IMPROVISING DRUMMING RECORDS

SONIC EXPLORATION

BY KEN WAXMAN

The disruptions and isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic created hardships for everyone. And because there were no outlets in which to play even through 2021, French drummer Tiri Carreras decided to fulfill a long-held desire to record a solo disc and start his own label, Improvising Drumming Records (IDR). The smaller-than-boutique label now has a dozen discs in its catalog, featuring Carreras improvising alongside some of France's most accomplished free-music players. Those releases include sessions going back to 2009, which featured Carreras, and in some cases were originally released on other imprints. This cooperation continues: IDR's two most recent releases, *T(h)ree* with Carreras, tenor saxophonist Sylvain Guérineau and bassist Fred Marty, and *Live @ La Guillotine,* with saxophonist Jean-Luc Petit and Carreras, are coproductions with Portugal's 4DaRecord label.

"It's fairly simple to release an album on your own label. Finding a label that's willing to distribute your work is much more complicated," explains Carreras, who describes himself as IDR's jack-of-all-trades. "The benefit of being distributed by a label like 4DaRecord gives us a level of legitimacy and expands our audience."

Initially a straight-ahead drummer, Carreras' concept changed radically in the early 2000s when he began frequenting sessions in the Paris suburbs. Playing with musicians such as bassist Benjamin Duboc and pianist Dominique Dubois-Taine, he developed a new playing style. "I enjoy using unconventional setups, such as a horizontal bass drum, as well as everyday objects to produce unique sounds." At that juncture he was in the midst of creating *Élan vital*, a solo drumming disc, when the pandemic's restrictions intensified. As business contracted, the grants-funded small labels weren't able to operate. The duo albums he later recorded with Guérineau, for instance, were offered to more than 80 labels, he notes. "Most either didn't respond or turned us down. Some would have liked to distribute our music but lacked the resources."

Back to 2021: "Due to the lockdown, I was forced to work solo. I'd been thinking about a solo album for a long time, and COVID-19 gave me the opportunity to do just that." He set up a recording studio in the basement of his house in Étables-sur-Mer, Brittany, and "invested in equipment to make high-quality recordings and taught myself how to mix." He also created a Bandcamp page to stream and sell the music. That established, he followed others' suggestions, founding IDR and adding more sessions to the service. Not wanting to limit his product to streaming, he also made the music available as physical CDs. "We could send it to music critics and radio stations and sell them at concerts or by mail order. Bandcamp turned out to be the ideal tool for that."

Tenor saxophonist Guérineau, who lives in a village near Orléans, France, has been part of three IDR sessions: *T(h)ree* and two duos with the drummer. He says, "I can only really play when I have absolute freedom," and expresses his appreciation for the autonomy fostered by IDR. "(Tiri) takes care of all the logistical stuff. All I have to do is blow into the saxophone. I also have my say on how we record and on the sound quality. We operate in a very democratic way—no leader, absolute equality. The music is good when it just happens naturally."

Although Carreras is IDR's sole employee, who (as he reports) "manages the Bandcamp page, uploads new recordings and artwork, orders CD pressings and handles promotion," he echoes Guérineau's statement about group participation. "Work is shared among the musicians involved in the recordings,"

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Élan vital
Tiri Carreras



Agua Volume 2
Sylvain Guérineau/Tiri Carreras



Lichens
zBlug



Live @ La Guillotine
Jean Luc Petit/Tiri Carreras



O'pLoft
bBlunk

'TIS THE SEASON TO BE JAZZY

BY TESSA SOUTER

New Christmas albums are churned out every year. The challenge is to do something different: either write new songs, like **Jamie Cullum** on *The Pianoman at Christmas* (Island), or find fresh ways to do those old chestnuts. A fabulous example of the latter is LA-based drummer Christian Euman's gorgeous new album *Euman Christmas* (Chill Tone), featuring the silken voice of vocalist **Michael Mayo**. The recording features familiar songs—including "Jingle Bells", "I Saw Three Ships" and "Winter Wonderland"—but with arrangements so fresh you could easily play them year-round. For nostalgia lovers, **Vanessa Racci's** *Comfort & Joy* (VRE) will hit the spot. Produced by GRAMMY-winning vocalist **Nicole Zuraitis** (who appears at the Staten Island Jazz Festival Dec. 19) and featuring guest trumpeter and vocalist **Benny Benack III**, it brings Racci's straight-ahead jazz sensibility to Christmas classics. Catch the album release live at Birdland (Dec. 6). Kindred Spirits presents the annual NYC performance of *Bending Towards the Light: A Jazz Nativity* at St. Paul and St. Andrew's Church (Dec. 21). Written by vocalist-composer **Anne Phillips**, it has had a changing cast of players since 1985. This year's production features **The Royal Bopsters**, Ella Fitzgerald Competition winner **Lucy Wijnands** and singer-saxophonist **Camille Thurman**. *Winter Songs, Vol. 3* (Madre Vaca), **April Varner**'s new album, mixes winter- and Christmas-themed songs, from Joni Mitchell's "River" to "Silent Night". Catch the release celebration at Mezzrow (Dec. 13) and appearances at Jersey Jazz Live! at the Madison Community Arts Center (Dec. 6) and The Church at Sag Harbor (Dec. 19).

Samara Joy has just released *Live at the Blue Note, LA* (Verve)—surprisingly, her first live recording. Even as a six-time GRAMMY winner, she's still doing spontaneous pop-up gigs at intimate clubs, including The Jazz Gallery, Jazzcultural and Ornithology. She's also helping nurture NYC's grassroots jazz scene, curating jazz and vocal jam sessions at the Corner Lounge Bistro in Harlem. Resonance recently put out *The Sound in San Francisco: Live at Keystone Korner* (recorded in 1976), by the Stan Getz Quartet, with special guest **João Gilberto,** as a deluxe three-LP set. Julian Lee will celebrate the Antônio Carlos Jobim and Getz centennial in "Bossa Swings," featuring vocalist Mar Vilaseca at Dizzy's Club (Dec. 1-2). A two-night mini-festival at Roulette will feature the NY premiere of composer and NEA Jazz Master Anthony Braxton's *Thunder Music* (Dec. 11). Among the performers blending their voices with pre-recorded sounds of thunder and nature are vocalists **Nick Hallett, Kyoko Kitamura, Raquel Klein, Adam Matlock, Anne Rhodes** and **Fay Victor,** the latter who also leads her ensemble in *Black Poems* at the Brooklyn Public Library (Dec. 13). Drawing on eight poems by Black poets, Victor's work takes the form of a suite built around a tapestry-based score. She will be joined by poet and vocalist **LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs** and bassist-vocalist **Devon Gates**.

QUICK PICKS...**Catherine Russell** will sing in the New Year at Smoke (Dec. 31). **Hilary Gardner** and the Lonesome Pines perform cowboy songs in their holiday show at Birdland Theater (Dec. 20). Hot jazz vocalist and trumpeter **Bria Skonberg** is at the Birdland Theater (Dec. 11-13). The Jazz Forum Annual Fundraiser this year features **Cécile McLorin Salvant** (Dec. 4-6), who also appears this month at The Pocket (Dec. 10-13). **Theo Bleckmann** gives a holiday concert at The Jazz Gallery (Dec. 23). **Jane Monheit**'s Christmas show will be at The Pocket (Dec. 19-20). Five Spot Jazz features several vocalists, including **Marcus Goldhaber** (Dec. 16), **Judy Niemack** (Dec. 19), **Sarah Pillow** (Dec. 20) and **Vicki Burns** (Dec. 4), the latter celebrating her new single release "Violets for Your Furs" and adding songs from last year's Christmas album. For the first holiday album in the label's women-centric Flying High series, musical director **Champian Fulton** calls in vocalists **Nicole Zuraitis, Carmen Bradford**, **Emily Braden** and **Bria Skonberg** for *Flying High for the Holidays* (Songbook Ink). At the Zinc Bar, **Johnny O'Neal** (Dec. 22) and **Vanisha Gould** (Dec. 30) will be performing. Electronicist Ikue Mori's trio features **Sara Serpa** at The Stone at The New School (Dec. 11). British jazz superstar **Emma Smith** appears at Birdland with her quartet (Dec. 8-12) and with the Birdland Big Band (Dec. 29-31). **Stacey Kent** will also be at Birdland (Dec. 15-17). **esperanza spalding** will be at Carnegie Hall (Dec. 18) and **Stella Cole** celebrates "Merry Christmas, Darling" at The Town Hall (Dec. 21).

**Tessa Souter's* Beyond the Blue *has just been reissued as a limited-edition, 180g double LP in the Venus Masterpiece Collection*

(HUDSON CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

ensemble showcased outstanding solo performances, fierce improvisational grit and flawless interplay—holding the audience so spellbound that not a single phone screen lit up the hall.

The music ran late into the night at Spark of Hudson, the community learning hub and social enterprise space that served as the main sponsor for "Sounds Around Town." Bassist **Tristan Jarvis** performed an evocative upstairs set, while **DJ Rebecca Borrer** (of Rager Solutions) kept the dance floor packed for the official festival opening day afterparty. The series' following day lineup opened at 9:15 am (!) with a swinging piano trio set by **Nico Bald** at the farmers' market, launching a full day of performances for the next twelve hours by promising emerging artists playing across town.

In the early afternoon, festival host Keanna Faircloth (now in her fourth year at the helm) moderated a panel, featuring South African vocalist **Vuyo Sotashe** and North Carolina–born pianist-composer **Chris Pattishall**. Their intimate discussion on collaboration and the meaning of home sparked curiosity about their premiere of a joint piece commissioned specifically to be performed at the festival. While Pattishall and Sotashe frequently tour as a duo, they expanded into a quartet for the night's mainstage concert, joined by bassist Zwelakhe-Duma Bell le Pere (of South African and Jamaican heritage) and Trinidadian drummer Ariel Shane Vincent-Brown. The ensemble held the room spellbound. Sotashe's magnetic stage presence and luminous vocal range shone whether singing in English or across several South African languages, navigating expansive instrumental stretches, and honoring classics made famous by Miriam Makeba, Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln. The centerpiece was their festival-commissioned homage to the creative power of mothers, which incorporated poignant fragments of the Sesotho spiritual "Moya Wa Bana" ("The Breath of Children").

The festival shifted to the Park Theater, featuring master percussionist-vocalist **Mino Cinélu**'s Mino 4 Miles project. Born in Paris to a French mother and a Martinican father, Cinelu was recruited by Miles Davis at age 24 during an Italian tour with Weather Report—a stint that yielded Davis' *We Want Miles*. His HJF set was a mesmerizing homage. A virtuosic colorist, Cinélu coaxed rhythms from surprising objects and even the audience's tables. Backed by saxophonist Jay Collins, projection visuals and an expressionist dance interlude, the performance exuded surreal energy. Music historian Ashley Kahn offered insightful commentary on Davis' career, capping a night rich in spontaneous, small-stage communion.

On closing day, São Paulo–born guitarist **Vinícius Gomes** brought Brazilian traditions into conversation with modern jazz during a jazz brunch at Pocketbook Hudson. Meanwhile, in the lush setting of the Secret Garden—a local plant nursery—the duo of **Adriana Tampasis** (flute, vocals) and **Omer Shemesh** (keyboards, oud) treated listeners to inventive, experimental explorations featuring wordless vocalizing and adventurous scatting. The Family Concert at The Half Moon's spacious garden drew a large crowd. An enthusiastic audience of children responded with delight to **Pamela Badila**'s captivating storytelling, **Ntangou Badila**'s live painting sessions and **Ngonda Badila**'s (aka Lady Moon) uplifting children's songs, which drew from her Congolese heritage.

Returning to Hudson Hall, vocalist **Shenel Johns** delivered a high-energy set alongside Jon Thomas (piano), Jonathon S. Muir-Cotton (bass) and Jonathan Barber (drums). Infusing her soaring, wide-ranging vocals with gospel warmth and Jamaican reggae heritage, Johns navigated originals, standards and homages to Odetta, Art Blakey and Abbey Lincoln—even improvising an interactive song built on real-time crowd contributions. The last event of the night took place at Isaan Thai Star, where pianist **Armen Donelian** (who started the summer Hudson Jazz Workshop in 2007, which became the Hudson Jazz Festival in 2018) struggled to be heard in the unfortunately very noisy restaurant.

Just two hours north of Manhattan via Amtrak, the Hudson Jazz Festival, surrounded by peak autumn foliage, walkable historic streets and world-class performances, offers an intimate, highly personal alternative to large-scale urban festivals. Mark your calendars for Oct. 1–3, 2027.

For more info visit hudsonhall.org/event/hudson-jazz-festival

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(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

studied timpani with Saul Goodman, as well as taking lessons with Karl Glassman of the NBC Symphony Orchestra and Billy Gladstone, who was playing at Radio City Music Hall. Her seriousness in pursuing a career was, Carrington notes, out of the box: "Women were not socialized to hit things, nor be aggressive. (But) she brilliantly pursued her love for drumming with an elegance and gracefulness that made it almost seem 'lady-like.' Thank goodness she had supportive parents and was rebellious to social norms."

Smith quickly joined Phil Spitalny's Hour of Charm Orchestra (remaining until the unit disbanded in 1954). During 1944, Smith, featured as "Viola and Her Seventeen Drums," played five shows a day at Manhattan's Paramount Theatre with Spitalny. She was frequently reviewed in the papers, one of them reporting that she "stopped the show" with her original "Drum Concerto". One high point in her career was playing at President Harry Truman's 1949 inauguration in the National Guard Armory in Washington, D.C., alongside the bands of Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, among others.

In the '50s, Smith led her own Viola and Her Seventeen Drums unit, and played in Léon Barzin's National Orchestral Association as well. She was breaking gender barriers also, by appearing as an endorser for WFL Drums and Zildjian cymbals. From 1966-69, Smith drummed for the Kit Kat Band in Broadway's *Cabaret*, and later she continued to drum selectively, mostly in studio work and with her own small ensembles. At age 100, in 2012, Smith moved to Costa Mesa, CA, where she played in Forever Young, billed as "America's Oldest Act of Professional Entertainers."

"Her longevity was truly inspiring," Carrington says, "making the point that you can do what you love until the wheels fall off!" The icon herself concluded in a late-career interview for the Women of Rock Oral History Project, "It was all fun. Drumming is fun."

For more info visit pas.org/viola-smith-2

(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

he notes. "For my solo albums, or the duos with Petit or Guérineau, I did everything myself. For the *T(h)ree* trio recording, Fred Marty handled the recording, mixing and mastering. As for the visuals, it depends on the album. Sometimes I take care of everything, and sometimes Dominique does. For record sales, everyone handles their own batch of CDs and Bandcamp purchases."

Marty, who lives in Noisy-le-Sec near Paris, explains that he took on the role of producer for *T(h)ree*'s since he had performed similar tasks over the years. And as someone who has recorded for many labels, he reports the IDR sessions "are relaxed and completely supportive." Despite Carreras' title as artistic director, "Tiri is a director who isn't controlling." While Marty has so far only recorded one album for IDR, a duo session with the bassist and drummer Carreras is being planned for the near future.

As for the mechanics of session financing, Carreras explains: "Costs are split among the musicians. We don't receive any grants. We sell very few albums, not enough to cover the expenses incurred and, above all, the time invested." That means the finished discs are also shared "so that everyone can sell or give them away as they wish." Future releases will include a second volume of *T(h)ree*, another session with LIANE (a large Rennes, Brittany-based improv ensemble), plus separate duos featuring the drummer with guitarists Marion Campos or Olivier Aude.

While IDR's profit-and-loss philosophy will scarcely make larger labels shake in their balance sheets, it's a large part of the *raison d'être* of the French imprint. "IDR is not a commercially profitable business," Carreras confirms. "(But) all the musicians involved are passionate and share common values—in particular, the desire to produce free and authentic music without compromise. I'm very lucky to be able to share this passion with them."

Considering the name, would Carreras be open to recording other drummers beside himself? "I'd love to," he affirms. "If any improvisational drummers have projects that can't find a label, they're always welcome to reach out to me. I'd be thrilled to discover new talent and bring them on board with IDR." Still, he cautions: "The aesthetic has to align with the label's; the music must be improvised at least in part, and very personal, with a genuine focus on sonic exploration."

For more info visit tiricarreras.bandcamp.com

