

HIGH TWO

DEMOCRATIC & EGALITARIAN CREATION

BY JOHN SHARPE

Daniel Piotrowski didn't set out to found a record label so much as to correct an imbalance. In 2003, while covering Philadelphia's arts scene for the *Philadelphia Weekly*, he recognized that pianist Dave Burrell (who turns 86 this September)—long a distinctive voice in creative music—remained underexposed despite his presence in the city. Their rapport grew as Piotrowski followed Burrell's work, and when he learned the pianist hoped to record with William Parker (bass) and Andrew Cyrille (drums), but wasn't gaining any traction, he saw an opening. "I stepped forward with the idea of starting a label. And he was up for it," he recalls. High Two was born not from business ambition (Piotrowski still talks of "break even dreams") but from a fan's impulse: to bring important music into better view.

The label launched with Burrell's *Expansion*, featuring what he dubbed his Full Blown Trio. Burrell's art—an idiosyncratic telescoping of blues, free improvisation, stride and lyrical romanticism—gave

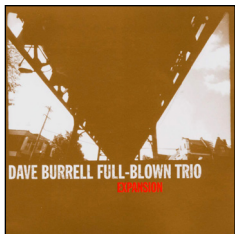
the new imprint a high profile from the start. Such was the acclaim that a second disc, *Momentum*, followed in 2006, this time with Michael Formanek (bass) and Guillermo E. Brown (drums). Burrell's presence didn't end with the music however; he inadvertently helped christen the label too. As Piotrowski explains: "It's a reference to a Dave Burrell record called *High Won - High Two* (Arista Freedom, 1968). So it's a play on that." But High Two was never meant as a one-artist boutique. In parallel with Burrell's project, Piotrowski issued *Ashé A Go-Go* by Kevin Diehl's Sonic Liberation Front (SLF), a group that quickly became one of the label's defining pillars, amassing a further six albums until the band's eventual dissolution amid COVID-19 in 2020. SLF's fusion of Afro-Cuban percussion, free jazz and chamber-like writing brought another facet of Philly's creative ecosystem into focus. Diehl enlightens: "We evolved and tried to look at how can we present ourselves in different ways. And we had various collaborators. We did a release with Sunny Murray. We did two with Oliver Lake: with a string quartet [*Bombogenic*]; and more recently we commissioned him to compose music for voices [*Justice: The Vocal Works of Oliver Lake*]. So it's his trademark of close interval music but with voices and SLF-adjacent to that. Those are just some examples. High Two was a great home to

try these different things out."

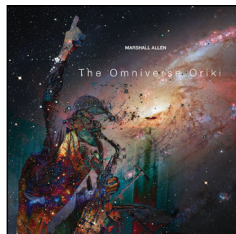
Reflecting Piotrowski's catholic tastes the label broadened beyond jazz in its early years, taking in rock, folk, electronics and other corners of the local scene. But that expansion eventually met the reality of what a small imprint can reasonably shoulder. "More recently, it's really been more back to the origins and focus on what I think is interesting in the jazz scene in Philadelphia," he says. The return to a jazz-centered mission sharpened the label's profile while allowing Piotrowski to concentrate on the music that was his passion. "There's a lot going on here always," he adds, a point indisputable in a city whose creative circles can feel both tight-knit and inexhaustible. The move also coincided with Diehl taking a greater role in the label. Having young children and a full-time job, Piotrowski welcomed the help from someone embedded in the roster. "He's always been a partner, an ally and friend and a useful resource for the label. But he's taken more of a step forward in recent years. So it's both of ours now."

Although he has always been the face of SLF, its spokesperson and founder, Diehl promotes an ethos which encourages everyone to shine. Such endeavors

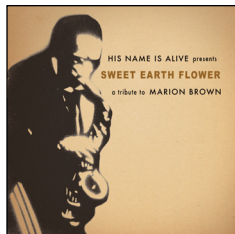
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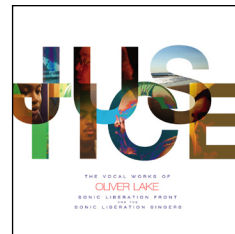
Expansion
Dave Burrell Full Blown Trio



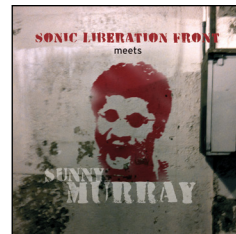
The Omniverse Oriki
Marshall Allen



Sweet Earth Flower
His Name Is Alive



Justice
Sonic Liberation Front



Meets Sunny Murray
Sonic Liberation Front

VOXNEWS

MORE VOCALS

BY TESSA SOUTER

Calling all vocalists aged 30 and under: applications are due this month (Jul. 15) for the Herbie Hancock Institute's International Jazz Vocals Competition, which will take place in Paris (Oct. 10-11)—the first time this prestigious event is being held outside the US. Previous winners include **Jane Monheit**, **Cécile McLorin Salvant** and **Jazzmeia Horn**.

There seems to be more vocal jazz than ever happening this summer, indoors and out. Jazz on the Plaza at Saint Peter's Church features four wonderful singers: rising star **April Varner** (Jul. 9), **Tyler Bassett** (Jul. 16), trumpeter-vocalist **Benny Benack III** (Jul. 23) and tenor saxophonist-vocalist **Camille Thurman** (Jul. 30). The ever-adventurous vocalist-songwriter **Andrea Wolper** belatedly celebrates her birthday at Mezzrow (Jul. 12), with Miki Yamanaka and Ken Filiano, and at Five Spot Jazz (Jul. 30) with Janis Friedman and Filiano. **Marcus Goldhaber**, a singer with echoes of Chet Baker, celebrates the release of his new *The Promise of You* (Fallen Apple) at Mezzrow (Jul. 16). Expect a mix of standards and originals that sound as though they emerged from the Great American Songbook. Also at Mezzrow are Brazilian singer **Jamile** (Jul. 5), a vocalist with impeccable taste and a beautiful instrument; the remarkable singer-songwriter **Vanisha Gould** (Jul. 12); **April Varner** (Jul. 19), who also appears at Zinc Bar the following day (Jul. 20); and **Naama Gheber** (Jul. 19), whose latest release, *They Say It's Spring* (La Reserve), is a joyful celebration of two beloved New York seasons: the album features 11 exquisitely-chosen standards, six devoted to spring, five to autumn.

Honduras-born, Spain-raised and NYC-based vocalist-songwriter **Eva Cortés** celebrates her beautiful album *La Malinche* (TRCC) at Drom (Jul. 16). Described as "a personal take on identity, memory and collective awakening," the project is inspired by the historical figure La Malinche, an enslaved Nahua woman who became interpreter, adviser, intermediary and eventual lover to Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. Montreal-based Juno and Félix Award-winning vocalist-arranger **Emilie-Claire Barlow** and her stellar band return to Birdland (Jul. 9-11), featuring Great American Songbook classics, bossa novas, ballads and French chansons, reimagined in her distinctive style. In this new show, she presents selections from *La Plus Belle Saison*, her most recent all-French project, alongside the singer's other favorites. Also at Birdland, Accentuate the Positive celebrates America's 250th birthday in song, presented in memory of Ken Peplowski, with vocalists **Olivia Chindamo**, Paris-based **Angela Grey** and The Voice finalist **Wyatt Michael** (Jul. 3-4). Other vocal highlights include Chilean vocalist-guitarist **Camila Meza** (Jul. 7-8), **Stella Cole** (Jul. 15-18), **Allan Harris** (Jul. 17-19) and cabaret star **Karen Akers** (Jul. 13), celebrating France on the eve of Bastille Day. At the Blue Note, **Lisa Fischer** with the Orrin Evans Trio is an absolute don't miss (Jul. 16-19); as is the Baylor Project with vocalist **Jean Baylor** and drummer Marcus Baylor (Jul. 10-12). At JALC's Rose Theater, Duke Ellington's masterpiece *Black, Brown and Beige*, features the extraordinary young singer **Ekep Nkwelle** (Jul. 23-24). Composer-poet-pianist **Janice Lowe** and vocalists **Olitheia Anglin** and **Kyoko Kitamura** will appear at the Brooklyn Free Spirit Festival (Jul. 11-12). **Kate Kortum** performs with the Aaron Diehl Trio at 92NY's "Jazz in July" (Jul. 22).

Currently enjoying a world tour, double GRAMMY-winner **Nicole Zuraitis** releases her latest album, *The*

Devil I Knew (La Reserve). Described by Zuraitis as "a self-reckoning" rather than a breakup piece, the album unfolds across five thematic movements—The Mirror, The Martyr, The Malediction, The Reckoning and The Requiem—each connected through poetry by iconic female writers including Dorothy Parker, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Francis Ellen Watkins Harper. Catch her live at The Jazz Loft (Jul. 16) and the Shubert Theater in New Haven, CT (Jul. 17). **Tierney Sutton** has a beautiful new duo album with longtime collaborator, pianist Tamir Hendelman. *Spring* (BFM Jazz) celebrates the season with a beautiful version of "You Must Believe in Spring", featuring a previously unheard verse by the Bergmans, close friends of the singer. The release concerts are at Smoke with special guests Randy Brecker and Lewis Nash (Jul. 1-3) and Houston Person (Jul. 4-5). Also at Smoke, **Jane Monheit** (Jul. 15-19), one of the foremost interpreters of the Great American Songbook, sings Cole Porter. Later in the month, **René Marie**—one of the most distinctive vocalists of her generation—appears as special guest with Eric Scott Reed (Jul. 22-26), showcasing the music of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.

RETROSPECTIVES...The first-ever reissue of poet and social activist **Amiri Baraka's** (aka LeRoi Jones) electric and live 1982 beat-poetry recording *New Music - New Poetry* (Modern Harmonic), is newly remastered and accompanied by a zine-style poetry insert and liner notes by avant garde saxophonist David Murray. **Ella Fitzgerald's** *Live at Falconer Theater, Copenhagen 1966* (Gearbox) captures the singer at the top of her game on a previously unreleased recording made the night before her celebrated Stockholm concert. And **Jimmy Scott's** *Falling in Love Is Wonderful*, recorded in 1968 (released on Ray Charles' Tangerine label), and Scott's rare *Doesn't Love Mean More* (Modern Harmonic) are both available again.

(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. 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)

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

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. 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/

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