blues". Later in the evening, in the 2nd Floor Ballroom, Poindexter and vocalist-accordionist **Sasha Papernik**, plus special guests, offered *Always: An Irving Berlin Tribute to Ken Peplowski*. The tribute to Berlin was originally scheduled to feature the late and much-missed tenor saxophonist-clarinetist, who passed away in February and whom Poindexter described as "the world's greatest clarinet player, something nobody would dispute." Papernik's exuberant vocal led with Berlin's first international hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (though churlish critics have pointed out it's not actually a ragtime song). While the theme was Berlin, there were outliers in Bernice Petkere's "Close Your Eyes" (Ella Fitzgerald did a fabulous version, and so did Papernik) and Cole Porter's "Don't Fence Me In".

The early evening slot in the 2nd Floor Ballroom was occupied by **Elizabeth Bougerol & Her Band**, which featured two trombonists. Her material—"When My Sugar Walks Down the Street" (1924), "You and the Night and the Music" (1934)—is of the period, but her singing was tinged with modernism. After a short breather, in the primetime evening slot on the 2nd Floor, Bougerol appeared with the popular **The Hot Sardines**, where she also seemed open to tinkering with the formula, turning "Love Potion #9" into impeccable swing. Competing in the 3rd Floor Ballroom was **Imani Rousselle**, singing with the exceptional **Eyal Vilner Big Band**; she is a true find, whose emergence fully-formed is reminiscent of Samara Joy. On material that ranged from "'Tain't What You Do (It's The Way That You Do It)" and "Darktown Strutter's Ball" to "What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?", she demonstrated the full package: wide vocal range, stage presence, control and power. Vilner directs the band when he's not playing alto saxophone or flute, and the musicians are drilled to a fine point. This group really brought out the dancers too, as the floor was packed. The **Gordon Webster** Band played between The Hot Toddlies and

Vilner slots, and later, after Waldo's Gotham City Band's appearance, Webster led the 4th Floor Lounge jam session.

And what of the 2nd Floor Lounge? That was the VIP Room and Artist Lounge where featured artists included pianist-vocalist **Quintin Harris**, pianist **Evan Palazzo** and **Bryce Edwards**' Frivolity Tri-Oh. Closing out the evening in the lounge was polymath, historian, pianist extraordinaire, **Jon Weber**. His gig became a challenge match, with lounge patrons sending out requests, trying to stump him. They never did.

Gotham Jazz Festival's strong turnout (significantly up from last year's edition) and crowded dance floors underscored optimism about the strong future of NYC's swing scene, which is filling several city venues weekly through Soluri's Prohibition Productions, in band residencies at Birdland and beyond.

For more info visit [gothamjazzfestnyc.com](http://gothamjazzfestnyc.com)

(R.I.K. FESTIVAL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

mic and to his own body to produce a didgeridoo-like drone. Karlson stretched a plastic tube under her bass strings; Neuberger rubbed rolls of masking tape across his drumheads in a sort of extended-technique cabaret. A scheduled set by vibraphonist Selendis Sebastian Alexander Johnson's group proceeded despite the illness-related absence of its leader. The remaining trio, including **Orchid McRae** (drums) and **Shogo Yamagishi** (bass), kept up a restless undertow while the playing of **Matei Predescu** (keyboard) spread out into ambient space.

In a first-time duo with drummer **Warren "Trae" Crudup III**, visual artist **Ximena Bedoya** transformed the pedal steel guitar into an experimental sound sculpture, vibrating the strings with e-bows and altering pitch by placing and removing small metal objects on rotating jewelry-display turntables. The result was as arresting visually as it was musically, producing wavering drones and ghostly overtones that at times resembled birdsong or distant train whistles, and Crudup met her there, in motion across the kit, with a constantly shifting wash of percussion. Night one closed with the 16-piece **Sam Day Harmet Soundpainting Collective**, spilling off the stage with four horns stationed up the staircase behind it. Harmet conducted using Walter Thompson's hand-signal, conduction vocabulary. Thompson, the inventor of Soundpainting, played Wurlitzer at center stage. With electronics, children's toys and a sound collage built from Tylenol commercials and news broadcasts whose phrases vocalists caught and threw back, the performance took on the unruly energy of a happening, attention-skipping around the room as the piece composed itself in real time.

Opening night two, the **Daniel Carter, Ayumi Ishito, Yuko Togami** trio delivered one of the festival's standout sets. They began with field-recording-like samples—water, birds, wings beating—and from there blurred the line between acoustic and electronic for thirty minutes. Ishito ran her tenor saxophone through processing that bent its sound into something between wind in a tunnel and a robot. Togami played drums the way Carter plays his horns: lighter than air, lyrical, patient. Carter (who switched between trumpet, alto and tenor) at one point dueted in a tenor pairing with Ishito, their instruments talking in a private code. The next trio collaboration—**John King, Jennifer Gersten, Jess Tsang**—went in the other direction: tense, drawn out, a thatch of clangs and agitated taps. King conjured a menacing drone on his electric guitar with e-bow, conventional bow, mixers and laptop; Tsang bowed the head of a concert bass drum, while Gersten attacked her violin with relentless pressure. The performance resembled a malfunctioning orchestra, teetering between precision and disintegration.

**On Ka'a Davis**' 3D Veve offered the festival's nearest approach to conventional song form with his Djuke Music, an African-rooted fusion with rock and free improvisation. Over Don McKenzie's drums and Davis' Jimi Hendrix-tilted theatrics, the band moved between abstraction and groove. Femi Shonuga-Fleming (the Providence-based sound artist who records as sadnoise) set up behind an impressive tangle of cables, and built a brief but memorable piece of dense, processed textures from sampled voice (through what looked like a school intercom mic), flute and an apparently homemade horn-and-coil device, before abruptly disconnecting a cable and ending the performance.

The weekend closed with **Hans Tammen**'s Third Eye Festival All Star Band, a large ensemble conducted by the festival's co-organizer. With Hooker, finally, behind the drum kit, a guitar army—King, Chris Cochrane, Mark Howell, Briggan Krauss—collided with the reeds of Dave Sewelson, Ras Moshe, Josh Sinton, plus synths and daxophone. The set cycled between maelstrom and minimalism and then, inexplicably, careened into the closing riff of The Beatles' "I Want You (She's So Heavy)", all while a smoke machine fogged the stage.

Even separated from the neighborhood that originally defined it, Rhythm in the Kitchen demonstrated the value of maintaining spaces where experimental musicians can gather without compromise. Geography may be negotiable. The need to make a room for this music is not.

For more info visit [rhythminthekitchen.bandcamp.com](http://rhythminthekitchen.bandcamp.com)

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Dunn says. One artist who took that leap of faith is guitarist David Torn, whose *now i imagine a place not the same* was released last month. Dunn invited Torn for a studio visit even before *Kōu* was conceived. "We just totally hit it off from minute one," the guitarist-producer says. A subsequent breakfast meeting about 18 months later came with the invitation to produce a solo album. Dunn and Lee wanted a solo performance. Torn wanted it to be fully improvised. Coming to an agreement was quick. "The business thing took exactly an hour; we were all in agreement on how to proceed," Torn explains. "I think they have the ideas that are perfect for crazy people like me who believe that we shouldn't be marginalized by music fashion or style."

Torn himself is a studio geek who has worked on albums released by CMP, Cuneiform, ECM, Pi Recordings and Windham Hill. But working with *Kōu*, he was content in the role of instrumentalist. "Randall, you're the producer and you're a great mixer. You do this," he recalls saying. "I don't think I had a single note. Randall made a few edits, I may have done an overdub or two. Randall suggested adding a drone on one track." Creating the cover art was also a collaboration, between Torn and artist Arik Roper. Torn looked at Roper's portfolio and suggested mood and color schemes. (When he got the proofs, his only comment was that his hair should be whiter on the back cover portrait.) "The focus on how the artwork appears, everything is in place," he says. "It's more than a label, it's a big idea, featuring people who have singular voices."

This summer will see releases by cellist Aliya Ultan, sound artist-composer Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe and bassist Henry Fraser. Dunn and Lee have about 30 future releases planned as well, but their dream project? A solo synthesizer record by Herbie Hancock. "We just have big blue-sky thinking all the time," Lee says.

For more info visit [kourecords.com](http://kourecords.com). *Kōu Records* curates *Roulette Jun. 24-25, featuring Aliya Ultan, David Torn, Eyvind Kang, Jessica Kenney and others. See Calendar.*