



**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.

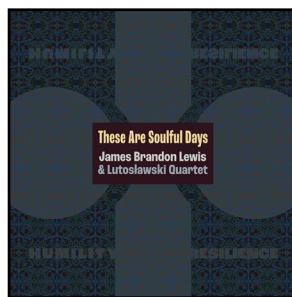
*Focus Out* is the third record that Irabagon has made with the otherwise New York-based quartet he formed in 2019, which includes Matt Mitchell (piano), Chris Lightcap (electric bass) and Dan Weiss (drums). Curiously, the quartet has always recorded as the core of a larger band. Four other musicians—KOKAYI (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 & Lutoslawski 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 Lutoslawski 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

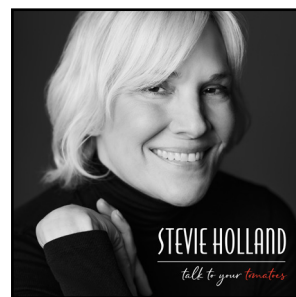
Helen Sung has distinguished herself from the time that she abandoned her classical studies in college to focus on jazz, a late start for some, but her focus and creativity earned her a spot in the inaugural class of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. Since moving to New York over two decades ago, 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

Ellis (tenor). Sung's inspired setting of Clark Terry's lesser-known "Samba Da Gumz" is a brief, richly textured feature for trumpets and flugelhorn that segues into her "Positively C.T." salute to the late horn virtuoso. Unaccompanied brass leads the way, before the piece transforms into a snappy blues that wails much like a Terry original. Sung switches to electric piano, joined by Ellis on soprano, for a sojourn into Wayne Shorter's dreamy ballad "Diana", segueing into "Wayne's World" as she returns to grand piano. Her playful tribute to the late master interweaves a colorful blend of ideas with a constantly shifting perspective, as she and Ellis flesh out the center of this engaging work. Tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover takes center stage in Sung's energetic post-bop salute to Jimmy Heath, "A Little Bird Watchin'", while bassist Vicente Archer and the composer also shine in the solo spotlight. Sung's diverse three-part suite "Pianism" fêtes three piano giants: (the late) Barry Harris, Kenny Barron and Herbie Hancock. Each movement provides an intriguing portrait of its namesake, with ample surprises awaiting the listener.

This is Helen Sung's most ambitious album to date and will stand the test of time.

For more info visit [sunnysiderecords.com](http://sunnysiderecords.com). Sung is at Zinc Bar Jul. 13 (with Mark Lewandowski) and Jazzcultural Jul. 24-26 (with Steve Wilson). She is also at Gordon Hall at Music Mountain Summer Festival (Falls Village, CT) Jul. 11. See Calendar and 100 Miles Out.



**Talk to Your Tomatoes**  
**Stevie Holland (150 Music)**  
by Marilyn Lester

Does vocalist-songwriter-actress Stevie Holland really talk to her tomatoes? The title track, the fun piece on the album, written by lyricist Holland, with composer husband and album producer-arranger, Gary William Friedman, is a Dave Frishberg-like instructional, a slightly swinging philosophy that communing with vegetables is a good way to achieve inner peace. The tune is one of three written with Friedman on this ten-track outing, the others being "When These Two Hearts Collide" (a Latinesque ballad of relationship difficulties) and "You Pull Through" (an instructional for maintaining a stiff upper lip in life). These tunes are pleasant enough, but largely don't stack up to the varied covers, beginning with opener "On a Clear Day" (Burton Lane, Alan Jay Lerner), more suitable to Holland's rangy vibrato and slightly nasal vocal tone. With a foot in musical theater (Holland is also a playwright), the album also includes Friedman's "How I Feel", lyrics by Will Holt, a bluesy tear-jerker from Broadway's *The Me Nobody Knows*.

What is consistently excellent on this album are its production values and superb musicianship from Chet Doxas (alto), Matthew Sheens (piano), Ben Monder (guitar), Matt Aronoff (bass) and Jeff Davis (drums). Additional color is provided by Sam Hoyt (trumpet, flugelhorn), Mike Fahie (trombone) and a nonet of string players (violins, violas, cello). The one jazz standard on the album, "Round Midnight" (Thelonious Monk, Bernie Hanighen) features an *capella* opening, sliding into duo accompaniment with Monder—another slow mover on the other end of cheerful. The guitarist's artistry is, however, superb. "Help Me" (Joni Mitchell) and "Blossom" (James Taylor) both lack verve. "Pure

Imagination" (Leslie Bricusse, Anthony Newley) finally picks up the pace, with Sheen's solo adding the necessary juice and swing, encouraging Holland to join in the party. Closer, Brooks Bowman's songbook standard, "East of the Sun (And West of the Moon)", often taken as an uptempo celebration, here falls back to Holland's predilection for doleful, sometimes lethargic, approaches to lyric interpretation.

*Talk to Your Tomatoes* is ideally suited to diehard Holland fans, those who can look beyond vocal presentation and tempi to excellence in musicianship, and those who might be in a mood to drown sorrows.

For more info visit [stevieholland.com](http://stevieholland.com). Holland is at 54Below Jul. 28. See Calendar.



**Of the Earth**  
**Shabaka (Shabaka)**  
by Andrew Schinder

British musician Shabaka (né Shabaka Hutchings) was closing in on jazz superstardom, hitting significant commercial heights (for jazz or otherwise) with his fusion projects The Comet is Coming (electro dance rhythms) and Sons of Kemet (politically-charged global beats), among several other groups. His skill as a tenor saxophonist rivaled some of the instrument's best in clarity and power—and then Shabaka moved on, transitioning away from the tenor as his primary instrument, mostly utilizing the flute and clarinet on 2024's *Perceive its Beauty, Acknowledge its Grace*, an amalgam of different styles and moods that blend together in a rich, ethereal synthesis, balancing his roots with a musical curiosity.

Moving even further away from traditional jazz on this, Shabaka's new album, *Of the Earth*—a hybrid of diverse styles including contemporary chamber, ambient, techno and hip-hop—begs the question: was Shabaka ever really a "jazz" musician in the first place? Indeed, he plays saxophone, and his groups relied heavily on improvisation, but he could never be constrained in any kind of descriptive box, despite the efforts of many in the music industry to define him. Regardless of this album's genre (or anti-genre), it nonetheless represents an impressive achievement.

The album opens with "A Future Untold", creating a cosmic, otherworldly atmosphere that includes his return to recorded saxophone, layered over a cello and electronic keyboard. Shabaka's hip-hop vocals—heard on "Go Astray" and "Eyes Lowered"—feature his deep, hauntingly effective moody voice. He amps up the rhythm midway through "Step Lightly", creating a driving, looping electronic beat that bolsters layered flute textures. "Marwa the Mountain" reduces Sons of Kemet's trademark tribal groove to its bare essence, with Shabaka utilizing a range of woodwind patterns over percussion that slowly increases in intensity.

While his previous record was positioned as a solo album, a recording on which he had plenty of help—including from André 3000, Carlos Niño and Brandee Younger—here on *Of the Earth* Shabaka is all alone, taking charge of composition, production and all instrumentation, thus laying himself bare.

For more info visit [shabaka.world](http://shabaka.world). The album release concert is at Central Park Summerstage Jul. 1 (part of Blue Note Jazz Festival, co-presented by City Parks Foundation). See Calendar.

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—*Trilogie +15: A Tribute to Albert Mangelsdorff* (ACT Music)
- Phillip Greenlief/Amanda Irrarázabal—*la verdad es la Verdad* (Mother Brain)
- Carlos Henriquez—*Monk Con Clave* (sfr)
- 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* (sfr)
- 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)

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	JULY 23-26 <b>CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE &amp; URSA MAJOR</b>
	JULY 30 <b>ATOMIC HABITZ</b>
	JULY 31 - AUG 2 <b>BOB JAMES</b>
	AUG 6-9 <b>KENNY GARRETT</b>
	AUG 10 <b>BRANDON WOODY'S UPENDO</b>
	AUG 11-16 <b>DIZZY GILLESPIE BIG BAND</b>
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