



**Focus Out (Irabagast)**  
**Saturday's Child (Irabagast)**  
**Raw Dog (Corbett vs. Dempsey)**  
**Jon Irabagon**  
 by Bill Meyer

Maybe it's not such a remarkable thing to say about Jon Irabagon that no single record can contain the full measure of his artistry. If you commit your life to jazz, that's part of the plan, right? The Chicago-based saxophonist's CV is undeniably dense. You can mention that he's a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient, a University of Illinois professor, an associate of veteran drummer Barry Altschul and guitarist Mary Halvorson, as well as the group Talibam!, and still come up frightfully short. The three albums under consideration here are united mainly by temporality: all three are relatively recent recordings released this spring. Between them they convey impressions of Irabagon as a bandleader and composer, a free improviser, an interpreter of others' compositions, as well as record label honcho.

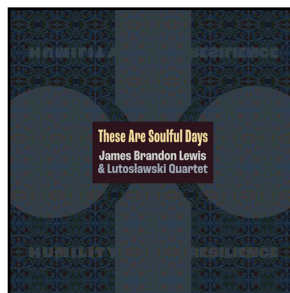
*Focus Out* is the third record that Irabagon has made with the otherwise New York-based quartet he formed in 2019, which includes Matt Mitchell (piano), Chris Lightcap (electric bass) and Dan Weiss (drums). Curiously, the quartet has always recorded as the core of a larger band. Four other musicians—KOKAYI (vocals), Donny McCaslin and Mark Shim (tenors), Miles Okazaki (guitar) and Dave Ballou (trumpet)—appear on one or two of the album's seven tracks, and Irabagon plays alto saxophone throughout. As a rule, the more people who play on each track, the more compelling the results, for while the quartet is undeniably facile in its rendering of some pretty demanding music, its performances feel a bit too on-the-nose in their representations of electric, acoustic and gospel modalities. The dynamic gets especially exciting when the extra horns start coloring outside the lines and KOKAYI commences hectoring.

*Saturday's Child* is a first-time, totally improvised meeting between Irabagon and Dan Oestreicher. Oestreicher might be best known to the general public for his association with Trombone Shorty, but his interest in less-showbiz-focused endeavors has led to his ongoing involvement with the Instigation Festival, a migratory congress of creative musicians from Chicago and New Orleans. The instigation for this particular encounter, which took place in 2023 at Chicago's Hungry Brain, was the fact that both musicians own a bass saxophone, and aside from a few moments when Oestreicher switches to bass flute, that's what they play throughout. The two men match and exchange long tones, withering cries, breathy huffs and stomping rhythms with lusty abandon and acute sensitivity, finding common ground in shared sound material. The album reproduces the full set, which sounds nearly as thrilling as being there (I know—I was). For good measure, it also throws in a radio edit of one tune enhanced by mixing and mastering engineer Mike Pride's drums.

The bass saxophone is Irabagon's only instrument on *Raw Dog*, which was recorded in September 2025 at the gallery of Corbett vs. Dempsey (who also released the album). Playing solo, he interprets two pieces by Anthony Braxton and two more by Julius Hemphill, both composers with a more than passing acquaintance with the extremes of reed language, the potentialities of extreme sonorities and the never-ending rewards obtained by returning to the ideas of Charlie Parker. The dynamic range is immense, from barely-there exhalations to rippling roars, and Irabagon sounds quite in control of his unwieldy

instrument throughout the set. He is also quite tuned in to what each piece requires, confidently negotiating the distorted abstractions of bebop conjugation on Braxton's "Composition 40M" and the corkscrewed contortions of West Coast glide on "Composition 23M". He likewise reconciles the analytical and expressive impulses of Hemphill's "#2" and transforms "Kansas City Line" from a fine line drawing into a rough charcoal scrawl. The composers' materials correspond closely to Irabagon's management of sound and form, making this as much a statement of his art as anything issuing from his own pen.

For info visit [jonirabagon.com](http://jonirabagon.com) and [corbettvsdempsey.com](http://corbettvsdempsey.com). Irabagon is at The Jazz Gallery Jul. 15-16 (with Miles Okazaki's *Boomtown*), National Jazz Museum in Harlem Jul. 23 (with Barry Altschul's *3dom Factor*) and First Street Green Jul. 25. See Calendar.



**These Are Soulful Days**  
**James Brandon Lewis & Lutosławski Quartet**  
**(TAO Forms)**  
 by JR Simon

Recorded live at Jazztopad Festival in Wrocław, Poland in 2021, *These Are Soulful Days* features James Brandon Lewis (tenor) and Poland's Lutosławski Quartet: Roksana Kwaśnikowska (violin 1), Marcin Markowicz (violin 2), Artur Rozmysłowicz (viola) and Maciej Młodawski (cello). Lewis' first long-form composition for string quartet and tenor is not a jazz/classical mashup or crossover exercise. Over a prologue, four movements and an epilogue, saxophone and string quartet speak the same language. That shared vocabulary is immediately apparent in "Prologue-Humility", where the quartet opens alone before Lewis' tenor slips in almost imperceptibly, blending so naturally with cello that, at first, it scarcely sounds like a saxophone at all. A simple, comforting melody unfolds over a repeated string pattern, eventually giving way to a soaring breakout from Lewis before settling back into its original, melodic warmth. "Movement II" builds similarly, from lightly pulsing pizzicato strings beneath a slow, legato saxophone melody that feels almost hymn-like in its warmth and directness. As the movement develops, Lewis pushes outward into more forceful improvisation, yet the melody continues to anchor the piece, preventing the music from ever feeling chaotic. Throughout the suite, recurring pizzicato figures function almost like a heartbeat beneath the music's more lyrical passages.

What makes this album so compelling is its confidence and restraint. Lewis' tenor sound is rich and muscular, but never showy or excessive. "Movement I" showcases the quartet's remarkable articulation—crisp, angular and sharply focused—while still leaving room for the leader's thrilling solo passages. Elsewhere, particularly in the gorgeous "Movement IV", the music feels almost prayerful, with Lewis and his quartet passing melodies seamlessly between one another as if they were variations of the same voice. Some listeners may find the album too rooted in chamber music to fit comfortably within jazz, while others may hear too much improvisational freedom to call it classical. But that would miss the point entirely.

*These Are Soulful Days* succeeds because it uncovers the shared emotional core beneath different traditions: music rooted in memory, resilience, prayer and song.

For more info visit [taoforms.bandcamp.com](http://taoforms.bandcamp.com). Lewis is at Village Vanguard Jun. 30 - Jul. 5. See Calendar.



**Oracles**  
**Helen Sung Big Band (Sunnyside)**  
 by Ken Dryden

Helen Sung has distinguished herself from the time that she abandoned her classical studies in college to focus on jazz, a late start for some, but her focus and creativity earned her a spot in the inaugural class of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Since moving to New York over two decades ago, the pianist has distinguished herself leading small groups, in addition to her work in other bands. Encouraged to compose by Ron Carter (one of her teachers) and invited to arrange for the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra by Wynton Marsalis, *Oracles* marks her first recording of originals and arrangements for a large ensemble, several of which are dedicated to her mentors and heroes, all of which are in her own voice rather than merely being derivative of their approaches.

Her potent opener, "Convergence", is fueled by its brisk post-bop tempo and dazzling piano solo, accented by the intricate blending of brass and reeds, showcasing strong contributions by Alex Norris (trumpet) and John

## RECOMMENDED NEW RELEASES

- Ambrose Akinmusire/Mary Halvorson—*Slo-Mo Luminare Hoverings* (Nonesuch)
- Ben Allison, Steve Cardenas, Ted Nash—*Triological* (Sunnyside)
- Mátyás Bartha Trio (feat. Scott Robinson)—*Hercules* (Bartha)
- Ron Carter/Yotam Silberstein—*Duets* (JOJO)
- Caleb Wheeler Curtis—*Ritual* (Chill Tone)
- Joe Fiedler's Big Sackbut—*Journey to Bowerbird* (Multiphonics)
- Frankfurt Radio Big Band, hr-Big Band, Nils Wogram, Jim McNeely—*Trilogue +15: A Tribute to Albert Mangelsdorff* (ACT Music)
- Phillip Greenlief/Amanda Irrazabal—*la verdad es la Verdad* (Mother Brain)
- Carlos Henriquez—*Monk Con Clave* (s/r)
- Dave Liebman/Ra Kalam Bob Moses—*Live at the Lilypad 2017* (Ra Kalam)
- Myra Melford/Satoko Fujii—*Katarahi* (RogueArt)
- Jason Moran, BlankFor.ms, Marcus Gilmore—*Shards* (Red Hook)
- Ocean Fanfare—*Third Nature* (Barefoot)
- Heather Pierson—*Alone At Last* (Vessel)
- Nat Reeves—*Now in Time* (The Side Door)
- Lisa Rich—*I Still Rise* (s/r)
- Elias Stemeseder/Thomas Morgan—*lo Pur Respiro* (Squama)
- Helen Sung Big Band—*Oracles* (Sunnyside)
- The Westerlies—*Have You Heard? The Music of Bill Frisell, Vol. 1* (Westerlies)
- Randy Weston—*The Music of Randy Weston* (In+Out)