

WIDE EAR

BY MUSICIANS FOR MUSICIANS

BY KEN WAXMAN

The hoary quip about the “best way to make one million dollars in jazz is to start with two million” could be applied with even more accuracy to recording improvised music, especially for a non-profit label like Wide Ear, the Swiss imprint that’s been around since 2009.

Promoting primarily Swiss musicians (saxophonist Urs Leimgruber, clarinetist Hans Koch, pianist Jacques Demierre, drummer Pierre Favre, et al.) in addition to an international array of others, particularly from Germany (clarinetist and bass clarinetists Michael Thieke and Rudi Mahall, drummer Paul Lovens and synth player Thomas Lehn), the Zürich-based collective gives its artists, who are responsible for all financing, complete control over their music and its presentation. This means “100% of our revenue goes to the artists,” explains Zug-based drummer and label co-founder Alex Huber. “We’re more flexible and don’t need to make a living out of the label,” he adds. “We see ourselves more like a curated platform.” The “we” he refers to are his two Zürich-based associates: drummer David Meier and accordionist Tizia Zimmermann. Others, including pianist Yves Theiler, vocalist Dalia

Donadio and another founding member, saxophonist Tobias Meier, were involved for greater or lesser periods, with Zimmermann joining Huber and Meier in 2023. “We don’t really have a hierarchy, everybody does everything,” Huber explains. Even the Zug location was strictly a matter of convenience. With no post office boxes available in Zürich when the label was created, the founders found one in Zug, 20 minutes away by train from the larger city.

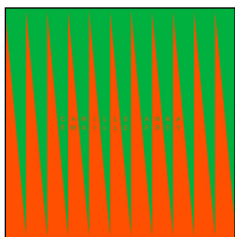
Why start a record company in the first place? “Established labels seemed to have a clear and fixed musical direction where we didn’t see our music fit, and going through an established label often involves big hurdles,” Huber elaborates. “We wanted to create our own platform to release our broad vision of contemporary music. We also wanted to keep as many decisions up to the artists themselves, most importantly the artwork and the format of the releases.” The thought was also that every release would generate interest and publicity for the other releases and artists. That said, Huber admits having no prior experience in running a label: “We had to figure stuff out and there’s plenty we still could do better.”

So far Wide Ear has released 80 sessions in a variety of formats. Most arrive in finished form from the musicians involved, with the label promising speedy timelines for the releases. Initially the label paid for the basic structure, but now, for every release,

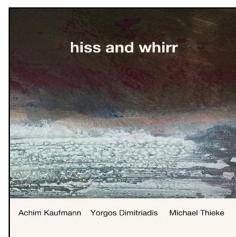
the musicians involved contribute a small amount, which pays for storage, web hosting and the like. As for the three organizers: “We only get paid by the specific artist who we help setting up a release,” says Huber. “This means talking to the artist about the process, what they want to do, what they need to send us, but also about finances and deadlines. Then we prepare the release, sometimes getting in touch with pressing plants or set up the homepage, upload the music for streaming and prepare a newsletter.”

Geneva-based pianist and composer Demierre has two albums on the label: 2023’s *The Hills Shout*, an edited version of a live solo piano concert; and 2024’s *in the endless wind*, with the LDL trio of Leimgruber and Lehn. As someone who has recorded for many companies over the years, Demierre points out that “every label that releases this kind of music wants to set itself apart from the rest. But Wide Ear offers a particularly interesting perspective on the Swiss experimental/improvised scene because it’s transgenerational and translinguistic. It also doesn’t limit itself to Switzerland, even as its musical cartography breaks down the borders of this small country.” Confirms Huber: “We have quite a few artists from the Berlin scene on our label, since there has been an ongoing exchange over the years, as well as a few New York artists.”

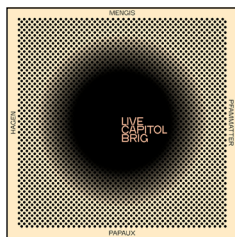
(CONTINUED ON PAGE 32)



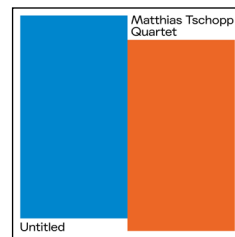
Camille Émaille/Anna Frey
Camille Émaille/Anna Frey



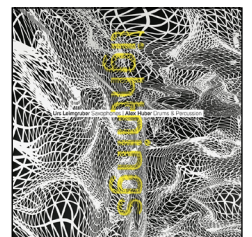
his and whirr
Achim Kaufmann, Yorgos Dimitriadis, Michael Thieke



Live Capitol Brig
Miguel Mengis



Untitled
Matthias Tschopp Quartet



Lightnings
Urs Leimgruber/Alex Huber

VOXNEWS

I WRITE THE SONGS

BY TESSA SOUTER

This month VOXNews shines a light on songwriters, starting with **Marcus Goldhaber**, whose new album, *The Promise of You* (Fallen Apple) features six standards from the Great American Songbook, alongside six of his originals—including “Two at a Time” (recently nominated for a 2026 MAC Best Song Award). **Amy London** is producing a tribute to lyricist and social activist Yip Harburg at Pangea (May 27), which will double as a celebration of Mayor Mamdani, AOC and Bernie Sanders. Blacklisted from 1951-62, Harburg was a champion of labor unionism and racial, sexual and gender equality. His 1932 song “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime” became an anthem of the Great Depression. His successful 1944 musical, *Bloomer Girl*, celebrated equal rights for women and the underground railroad (its heroine refuses to marry her suitor until he frees his slave), and his best-known Broadway show, *Finian’s Rainbow*, satirized American financial practices, reactionist politicians, racism and the mistreatment of the working class. Not forgetting *The Wizard of Oz*, which Harburg helped shape into a subtly political allegory for the late 19th-century American Populist movement.

Aubrey Johnson’s sophomore album, *The Lively Air* (Greenleaf Music), is an exquisitely-crafted program of original arrangements and songs, marking Johnson’s return to composing after several years focused primarily on recording and interpreting other artists’

music (including Lyle Mays, Billy Childs, Alex Sipiagin, Randy Napoleon). Catch her this month at Nublu (May 30). GRAMMY-winning drummer-composer Adonis Rose presents *Unusual Suspects*, featuring veteran vocalist **Phillip Manuel**, who was persuaded not to retire by Rose in order to make the album. Nine of the album’s eleven songs are former instrumentals and jazz standards that have been lyricized by Manuel, including “Party Time” (Lee Morgan), “The Unusual Suspects” (Peter Martin) and “The Road Less Traveled” (Joe Sample).

For a peak behind the scenes of songwriting, don’t miss GRAMMY-winning vocalist **Nicole Zuraitis**’ “Songbook Round Table” at Mezzrow (May 20), a mix of songs and discussions with other songwriters about process. (The first one at Drom, featuring singer-songwriters **Vilray** and **Vanisha Gould**, was a huge success.) This one will feature Brooklyn-based vocalist-composer Spilata (**Charles Turner**) and special guests TBA. **Gabrielle Cavassa**, who made a splash as the singer on Joshua Redman’s Blue Note debut album, *Where Are We*, after his manager discovered her singing at a wedding, makes her own Blue Note debut with *Diavola*. The new album showcases her pure, expressive voice as a beautiful interpreter of songs as well as her skills as a songwriter. Catch her album release at Birdland Theater (May 1-3).

SEE YOU THERE... Starting out the month, velvet-toned vocalist **Kelley Sutenfield**, currently London-based, reunites her NYC trio for a rare local appearance at the Ivy Room (May 1). Don’t miss **Jane Irving** at Mezzrow (May 3). Jazz Foundation of America’s annual Great Night Gala fundraiser at Jazz at Lincoln Center (May 21) will include 10-time GRAMMY winner **Norah**

Jones (2026 Dr. Billy Taylor Humanitarian Award honoree) and **Patrice Rushen**. Singing at Silvana (May 1) is **Maria Guida**. As *Is*, co-led by enchanting husband and wife duo, guitarist Al Schulman and vocalist **Stacey Schulman**, celebrate the release of *Crazy World* at Chelsea Table + Stage (May 1) and the free Porchfest in Montclair, NJ (May 16)—where front porches become musical stages for local bands, artists and musicians. Multi-GRAMMY-winning **Samara Joy** will be at David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center, performing with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (May 16). GRAMMY-winning singer-actor-pianist **Harry Connick Jr.** will be at Carnegie Hall (May 22-23). Poet-vocalist-composer **Maryanne de Prophetis** celebrates her new album, *Come O Light* (ENNA) at Greenwich House Music School (May 20). **Jazzmeia Horn** and Her Noble Force perform at the Appel Room (May 29-30). **Alica Hall Moran** will be among The Jazz Gallery annual Gala Honorees, sharing the Trailblazer Award with husband, pianist Jason Moran at the Cosmopolitan Club (May 18). **Dee Dee Bridgewater** joins in the post-centennial celebrations of Oscar Peterson at Rose Theater (May 8-9). **Madeleine Peyroux** unites her long-time Carlile Family band—Jon Herington (guitar, vocals) and Barak Mori (bass, vocals)—for “We Are America,” a celebration of the great American composers and songwriters that represent what the trio feels about the US. Expect a mix of Peyroux originals with songs by Allen Toussaint, Judy Collins, Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan and more. Catch them at Sony Hall (May 15). And **Richard Cortez**’ Sinatra tribute is at Birdland Theater (May 17).

(*Tessa Souter celebrates Erik Satie’s 160th birthday at Joe’s Pub May 17)

(OUT FEST CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

traversed in and out of “April in Paris”—like he was having conversations with absent friends, with the chosen repertoire and the room’s generosity. “It’s so special that you can walk into a space that is so giving,” he said afterward, a line that could have described the festival itself. Blue Reality closed the night with a dense, forward-moving set led by multi-reedist **Michael Marcus** alongside Trio X collaborators Joe McPhee (tenor) and Jay Rosen (drums), plus Ted Daniel (trumpet) and two bassists: Lonnie Plaxico and Tyler Mitchell. Arrayed in a semi-circle, the ensemble balanced solemnity and propulsion; the interplay between dual basses and the multiple horn voices creating a layered, communal sound.

Night two began with the **Jazz and Poetry Choir Collective**, an intergenerational chorus that used spoken word and music to stake a civic claim. Poet laureates of Yonkers and Westchester, respectively, Golda Solomon and Phylisha Villanueva, interlaced with vocalist Andrea Wolper and instrumentalists—Michael TA Thompson (djembe, also music conductor), Jason Kao Hwang (violin, waterphone, plus a tube swung over his head, shifting its pitch based on the orbit of its arc), JD Parran (flute) and Christopher Dean Sullivan (bass)—until the group coalesced around the repeated line, “I will not be silenced.”

Alfredo Colón’s quartet, drawn from trumpeter Ryan Easter’s Trap Music Orchestra, married Latin inflections to free improvisation. Though the set was spontaneous, it sounded composed, balancing minimal gestures with maximal density. A former mentee of William Parker, Colón now occupies a similar role for younger players; when he brought out saxophonist Ben Sherman, the leader watched, grinning, as Sherman

pushed forward. The music balanced risk with an evident pursuit of beauty, never collapsing into abstraction for its own sake.

Improvising collective, **Geometry**—Tomeka Reid (cello), Joe Morris (ring-modulated guitar), Taylor Ho Bynum (cornet), Kyoko Kitamura (voice)—provided the most intimate sonic study of the night. The players extended their instruments with preparation, objects and effects, especially Bynum’s cornet, muted with found objects (hat, funnel, rubber stopper, CD) and Kitamura’s vocal transformations and electronics. They occupied liminal quiet as comfortably as they did dense timbral textures, producing a handful of the festival’s most fragile, exacting moments.

William Parker’s Pocketwatch closed night two with a large ensemble vignette. Parker, wearing a clock and alternating instruments, led a 15-person group through a groove that quickly asserted itself as both political lament and affirmation. Nicholson-Parker’s spoken text framed the band’s gradual build into a gospel-like uplift, a refrain insisting that mistakes repeat unless countered by communal wisdom.

Day three opened with trumpeter **Ahmed Abdullah’s** *Diaspora*, in which the Sun Ra lineage was honored and resituated into something more personal, alongside original material. Abdullah, and Monique Ngozi Nri’s intertwined singing, delivered solace and joy, ending tradition-ward with Ra’s “Enlightenment”. **Matthew Shipp** followed with a 35-minute solo that was austere and expansive; his pianism resisted tidy labels, ranging from blues-rooted gestures to stark contrapuntal inventions. His intensely-focused set was an excavation, both of silence and overlooked melodic possibilities. **Radical Reversal** fused sermon-like poetry from Randall Horton with Amma Islam’s R&B-inflected vocals and Brandan Regan’s riff-driven guitar, a hybrid that made political storytelling feel immediate and soulful, with Melanie Dyer’s viola adding dense color.

The festival’s closing set—**Cooper-Moore, William Parker** and **DoYeon Kim**—offered an elemental conclusion: handcrafted instruments, cross-cultural strings (gayageum, donso ngoni) and wooden flutes. Their interplay moved from intimate blues to ecstatic vocalizations; Kim’s song rose into a cry that linked traditions across continents. Cooper-Moore’s defiant humor and Parker’s soft, searching proclamations (“Death has died today”) left the audience with a sense of ritual completion. Nicholson-Parker’s quip at the end: “They need a whole night!”, and Cooper-Moore’s rejoinder: “I need a whole life!”—felt exactly right.

Out Fest’s programming underscored a simple insistence: improvisation isn’t just a musical method—it’s a social practice. In a city forever on the move, this festival argued for temporary belonging, with a heart aching toward something more permanent.

For more info visit artsforart.org/out-fest

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

Anna Frey, a Zurich-based rapper, poet and spoken-word performer, has had three releases on Wide Ear since 2019, two with guitarist Florian Stoffner and one, this year, with drummer Camille Émaille. Knowing Meier and Zimmermann personally, she figured her music and lyrics would be in good hands. “My first EP was released in 2006 back when CD stores still existed and you could still earn money with music,” she notes. “Since then, everything has changed completely. It’s no longer clear what exactly are the tasks of a label and what belongs to the band. But what’s special about Wide Ear is it’s a label by musicians for musicians on fair terms. When they publish something, you can assume that they like the music. They don’t put any pressure on you or anything, but are supportive and offer advice. It’s a partnership-based collaboration.”

Additionally, it’s the artists who decide in what form their work should be released, whether on CD, LP and/or digital. However Huber does say that: “We do streaming, but that doesn’t do anything, I guess. The whole streaming-money business is a joke and killed physical sales.” The average number of copies pressed (for either LP or CD) ranges from 200-300, and so far no album has been re-pressed, giving an inherent collectability factor for each album. For this year’s releases, there’s OMNIVORE’s *Yber Hybris*, the debut recording of Émaille with Anna Frey and a Meret Siebenhaar/Pascal Sontag duo, in addition to forthcoming records by Kimmig-Henkel-Weber, the Der Verboten quartet and the Hunter-Gatherer septet.

Substantiating Wide Ear’s mission statement that it’s a non-profit platform from musicians for musicians, Huber states: “We think that labels like ours are very important for emerging as well as for established artists. We try to make releasing music as straightforward as possible, in the best interest of the music—and the artists themselves.”

For more info visit widearerecords.ch

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Frustrated with the music business, she took a personal hiatus of over a decade, returning to music in the late ’70s. A comeback concert at the 1980 Chicago Jazz Festival (available on YouTube) includes an interview with record producer Michael Cuscuna. Revealingly, she says, “I got a lot of flak from a lot of people who said ‘Lorez, if you just sing one song straight, if you just sing one song without laggin’ behind the beat, you’d probably have a hit record,’ and I said, ‘I’d have a hit record, but would I be happy?’”

Musicians considered her a consummate professional. Reeds player Charles Owens played oboe and flute on *How Will I Remember You?* (Discovery, 1978), recalling how it all came to be: “I got her that record date, as she was working at the Parisian Room and I told Albert Marx about her and to go hear her and he quickly signed her to his Discovery label...She was a very serious jazz singer; not flashy and never overwhelming; she just needed a good groove and she did her thing.” Tenor saxophone legend and record producer Houston Person met Alexandria in California in the ’60s. “When my first wife passed away,” he recalls, “Lorez called me and gave me her condolences. I said, ‘Wait a minute, are you recording for anybody?’ She said nope. She wasn’t working that much...until I introduced her to [Muse Records founder] Joe Fields. We soon recorded three albums on Muse. I really enjoyed working with her. Everyone, all the musicians, were delighted... She knows how to pick tunes and always had a surprise.”

In all likelihood, if Lorez Alexandria had lived to witness the growth of digital music and streaming, she would have been surprised to discover over 30 million hits on one platform alone for her version of “Give Me the Simple Life”. Her work is well-worth discovering, celebrating and sharing, as we gear for her centenary just a few years away.

For more info visit discogs.com/artist/5666-Lorez-Alexandria

Recommended Listening:

- Lorez Alexandria—*Lorez Sings Pres* (King, 1957)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Early in the Morning (with Ramsey Lewis Trio)* (Argo, 1960)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Alexandria The Great* (Impulse!, 1964)
- Lorez Alexandria—*How Will I Remember You* (Discovery, 1978)
- Lorez Alexandria—*My One and Only Love* (CBS/Sony, 1986)
- Lorez Alexandria—*Star Eyes* (Muse, 1993)

JAZZ FOUNDATION OF AMERICA'S
GREAT NIGHT GALA

MAY 21 2026
8 PM CONCERT

VENUE:
JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
BROADWAY AT 60TH STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10018

FEATURING
NORAH JONES BUSTER WILLIAMS
AND MORE TO BE ANNOUNCED

For further information
please contact Bridget Sullivan
bsullivan@jazzfoundation.org 917.716.6608

JAZZFOUNDATION.ORG/GREATNIGHT26

JAZZ FOUNDATION OF AMERICA
HONORING JAZZ & BLUES
ONE MUSICIAN AT A TIME