

COURTESY OF ARTIST



# JON WEBER

## SONGBOOK STEWARD

### BY JOSH GAGNON

Attaching the word “genius” to Jon Weber is no stretch. The Milwaukee-born pianist spontaneously sat down at a keyboard at age three, and by the age of five had memorized thousands of standards from his grandmother’s piano rolls. Largely self-taught, Weber has perfect pitch, virtuosic technique and an encyclopedic knowledge of jazz and popular music history; plus ask him to play like any known pianist and he’ll replicate the style perfectly. There’s melodic recall and the gift of weaving musical quotes into the creative ideas of his playing. Also a composer, and host of NPR’s “Piano Jazz with Jon Weber” (the chosen successor of the legendary Marian McPartland’s “Piano Jazz” program), Weber’s multi-decade career has established him as a recorded jazz luminary in his own right as well as a sought-after music director-accompanist for countless jazz and cabaret vocalists.

**THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD:** You’re the late-night pianist at Mona’s club. How long have you been doing that gig?

**JON WEBER:** At first, it was just a place to go. I remember I was playing a concert at Symphony Space with Bria Skonberg, Evan Arntzen and Glenn Crytzer. And after the show, this is 2012 I want to say, they said, “Hey, you want to go to Mona’s?” I’m like, “What’s Mona’s?” Little did I know, and as soon as I arrived, I was thinking, “Oh, this is so cool.” It was an 11 to 3 (am) gig at that time, and I was there as a visitor, just in the jam, right up my alley because I have done late-night jams before, when I lived in Chicago, for example. Dennis [Lichtman] decided to make it 9 to midnight after COVID-19. It was just an easier thing, and he thought, “Well, we want to have a late night thing too,” so he wanted to have it midnight to 2 (am). And I think, I can’t remember if it was Jesse Gelber or Gordon Webster, a piano player played the late-night, one of them, I forget which one. Dennis just asked me and I said, “Oh God, yeah!” I usually play until the last person leaves happy, which is usually me [laughs]! Actually, it stays pretty packed.

We always have waves of people coming from different clubs that close at various hours, and all of a sudden, we’ll have a whole bunch of people come in from this club or that. It’s never been the same exact crowd twice. We have a lot of regulars, but no two weeks have ever been the same. And I’ve been doing it steadily since 2021, doing the late-night thing. Every once in a great while, I’ll have to take a Tuesday off because I’ve got to go somewhere to play. For example, I’m bringing my suitcase next week. Yeah, I’m on a 6:30 (am) flight to the Twin Cities again.

**NYCJR:** What’s your relationship with travel like?

**WEBER:** I don’t travel anywhere near as much as I once did. I remember moving out of one apartment about a year ago, and I went through my old calendars. I thought, “Oh my God, how did I ever get this much

done?” I moved from, let’s see, well, I was in 18 different countries in that year. But I think, let me ask you something—during COVID-19, did you find yourself looking at your calendar from 2019 and saying, “Oh my God, how did I get all this stuff done? How am I ever going to get used to this life again if it ever resumes?” When it came back, I said to myself, “Oh yeah, I remember now!” So yeah, I do love it if I have the chance to go somewhere.

**NYCJR:** What do you think your role is as the host of a jam session, and how do you see your relationship with the next generation of people who are enthusiastic about this music?

**WEBER:** I would hope that there’s a contagious interest or enjoyment of this repertoire, of this stuff, of this approach. If I could be the ombudsman, that’s a good Norse word, to be the middleman—I’ll say, “What do you guys feel like playing? What do you want to play?” Every once in a while, there’s a dead silence for 30 seconds, which is an eternity for me on stage because I rarely get up from the bench. If nobody says anything, I’ll start playing something that I think they’ll know. If I’m feeling really confident about the group of folks that are up there, I’ll play something that I’m pretty sure they don’t know.

I’ve got to give my grandma another shoutout because she had all these piano rolls. One day, when I was five years old, her piano just showed up at her house with about 2,000 rolls, which I immediately learned by heart because when you’re five, what else are you doing? You don’t have any car payments, or mortgage, or alimony, or anything else. You don’t have any responsibilities. It’s a time of maximum fun and minimum responsibility. If I can do anything, if I can pass the torch of my grandma’s time, if I can keep her alive in a way...I just think it ought not to disappear, this joyful stuff that I listen to. I think about the people who created it in the first place, and many of them were Black composers like Shelton Brooks or Scott Joplin. They made up this stuff in response to being treated terribly. It was a terrible time of persecution for them. They were being humiliated and lynched and shot and burned and hanged. All these awful things are happening to them. The response was this joyful thing. It’s astonishing the kind of alchemy that arose from that situation. It’s putting the best possible spin on an awful thing that was happening. If nothing else, I feel inspired and obligated to pass that on as long as I possibly can.

**NYCJR:** You have this ability to go layers deep in these stories—the ability to, in a context that one wouldn’t expect, quote these diverse melodies from across genres. How did you go about starting to play like that? You mentioned your grandmother’s piano rolls, but how did you develop this vast repertoire from which you’re pulling? Did that come naturally?

**WEBER:** I’d have to say that it’s because all types of music interested me, because there’s some value in every piece of music I’ve ever heard. Because somebody likes it. Somebody enjoyed it. Somebody created it. I remember hearing a Sammy Davis Jr. record as a kid where he was singing. He impersonated forty different people. He would sing a song that everybody knew, and he’d have (impersonate) five different people singing it here and there. And he’d kind of have them trade off. He’d have himself as Louis Armstrong singing, and then Mario Lanza, and then he’d have Boris Karloff doing it, then Dean Martin, then Jerry

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<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> Allison Miller (7/1) Duduka Da Fonseca’s <i>Quadrilogy</i> (7/8) Morgan Guerin (7/15) Elsa Nilsson Band of Pulses (7/22) Marty Ehrlich Quartet <i>Expanse</i> (7/29)</p>
<p><b>THURSDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Gary Versace (7/2), Jacob Sacks (7/9), Steve Cardenas (7/16), Julian Shore (7/23), Ben Monder (7/30)</p>	<p><b>FRIDAYS 8 &amp; 9:30 PM</b> Zoe Obadia (7/3) Ember with Caleb Wheeler Curtis (7/10) Jerome Sabbagh (7/17), Kazemde George (7/24) Stephan Crump with Darius Jones, Eric McPherson (7/31)</p>
<p><b>SATURDAYS 6 - 7:30 PM DUET SET(S),</b> followed by 8 &amp; 9:30 PM sets: Wayne Tucker (7/4), Garvin Blake (7/11) Daniel Meron, Pablo Menares, Jimmy Macbride (7/18) Melissa Aldana (7/25)</p>	

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\*JULY 6TH - JULY 12TH\*

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\*JULY 14TH - JULY 19TH\*

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JOHN PATITUCCI - NATE WOOD

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\*JULY 21ST - JULY 26TH\*

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\*JULY 28TH - AUGUST 2ND\*

**MAKAYA MCCRAVEN TET**

MARQUIS HILL (TUE-SAT) - JEFF PARKER (TUE-SAT)  
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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

Lewis. So it was this hilarious thing. The whole expression, “that has no business being in there,” was always funny to me. Frank Zappa called it “putting the eyebrows on something.” And for me, that’s a funny thing. Doing something that has no business being in there. And that’s been a theme pretty much throughout my entire life.

**NYCJR:** Are you optimistic about jazz here in NYC? Is there anything in particular that’s exciting you about the contemporary music scene?

**WEBER:** In about a week, I’m revisiting a show of mine called “Joplin to Jarrett,” in which I start with Scott Joplin, and I evolve forward, showing who evolved into whom—how W.C. Handy came along, and then Jelly Roll Morton and so on, saying “Here’s the through line of all these people. This is where this music came from.” I stopped with Keith Jarrett because there have been great players who’ve come along since that I could include, but the thing is, it’s too early to tell if they’re going to shape the music because Jarrett is still affecting the way people play now. Chick Corea’s music, which is in the show, is still affecting the way people play now. I’m waiting for another Thelonious Monk, and whoever he or she is, they’re gonna do it. It’s getting harder and harder to do. YouTube is a great equalizer, but it’s also a great homogenizer in a way because people hear things and they don’t come up with something radical on their own. But somebody will. I can’t wait to hear who the next Scott Joplin is or who the next Jelly Roll Morton is, or James P. Johnson. Some innovator is going to do something that nobody else has tried before, and it’s going to shape everybody else, but the thing is, it’s just too early in their career for me to know *who* they are.

For more info visit [facebook.com/p/Jon-Weber-100063705424124](https://facebook.com/p/Jon-Weber-100063705424124). Weber plays the “Piano in Bryant Park” concert series Jul. 6-10 and is at *Mona’s Tuesdays*. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Jon Weber — *Jazz Wagon* (IMI, 1993)
- Jon Weber — *Live in Concert: Flying Keys* (Jazz Connaissanceur, 1997)
- Jon Weber — *It’s Never Quite the Same: Jon Weber Plays the Songs of Livingston & Evans* (Mood, 1998)
- Jon Weber — *Simple Complex* (2nd Century Jazz, 2003)
- Joyce Breach — *Odds & Ends* (Audiophile, 2009)
- Stacy Sullivan — *On The Air: A Tribute to Marian McPartland* (Harbinger, 2014)

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particularly appeal to Piotrowski: “I would say my preference has always been, other than Dave Burrell, in the sort of the collective-run groups.” That preference is audible across High Two’s catalog, which spotlights ensembles operating with lateral decision-making rather than top-down direction: Shot x Shot’s four-way abstraction; Inzinzac’s jagged Franco-Philly manœuvres; Feeler Gauge’s tensile free improvisations; and Special What’s minimalist collisions of texture and rhythm. As Diehl affirms, “High Two really is a fertile ground for that democratic, egalitarian creation.”

Artist autonomy remains a guiding principle for Piotrowski. His role, he says, is largely about clarity and facilitation, not editorial interference. In recent years, Diehl has taken the lead on commissioning and producing, a shift that has brought several new projects under the label’s wing. Among them is *The Omniverse Oriki* by the now 102-year-old Marshall Allen, in which Yoruba drums and chants thread through

buoyant electronics and Allen’s ever-surprising reed work. On *Lingua Franca* by the Instant Arts Quartet, with saxophonist Terry Lawson, the brass and winds of Matt Lavelle and bassist Pete Dennis alongside Diehl, the label leans into a grittier strain of free jazz—robust, declarative and rooted in the community that sustains it. Diehl’s own post-SLF trajectory continues to feed High Two’s forward motion. As he reveals: “I’ve been doing a residency, post-Sonic Liberation Front, so it’s going on over four years. And we call that the AIRLFT series and AIRLFT is an ensemble, which grows and shrinks.” The forthcoming album from this project draws on musicians whose pedigrees map the city’s avant garde continuum: Lavelle, who studied with Ornette Coleman; Elliott Levin, a veteran of Cecil Taylor’s ensembles; and Dave Hotep, long associated with Allen and the Sun Ra Arkestra. In Diehl’s words, “So we have this amazing array of creative perspectives.” Piotrowski’s enthusiasm remains similarly undimmed: “The scene is so great here in Philly that it’s still exciting after 20 years of doing this.”

High Two’s catalogue stands as evidence: a portrait of Philadelphia not as a footnote to larger jazz capitals, but as a generative center in its own right, where artists build their own structures, cross-pollinate freely, and trust that someone—like Piotrowski and Diehl—will make sure the record exists.

For more info visit [hightwo.net](https://hightwo.net). High Two artists performing this month include Marshall Allen at *Grounds for Sculpture* (Hamilton, NJ) Jul. 18. See *100 Miles Out*.

(MILES 100 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

(Miss Mabry)”, an uncredited Gil Evans reworking of Jimi Hendrix’ “The Wind Cries Mary”, titled after Betty Mabry, the soul-funk singer who was Miles’ wife at the time (aka Betty Davis) and who brought psychedelic rock to his attention. This background must be the reason why Akinmusire elected to play at full throttle on this selection. By contrast, Hermeto Pascoal’s dreamy “Selim” made for a sweet closer.

Down at the fifth floor, audiences were welcomed to a pop-up bar where a listening marathon of 64 LPs recorded by Miles Davis were played in chronological order. The drinks menu offered special brews for the occasion, including the Miles High (Monkey Shoulder Malt Whisky, Weisser Vermut, hausgemachter Mandarinen, Likör, Bitter)—perfect for sipping while listening to Miles on massive speakers, or perusing the newly published *Miles Davis—Three Days in Malibu* photo book by Ralph Quinke. A cool initiative to get in the swing before the shows or prolong the jaunt.

In the late ’60s, Miles Davis declared “jazz needs a new motor, like James Brown’s music has a motor,” and proceeded to build the engine: band members, song structures, plugged sounds, to materialize his ideas. If *Bitches Brew* wasn’t his first album to feature electric instruments, it was a decisive step forward in a direction that proved highly influential on the jazz world and beyond. New York drummer Bobby Previte admits to a lifetime worship of that record, and has been using its contents as a springboard for improvisation since the late ’90s, first with bands to tour with, then as a workshop for young musicians. He describes his *Bitches Brew Reimagined* project as “the perfect vehicle for teaching [students] patience, thoughtfulness, deep listening, and above all, how to banish fear from their playing.” The premise may seem odd to begin with, contradictory even: taking unscripted jams resulting from multiple takes and post-production splicing and editing, as a textbook, transcribed into sheet music for the participating players. At the festival, close associates Brad Jones (electric bass) and Fabian Rucker (bass clarinet) evoked Bennie Maupin’s key presence on the album.

They were joined by violin, saxophones, keyboards, trombone, guitar, electronics and, for the first time, flute by standout Clémence Manachère. Intriguingly, no trumpet. The tentet launched into sprawling versions of “Spanish Key”, “John McLaughlin”, “Miles Runs the Voodoo Down”, “Bitches Brew” and best of all, “Pharaoh’s Dance”. The pieces took no definite shape aside from their basic pulses, sporadic themes and ostinati bass lines. These elements were fleshed out by the younger players who actively engaged in the now moment under Previte’s guidance (when he was not behind his drum kit).

The **Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) Bigband**, Hamburg’s premier jazz ensemble since the mid ’40s, has featured a wide array of musicians through the course of its history, including Chet Baker, Herb Geller, Al Jarreau, Pee Wee Ellis, Susi Hyldgaard, Jiggs Whigham and Michael Gibbs. Its set opened with Miles Davis and Gil Evans’ masterwork *Sketches of Spain*. If you’re familiar with that album (originally recorded in November 1959 and March 1960), you needn’t read further, as the concert was a carbon copy of that record. Hearing it live and loud, however, was a thrilling experience, from opener “Concierto de Aranjuez (Adagio)” and follow-up “Will o’ the Wisp” (its lurching rhythm, including the sound of castanets, calling to mind a horse’s trot), by twentieth century composers Joaquín Rodrigo and Manuel de Falla respectively, to third stream selections and arrangements by Gil Evans, inspired by flamenco and other folk and religious songforms, such as the hypnotic and swirling “The Pan Piper”, the unruly fanfare/bolero “Saeta” and the danceable brass and percussion-laden “Soleá”. On flugelhorn and muted or unmuted trumpet, Germany’s virtuoso Claus Stötter was spellbinding. Olé!

After an intermission, the NDR Bigband reappeared with instruments removed (goodbye harp) and others added (hello electric guitar). The addition of featured artist, Spanish bassist, composer and bandleader **Pablo Martín Caminero** and his *New Flamenco Sketches* to the program made thematical and opened a window onto today’s Iberian jazz. Caminero’s take on flamenco-jazz fusion is joyous and playful, rather than displaying the melancholy, solemn bent of *Sketches of Spain*. Replete with ideas, his writing was tasty, impactful and ever forging ahead.

The *Miles 100* celebration continues at the Elbphilharmonie with a Terence Blanchard/Ravi Coltrane co-led quintet (Jun. 30) that additionally honors the memory of John Coltrane (2026 also of course represents the saxophonist’s centennial) and Marcus Miller’s *We Want Miles!* (Jul. 9) featuring members from that 1981 live album of the same name.

For more info visit [elbphilharmonie.de/en/](https://elbphilharmonie.de/en/)

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