

# 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

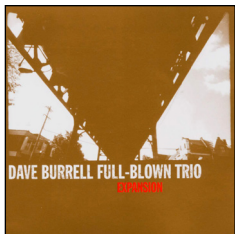
the new imprint a high profile from the start. Such was the acclaim that a second disc, *Momentum*, followed in 2006, this time with Michael Formanek (bass) and Guillermo E. Brown (drums). Burrell's presence didn't end with the music however; he inadvertently helped christen the label too. As Piotrowski 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

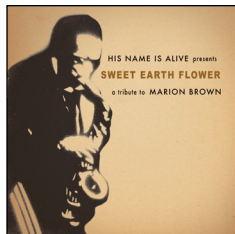
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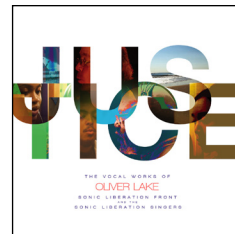
*Expansion*  
Dave Burrell Full Blown Trio



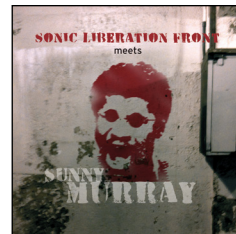
*The Omniverse Oriki*  
Marshall Allen



*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 **Olithea 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.