



ETHAN IVERSON

DYNAMO

BY DAN OUELLETTE
PHOTOS BY ROBERT LEWIS

AT THE CROSSROADS

Midway into his career, pianist Ethan Iverson has experienced a universe of multifaceted artistry and in many collegial opinions has become a restless visionary.

Iverson continues to evolve as a deep, enlightened, good-humored artist who has excelled in a variety of musical settings—from composing formal classical scores, to being the musical composer/arranger for choreographer Mark Morris, to breaking jazz rules in The Bad Plus (the trio he co-founded in 2000 and departed from in 2017). Iverson also teaches at New England Conservatory, where he's been on faculty since 2016. And he has gained considerable esteem as a prose writer, thanks to his contributions to *The New Yorker* and his widely read blog, *Do the Math*.

Iverson stands as a passionate dynamo at the crossroads of jazz and classical music. "To move the music forward, you have to think about the greatest jazz and the greatest classical music," he said in his Brooklyn apartment, seated in front of a large painting by his father depicting the house in which he grew up, during formative years spent near the border of Minnesota and Wisconsin. "In back-to-back weekends recently,

I got to play duos with Ron Carter, whose tradition I feel myself in, and Miranda Cuckson, one of the best new music violinists in New York, who is also part of my tradition. I was watering my garden in an unbelievable way with these two heavyweights."

Iverson's new album is *Temporary Kings* (ECM), a remarkable duo project with tenor saxophonist Mark Turner. On the recording, the pair dives into a conversational, chamber-jazz setting with mysteries, musings and motif-bending originals (six by Iverson, two by Turner). They give a nod to the Lennie Tristano-Warne Marsh school of cool with a playful flight through Marsh's "Dixie's Dilemma" (which is based on the changes to Jerome Kern's "All The Things You Are"). The two artists have a long history of collaboration. Most notably, they served as the solo powerhouses in drummer Billy Hart's quartet with bassist Ben Street starting in 2005, later appearing on Hart's ECM albums *All Our Reasons* (2012) and *One Is The Other* (2014).





Iverson (left) and Mark Turner are members of Billy Hart's band in addition to collaborating on *Temporary Kings*.

In a recent phone conversation, Turner said that the duo album is rooted in the Hart connection. "One thing was clear to Ethan and me in wanting to play with Billy was an interest in older music, traditional music, folklore, and how that informs the music of the present," he said. "Billy exemplifies that—the modern and the present. He embodies what we want to be. Ethan brought up the idea to do this album. There wasn't any back-and-forth. It's just a continuation of our relationship within Billy's band."

Temporary Kings was recorded last year at the RSI studio in Lugano, Switzerland. "It's fun to play free with Mark, because he has perfect pitch; he can hear what I'm doing," Iverson said. "I don't have perfect pitch. But his mind is so acute, he can always do things that are a little less obvious, whereas I can be too obvious, because I'm seeking clarity." He paused and added, "I'm willing to sacrifice jazz hipness for clarity."

On the asymmetrical title track—named after the 1973 novel in Anthony Powell's 12-volume epic, *A Dance To The Music Of Time*—Turner sings while Iverson swoops to create flow and sonic power. Iverson said that the book metaphorically nods to the old days when there were kings who served for a brief period and then, at the end of their reigns, were executed. "It's like our time recording in Lugano," he said. "We record in this fancy studio with [ECM's] Manfred Eicher, and then we come back to Brooklyn. Mark's taking his kids to school, and I'm playing for a dance class. So, we were temporary kings."

Key to the success of the recording sessions was the artists' mutual admiration. "I have tremendous respect for Mark in every dimension," Iverson explained. "I listen to Mark, not just musically, but what he says to me as a person. It's like when he told me that it takes us longer to be great now because there is so much more to learn. Mark is a very gentle Buddhist and family man. He plays the best tenor saxophone of his gener-

ation, and he's not doing it in an aggressive way. He doesn't care about commercial success and doesn't put a package together to make himself famous. It's really an honor to play with someone who has that level of purity."

"Ethan is iconic," Turner said. "There's no one like him. He's a true individual. The main thing he has is his touch, and I like his comping, especially with his note choices and voicings."

Iverson took piano lessons up to the 7th grade, but decided to quit when he became concerned that he wouldn't ultimately get to his passion: jazz by the likes of Count Basie and Thelonious Monk. "I could read music very well," he said, then laughed. "In fact, I'm a famous sight-reader today. But I got this message that a teacher wasn't going to help me with jazz. In fact, maybe it could harm me. It's like the Mary Lou Williams jazz tree, where she says that classical studies don't help. There are many verdant branches on the tree, but the classical branch, with its études and books, is a dead branch. Paul Bley said that if you go too far down the classical path, you won't figure out how to play jazz. The irony is that no one knew more about European classical music than he did, and I have become pretty expert at it, too."

Iverson enrolled at New York University in 1991 to study jazz, but he only lasted two years. Among his instructors was Jim McNeely. "The most important part of [McNeely's] classes was when he told stories about playing with Sonny Stitt and Thad Jones and others," Iverson said. "I know he showed me some stuff on the piano, but I think the essence of jazz is in those stories. That's the way I think jazz works as a curriculum."

Iverson went on to take private lessons with Fred Hersch, who sent him to classical teacher Sophia Rosoff and her colleague Robert Helps (1928–2001). Today, he studies with John Bloomfield.

Given Iverson's history in academia, it's

somewhat ironic that he currently has a teaching position at NEC. Before he was offered the job, the school had invited Iverson to give a lecture on stride piano, during which he interspersed his own playing with recordings by artists like Mary Lou Williams, James P. Johnson and Art Tatum.

"I talked about the base of the music, stuff that was very old," Iverson recalled. "There's a way of talking about jazz piano where you start with Bill Evans and everything that happened after that. But when I was in my late teens and early 20s, what set me apart from my peers was my interest in early jazz. To some people, this is just corny music and why do that? But people like Earl Hines had such technical competence with the sheer number of notes he was shoveling around on the instrument that was actually greater than most modern pianists. Plus, they could play for dances. How many modern jazz pianists can sit and play for a dance?"

Iverson meets seven times with seven students each semester. "It's a real joy to see people improve when they do stuff I tell them to," he said. "That's a unique pleasure I never had before. I teach them that jazz is a blend of two traditions: European harmony and African rhythm. There are other factors, but that's the basic mix. The European harmony comes naturally to piano players, but the African side is harder to talk about."

When Iverson was scrounging gigs in New York in the '90s, he became associated with Mark Morris, who brought him aboard as the musical director for his dance troupe. Morris is humorously frank in talking about his first experiences with Iverson when he was in his twenties: "Ethan was clueless and completely out of his realm. He played well, but was green. He showed up with enthusiasm, but he wasn't very sophisticated. ... But he was very open-minded." Iverson spent five years with Morris, frequently on the road. He learned a phenomenal amount about classical music, but many of his tasks were functional, not creative.

"It was stuff that needed to happen," the pianist said. "Mark is the perfect example of using a mixture of high and low art. It hits you in your gut, as well as your brain."

As he was closing in on 30, Iverson realized he had to devote himself to playing jazz again. "I told Mark, I love you, but I've got to go," he said. "As if I had arranged it, within a month The Bad Plus hit, played the Village Vanguard and got a record deal with Columbia. Without that mix of high and low art I learned from Mark, I don't think I could have played The Bad Plus music."

After Iverson left Morris' employ, the two continued their friendship, with the choreographer marveling at shows he saw Iverson perform in various settings, including a tango band and a solo piece, "Easy Win," for John Heginbotham's Dance Heginbotham troupe. Morris also became a big Bad Plus fan and collaborated with the musicians on dance projects, including "Spring,

Spring, Spring,” which involved the trio interpreting Stravinsky’s *The Rite Of Spring*.

Now, Iverson has returned to Morris collaboration mode, this time with the choreographer and pianist creating a 50th anniversary celebration of The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* called *Pepperland*. Iverson wrote the score, which includes his arrangements of six Beatles songs, as well as six originals inspired by Lennon and McCartney’s work. “It’s blowing everyone’s mind,” Iverson said, “especially the Thelma Houston version of ‘A Day In The Life.’”

Morris is pleased: “The music is complicated, subtle and jarring, rhythmically and sonically. Ethan is fascinating and smart, and a good friend.”

Iverson will be busy this fall, as a duo tour with Turner will take the musicians to Chicago (Sept. 15), New York (Sept. 18), Los Angeles (Oct. 12) and Seattle’s Earshot Jazz Festival (Oct. 15). *Pepperland*—which has its own music ensemble—will be staged at performing arts centers for the foreseeable future. “We’re booked for the next five years, which I like,” Iverson said. “It’s an anchor, so that I can explore more.”

Pepperland also gives him a steady source of revenue. After he cut ties with The Bad Plus, Iverson was wondering what would come next. But post-trio, he has been quite active. “Now, I have so much more air around my head to make the music I want to make,” he said. “It’s been freeing and exciting, because there are limitless possibilities.”

One product of that freedom is his three-part classical composition *Concerto To Scale*, which he debuted this spring with the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie Hall’s Zankel Hall. “For my first symphonic work, I didn’t want it to be too serious,” he said. “A lot of these cross-over-type pieces collapse under the weight of trying to do too much. And some jazz composers may ask the orchestra to swing. I know better.”

When Iverson presented the slightly humorous piece, one of the few jazz elements was having the bass drummer double his left hand for the syncopation. The orchestra played some Mozart-like material and then Iverson played a stretch of ragtime with the orchestra doing what he said is “a freak improv from the Charles Ives tradition.”

“I like being a little goofy,” Iverson said. “I think The Bad Plus got more serious through the years. We started out punkishly goofy, but as we matured, Reid [Anderson] and Dave [King] wanted to dial that back. But you listen to music by Sonny Rollins, Paul Bley, Ornette Coleman, and they’re all telling jokes in their music.”

On the horizon, Iverson will be curating two projects. For three days in November at the EFG London Jazz Festival, he’ll oversee a history of British jazz; an overview of modern improvising artists, such as Kenny Wheeler, John Surman, John Taylor and Django Bates; then an avant-garde conduction, based on the English Baroque

music of Henry Purcell. At the end of the year at Umbria Jazz’s Orvieto festival, Iverson will debut his 75-minute suite, based on Bud Powell’s music, with new compositions for jazz orchestra.

Hart marvels at the breadth of Iverson’s work. “It’s Ethan’s positive vision that he brings to everything,” he said. “He has a way to make these visions materialize. He has an instinct that is extremely unique. Even in my band, he puts things into motion. He’s an arranger of the highest order, and an innovator who is on a quest.”

Iverson appreciates the accolades, yet pushes forward to find his voice. “There are so many

things I’ve just scratched the surface on that I’m ready to get into,” he said. “One of my idols is Paul Motian [1931–2011]. His music didn’t get truly personal till he was in his late forties. No one thinks about the early records of Paul’s career, but he kept figuring out the blending of European and African traditions to make great records later in his life. That inspires me. I’m 45 and have been a part of a very successful band that played on the biggest stages of jazz. But as for what’s next, I feel like I’ve accumulated a lot of information to sift through to use to present the real Ethan Iverson.”

DB

YELENA ECKEMOFF BETTER THAN GOLD AND SILVER

“I have been smitten and humbled by the profundity of the psalms, and not only as the sacred texts, but as the marvelous treasure of the poetic art. I found out for myself that there is a lot to be learned from these verses even in our modern world about the eternal questions of life and death—what is the meaning of life, what makes people happy, what we leave behind after we die, and where to find strength to go about the daily labors and survive in the face of adversity.” *Yelena Eckemoff*

Yelena Eckemoff (piano & comp)
Tomas Cruz, Kim Mayo (vocals)
Ralph Alessi (trumpet)
Ben Monder (el guitar)
Christian Howes (violin)
Drew Gress (d bass)
Joey Baron (drums)

Available on September 21, 2018
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“In the settings Eckemoff created here for the psalms, the vocals represent the word-for-word verses from the King James Bible. As she described in her liner notes, Yelena just wrote down the music she “heard behind the words.” The album has a beautiful, open, natural sound. The songs flow into each other with a combination of delicacy and strength, adding up to a work that’s greater than the sum of its parts. Floating on Eckemoff’s glistening lyricism at the piano, which draws from her classical training as well as jazz, blues, gospel, and pop, the music is remarkably open and lit from within.”

Lloyd Sachs

World Première of the Biblical Psalms
set to original music by Yelena Eckemoff
in album release concert on October 5, 2018, 7 PM
at Saint Peter’s Church, 619 Lexington Avenue at 54th Street,
New York, NY 10022, tel. 212 935 2200. Free admission.



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