



MARIANA MERAZ

ELSA NILSSON

A WORLD OF FLUTE

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

Flute player-composer Elsa Nilsson grew up in Gothenburg, Sweden with an American mother and a Swedish father, which helps to explain her international outlook. Her working band includes Argentinian pianist Santiago Leibson, Chilean drummer Rodrigo Recabarren and Alaskan bassist Marty Kenney. Together, they can take you just about anywhere in the world.

"I started singing at age two," the now Brooklyn-based Nilsson says. "My dad directed an [ex-Navy] choir and he put me out there. When I was four, he had me singing harmonies with my brother. I started piano at five, with lessons from a Brazilian woman living in Sweden." Illuminating more about her father and his influence on her formative years, she adds, "My dad was a fisherman, and I hated to go out with him because I'd get motion sickness, plus I didn't like killing things. So he'd drop me off on a remote island, where I'd make up songs. The first one that got written down is from when I was six." At 13, Nilsson was sent off to Camp Unalayee, a Quaker wilderness camp in California: "I couldn't bring the piano, but the flute fit well in a backpack!" There Nilsson taught herself to play flute by improvising on mountain tops. In returning to music school she was told she wasn't good enough to become an orchestral flautist, so her teacher started showing her avant garde classical pieces. "It was a sideways door into jazz."

Another entry point came via her brother, who owned *The Köln Concert* (ECM, 1976), pianist Keith Jarrett's iconic solo album, and then there was her mother's America, the home of jazz, which beckoned. "In 2005 I bought a round-trip ticket to Seattle and never used the return trip," she says. And in 2010, Nilsson made the cross-country trip to the City That Never Sleeps. "I was drawn to the urgent way people relate to the music here," she explains. Plus, Nilsson is a lifelong scholar and New York provided opportunities of study; she has, over the years, studied with (and sometimes recorded with) teachers including Karl Berger, Jamie Baum, Jon Cowherd (*After Us*, 2018), Robert Dick and Bill Frisell (through a CMA Performance Grant with her sometime collaborator, pianist-vocalist Dawn Clement). Dick acknowledges that, "Elsa was my student through the NYU jazz program [where she earned a master's degree]. She was really gifted, and she had been told a lot of stupid things by a bunch of jazz dabblers. Once she started playing more in harmony with the nature of the flute, she just blossomed." Unsurprisingly, Dick was an early champion of Nilsson's music, and helped with her early solo work, including the 2013 debut, *Already There Yet*. Baum reveals that Nilsson studied with her, via mail, when she was located in Seattle, and then for a year in New York after she came East. "She's a wonderful player, and I know she does cool stuff," Baum says. "She organized a flute quartet, including me, Robert Dick and Jessica Lurie, and we played a gig at Spectrum on the Lower East Side—probably in 2012 or 2013. It's great to see the next generation of dedicated flautists taking the music in new directions." Of new directions, saxophonist Peter Apfelbaum, who has played with Nilsson's

quartet and worked with her in the Creative Music Studio Improvisers Orchestra, observes that Nilsson is not only a virtuoso flautist, but one who is reordering and reinfusing jazz by creating her own instrumental structures to improvise within, thus redefining the roles of the different instruments in her groups. "I love how varied and wildly imaginative her music is," he enthuses. "Rhythmically, harmonically and conceptually, from the very spare to the very dense. And however knotty and complex her music gets, it always feels lyrical."

Nilsson, who might have as easily majored in philosophy instead of music, has made three records with Band of Pulses, including her latest, the just-released *Liminal* (Adhyâropa). The album title is derived from Latin and means threshold, and thus liminality, an existential state of being "betwixt and between," of existing on the boundary of what has passed and not yet arrived. "I've become fascinated with the in betweens," Nilsson explains. "We all have these big, life-changing moments, such as moving to a new place, leaving our old lives behind. In my current case, it's going through a divorce. You have to let go of a version of yourself to grow into the next phase." The music on *Liminal*, which consists entirely of her original works, is extremely varied, from serene passages that fit right into the mainstream jazz repertoire to moments of agitation and total turbulence that reflect liminality. "We all have these experiences," Nilsson explains. "Beauty and brutality are two sides of the same thing."—a statement that arose from one of many projects she is involved with: *Live from Death Row* (2025) with political activist-pianist Albert Marquès and Keith LaMar, who is on Death Row in Ohio and who speaks about the dichotomy of human existence. "That's something Keith said to me, along with 'everything is everything,'" Nilsson says. "If you refuse to look at the grit, you're cutting yourself off from part of life."

Among her projects, and inspired in part by veteran flute player Paul Horn (who recorded inside the Taj Mahal) as well as Eric Dolphy (who imitated and was inspired by the sound of birds), Nilsson has been traveling the world to create in far-flung nature, as part of her *Atlas of Sound* series. She made *Quila Quina*, a duo record with Santiago Leibson in Patagonia, and *Coastal Redwoods* in the Pacific Northwest. The third in the series will be recorded in the Czech Republic this summer.

In the final analysis, Nilsson isn't focused on commercial success. She says a huge influence on her "both musically and personally" was the late trumpet player-composer Ron Miles, who had lessons to teach about keeping one's integrity intact. Nilsson's teaching work at The New School keeps her solvent while she pursues a demanding muse: "I'm trying to do something as deeply honest as possible, and to capture as much of the experience of being alive as I possibly can."

For more info visit elsanilssonmusic.com. Nilsson's album release concert is at Bar Bayeux Jul. 22. She is also at *Soup & Sound* Jul. 19 (with Ravi Coltrane) and *Mezzrow* Jul. 29 (with Steve Cardenas). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Elsa Nilsson/Jon Cowherd—*After Us* (Bumblebee Collective, 2018)
- Elsa Nilsson—*Hindsight* (Bumblebee Collective, 2019)
- Martin Fabricius/Elsa Nilsson—*Glaciers* (Gateway Music, 2023)
- Esthesis Quartet—*Sound of Fury* (Sunnyside, 2023)
- Elsa Nilsson/Santiago Leibson—*Atlas Of Sound, Quila Quina*, -41°17'38.21"N -71°45'68.48"S (ears&eyes, 2023)
- Elsa Nilsson Band of Pulses—*Liminal* (Adhyâropa, 2024)



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<p>National Jazz Museum in Harlem* 58 West 129th St., 2PM 7/16 - Jorge Sylvester Ace Collective 7/23 - Barry Altschul Trio 7/27 - Monday Night Jam, 6PM 7/30 - Steve Swell - The Poetics of Improvisation <small>*and livestreaming on JFA Facebook and YouTube</small></p>	<p>Hudson River Park Jazz at Pier 84 555 12th Ave, 7PM 7/1 - Clifton Anderson 7/8 - Chief Baba Neil Clarke Trio Plus 7/15 - Ghanniyya Green and Soulful Sound 7/22 - Mala Waldron and Spaceman Patterson and the Celestials 7/29 - Spaceman Patterson and the Celestials</p>	<p>Bushwick Inlet Park 86 Kent Ave at North 9th St, Brooklyn, 6:30 PM 7/16 - Reggie Woods Quintet 7/23 - George Gray Jazz Coalition</p>
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***7, 9 pm sets unless otherwise noted**
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