

# PHONOGRAM UNIT

BY STUART BROOMER

Over the past two decades, Portuguese free jazz has moved at a rapid pace, developing a strong presence at home and spreading to other parts of Europe. It is evident in the expanding international collaborations and presence of more and more Portuguese musicians like Gonçalo Almeida, Rodrigo Amado, Susana Santos Silva and the collective Red Trio. Two of Europe's most active record labels, each launched in 2001, reside in Lisbon: Pedro Costa's Clean Feed on the jazz front and Ernesto Rodrigues' Creative Sources emphasizing free improvisation. Further indication of the scene's vitality is Phonogram Unit, a musicians' imprint, which, in its first two years, has released just ten CDs, but with an improbable number of masterpieces among them.

Among the label's founders are two members of Red Trio, pianist Rodrigo Pinheiro and bassist Hernâni Faustino, musicians whose credentials include collaborative recordings with Lotte Anker, John Butcher and Nate Wooley. Pinheiro describes the label's beginnings: "Phonogram Unit was founded as a collective by Jorge Nuno, José Lencastre, Hernâni Faustino, Vasco Furtado and me. Many years ago, Hernâni, Jorge and I talked about the idea of creating a new record label, but the project was left in standby mode for many years. Two years ago, the idea finally came to life with this new collective. All members are located in Lisbon, except Vasco Furtado, who is based in Cologne, Germany. All of us share the same musical

interests in free improvisation, free jazz and experimental music."

The defining element in the label's first ten releases may simply be quality, but there are other characteristics that emerge with a certain immersion. Vasco Furtado's recent *Aforismos*, the drummer's trio with German musicians Salome Amend (vibraphone) and Luise Volkmann (alto saxophone), represents a very different milieu from the other releases. Yet the style, a minimalism that somehow feels simultaneously atmospheric, abstract and intimate, has a strange kinship of mood with *Habitation* by the No Nation Trio, from the label's first batch, a trio of guitarist Jorge Nuno, Faustino and drummer João Valinho, which feels strangely like folk music played by a forest itself, as if the wood of acoustic guitar, bass and drums were still connected to the originating trees. Each is musical communication so intimate that it moves to another level, the molecular.

Nuno and Valinho have created both the subtlest and the noisiest recordings the label has released thus far. At the opposite extreme from *Habitation* is 290421 with the trio completed by Luis Guerreiro on trumpet and electronics. The wall of noise leavens for moments of brutalist melody to emerge and there is enough coherent shaping to share in the label's serious musicality. The title, which names the CD's single 44-minute track, could be a contemporary date code, a random number or a speculative year far in the future, every reading resisting further identification.

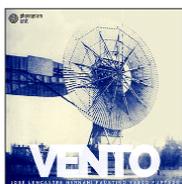
Faustino, who must have the distinction of being Portugal's busiest improvising musician, appearing regularly with every other musician of distinction in the field, comes to the foreground on *Twelve Bass Tunes*.

He brings a special depth to the program, often focusing on profound reflections in his instrument's resonant lower register, whether playing pizzicato or bowing dense and shifting multiple tones.

That lyricism is close to a certain neo-classical impulse apparent in some of the recordings, most notably those with the presence of Pedro Carneiro, a classical conductor and master percussionist who entered the improvisers realm about a decade ago in the company of violinist Carlos Zingaro, father figure to Lisbon free music. It is evident in Carneiro's duo recording with Pinheiro, *Kinetic Etudes*, in which the levels of precision and complexity result in improvisations that could only have sprung from the deliberations and intensive rehearsal of a composer and two virtuosos, respectively. Its spontaneity, however, gives it further dimension, as do the resonant bass register and the quarter-tone extension of Carneiro's vast marimba. *Thoughts Are Things* by Lencastre's Nau Quartet + Pedro Carneiro places the marimba master in another context, a quintet that creates its own genre in which the leader's post Albert Ayler-lyricism on tenor saxophone combines with the group's artfully abstract support.

Three of the label's founders—Lencastre, concentrating on alto saxophone, Faustino, playing acoustic or electric bass and Furtado—have produced two trio recordings, the inaugural *Vento* and the recent *Forces in Motion*. Both are characterized by spare interactivity and light, fleet, speech-like familiarity. Lencastre also leads another triumph of the subtly beautiful *Common Ground* by a quintet with Zingaro, bassist Gonçalo Almeida, pianist Clara Lai and drummer João Sousa.

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*Vento*  
Lencastre/Faustino/Furtado



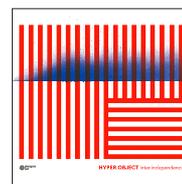
*Twelve Bass Tunes*  
Hernâni Faustino



*Thoughts Are Things*  
José Lencastre, Nau Quartet + Pedro Carneiro



*Kinetic Etudes*  
Rodrigo Pinheiro/Pedro Carneiro



*Inter-Independence*  
Hyper.Object

## VOXNEWS

# MAJOR SPINS

BY SUZANNE LORGE

This month **Samara Joy** makes her Verve Records debut with *Linger Awhile*, joining the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Shirley Horn and Abbey Lincoln on the label's distinguished roster of singers. Verve represents other great jazz vocalists like Diana Krall, Harry Connick Jr., Seth MacFarlane and Jon Batiste but as a singer, Joy keeps to tradition more than these popular Verve voices do, favoring fluid scats and subtle phrasings that belie her 22 years. Notably, Joy only started singing jazz six years ago. Then, three years in, she took first place at the Sarah Vaughan Vocal Competition while still a vocal jazz student at SUNY Purchase. One of the prizes for that year's win was a slot at the prestigious Newport Jazz Festival in 2020, the year the pandemic leveled concerts everywhere. Rescheduled for this year's Festival, Joy displayed a newfound sophistication as she crossed that auspicious career benchmark. She now boasts an impressively wide listener base that reaches from TikTok to *The Morning Show* to global stages. The new album, out as of Sep. 16th, follows quickly after her eponymous debut last year on Whirlwind. As with that album, Joy digs into the Songbook on *Linger Awhile*,

though with a more discerning eye for the unfamiliar, such as Ronnell Bright's "Sweet Pumpkin" and Frank Loesser's "Can't Get Out Of This Mood". The album's pre-release promo includes music videos for these two titles, quick intros to Joy's irresistible way with a tune. But to hear her live, visit Blue Note (Sep. 12th or 26th), the New York dates for her international tour this fall.

The recently formed trio SONICA—singer/instrumentalists **Julia Adamy**, **Thana Alexa** and **Nicole Zuraitis**—offer uplift and encouragement on their eponymous debut. Fully engineered by Alexa, *Sonica* (Outside In Music) comprises seven tracks written or arranged either by individual members or in cooperation. The artists integrate intriguing sonic effects, rhythmic feels and several musical languages; the through-line is expert lead vocals and tight, tripartite choral sections. Note Alexa's gospel turns on Adamy's arrangement of "Love's In Need Of Love Today", Zuraitis' mournful lyrics on her original "Come A Long Way" and the impactful fusion of voiced beats, soaring harmonies, electronica and spoken word (from abolitionist Sojourner Truth's 1851 speech "Ain't I A Woman") on album showpiece "Doyenne". The associated video for the latter—three young dancers in improvised movement—drives home the message of female empowerment through positive collaboration. SONICA's "Doyenne" also appears on Warner Music's *SHIFT (Bad Hombre, Vol. II)*, drummer Antonio Sánchez' sequel to his Grammy-nominated

album *Bad Hombre* (CAM Jazz). Sánchez, who is married to Alexa, also sings on his new album in addition to playing drums, guitar, bass, mandolin and oud. The multi-faceted composer, with no shortage of talent at his disposal, also pulled several prominent co-creators into the project, among them Dave Matthews, Pat Metheny and Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross. But the compositional focus, according to Sánchez, is the equal weighting of vocals and drums. To facilitate this end he invited several other singer-songwriters from around the world to contribute, including **Meshell Ndegeocello**, **Lila Downs**, **Kimbra**, **Ana Tijoux**, **Becca Stevens**, **Silvana Estrada** and **MARO**. You can hear how he strikes this balance in the pre-launch video for the rock track "I Think We're Past That Now", with Reznor and Ross, a declaration of freedom from social oppression and a strong corollary to Sánchez' earlier work.

Beyond the studio: basking in the success of her Nonesuch debut, *Ghost Song*, earlier this year, **Cécile McLorin Salvant** will play Blue Note (Sep. 20th-25th). **Catherine Russell**, celebrating her April 2022 release on Dot Time Records, *Send For Me*, headlines Dizzy's Club (Sep. 29th-Oct. 2nd). And The Jazz Journalists Association will honor its 2022 award winners with an online interactive "JazzBash" (Sep. 11th); singers **Sheila Jordan**, **Kurt Elling** and the trio **Duchess** have all accepted the JJA's invite to appear at the virtual event. ❖

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sitting back and saying “what a shame”, I decided to put everything that I’d learned up to that moment to the test and go! Here we are five years later with a program that had six students when I began, to now having almost 60 students and a Masters program that is fully funded. I don’t say these things as if I’m the reason. But, I will say that when you listen to THE reason, you won’t go wrong. I’m truly thankful for that spirit, guiding me in my life through every triumph and every lesson.

Although the experience began shrouded in controversy, I’m thankful that I answered the call. Now we have brand-new facilities and strategic partnerships throughout the community of Baltimore. I feel that we have one of the greatest jazz faculties on the planet and 80% of them live right in the community. The program is, in essence, split into two sections. The first two years are largely foundational, focusing on the fundamentals of the music. The final two years, we focus on the individual vision of each student, affording them the opportunity to slowly go through the process of creating their own albums, which will help them discover who they are as an artist. I’d say that this distinguishes our program from most.

The Masters program is loosely based on the Herbie Hancock Institute’s design, focusing on a graduate ensemble. Each admitted grad student receives full tuition remission as well as a \$12,000-a-year stipend. The first full class of the program will begin their studies in the fall of 2023. It’s been a challenge during the pandemic, but with the help of some amazing colleagues, faculty and students with tenacity, we were able to achieve what many felt was a pointless task.

Now that I find myself in this position in higher academia, I’ve made it my life mission to effect change in policy and the true codification of American music in our institutions of higher learning. It’s time that this country embraces its culture vs. the continued propulsion of a culture that limits the narrative of the original intent of “E Pluribus Unum”. To that end, I’ll go wherever that mission takes me, as I believe that this is one of the ‘calls of the spirit’ on my life.

**TNYCJR:** Talk about your playing experience as a leader and a sideman and the pros and cons of each.

**SJ:** I wouldn’t say that there are pros or cons to the varying types of playing experiences. However, I will say that if you have a musical vision that requires you to step up in a leadership capacity, it’s more challenging to see that vision through if you’re exhausting your energies helping others to bring their vision to fruition. I’ve enjoyed my time as a sideman in a variety of settings. But, nothing will ever be as fulfilling as hearing an idea in your head and doing what is necessary to birth that idea into the world. Both types of artists are important and necessary.

**TNYCJR:** Elaborate on your time with Jazz at Lincoln Center.

**SJ:** Wow! An open-ended Jazz at Lincoln Center question. This may be the first time I’ve been asked to just elaborate. Let’s see, where do I begin? First off, Wynton Marsalis is my big brother. I never really thought that I was ‘working’ FOR him over at Jazz at Lincoln Center. It always felt like a big brother that was constantly checking out your homework to see if it looked right. I learned what it means to commit to vision.

I’ll say it again, Wynton is an amazing artist! However, I believe his true gift lies in his ability to work tirelessly for the vision. My time with the ensemble also made me realize that I needed to see my own vision through. So, I had to leave. I also realized

pretty quickly that playing lead trumpet is more than having the physical capability. It’s also a mentality that requires one to devote their energy to that discipline and that’s not where I wanted to expend my energies.

I enjoyed my time with the band. I love those cats. But, ultimately, I knew that I had work to do that required the same level of dedication that I saw my big brother Wynton exemplify. So, I had to take the leap. Playing in that band was a huge boost for me, however. I realized that there was no task too big or challenging on the trumpet. It further solidified the notion that I could face any challenge presented to me on the instrument. So, here I am with those lessons learned. I’m grateful for those six years and if big bro ever needs me in the band again...I’ll respectfully decline.

**TNYCJR:** What are your current band’s projects and are there any plans to record?

**SJ:** There are currently several projects in the works. The Baltimore Jazz Collective, loosely based on the SFJAZZ Collective concept, is poised to release its first album either this winter or spring. Also, I’ve been working with Brinae Ali on a project called Dizzy Spellz, which is an AfroFuturistic look into the music and life of Dizzy Gillespie. I’m truly excited about capturing that on video.

I’m also working on a few projects with my band, one of which requires me to live through certain things in order to birth the album in its most honest form. Some things simply can’t be rushed and that is this particular concept. More to come on that. Let’s just say that it’ll be the crown jewel of my catalogue as it’ll be the most personal reflection of my life to date.

**TNYCJR:** Talk about the National Youth Orchestra and the recent tour.

**SJ:** Working with National Youth Orchestra out of Carnegie Hall is one of the greatest joys of my career. This group of 16- to 19-year-olds is literally one of the best ensembles that I’ve ever been blessed to lead. For the past five years, we’ve selected some of the most talented and inspirational young musicians to go on tours throughout Asia, Europe and the U.S. Several hundred students apply and we work extensively to select 22 young musicians who are not only some of the best artists of their age group, but ambassadors for the music. Guest artists have included Dianne Reeves, Kurt Elling and Jazzmeia Horn. We managed to even record our first album over the pandemic entitled *We’re Still Here*.

The true magic of the ensemble is that these folks arrive at Purchase College mid-July as colleagues and leave the tour mid-August as family. We instill core American values—or what should be American values—of leadership, democracy, acceptance and teamwork by encouraging them to find common ground in their human experiences and bringing that to the bandstand. It’s truly magical to witness and I’m eternally grateful for the opportunity to help mentor these amazing young folks. ❖

For more information, visit [sean-jones.com](http://sean-jones.com). Jones is at Dizzy’s Club Sep. 23rd-25th. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Sean Jones–*Eternal Journey* (Mack Avenue, 2003)
- Sean Jones–*Roots* (Mack Avenue, 2006)
- Ralph Peterson Fo’ tet/Sextet–*The Duality Perspective* (Onyx Music, 2012)
- Sean Jones Quartet–*Im.pro.vise: Never Before Seen* (Mack Avenue, 2014)
- Sean Jones–*Live From Jazz at the Bistro* (Mack Avenue, 2015)
- SFJAZZ Collective–*Music of Miles Davis & Original Compositions* (Live SFJAZZ Center 2016) (SFJAZZ, 2016)

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Stańko died on Jul. 29th, 2018 in Warsaw from lung cancer exacerbated by pneumonia. He left his mark on many. Guitarist Jakob Bro, who performed with Stańko in his *Dark Eyes* quintet, stated “He had such a wild energy. He wanted to play every night and was constantly talking about the importance of playing concerts to develop as a musician and composer. I simply loved standing next to him on stage, he was such a warm, soulful and poetic player. He told a story with his horn every time he picked it up. There was never a need to show off or anything. He had something on his mind, something in his heart that he needed to express. It was truly beautiful to witness.”

A tribute to Stańko will take place this month at Roulette with appearances by trumpeters Ambrose Akinmusire and Wadada Leo Smith, among many others. Smith finds the concert especially important as a means of keeping Stańko’s voice alive: “It is the remembrance, that’s one of the human qualities. When people pass on you remember them and by remembering them they stay alive.” ❖

A tribute to Stańko is at Roulette Sep. 18th. See Calendar.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Komeda Quintet–*Astigmatic* (Polskie Nagrania Muza, 1965)
- Tomasz Stańko–*Balladyna* (ECM, 1975)
- Tomasz Stańko–*Music From Taj Mahal and Karla Caves* (Leo, 1980)
- Tomasz Stańko/Arild Andersen/Jon Christensen–*Bluish* (Power Bros, 1991)
- Tomasz Stańko Septet–*Litania: The Music of Krzysztof Komeda* (ECM, 1997)
- Tomasz Stańko New York Quartet–*December Avenue* (ECM, 2016)

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“Our main idea in creating a record label,” Pinheiro says, “was to have more control and to make it easier to release and promote our music. The feeling most of us were getting was that the process of releasing a CD on a record label was too slow and we felt that the promotion was not as good as we expected. So, by creating a new record label we were trying to overcome these issues and to have a more direct medium to release our music. We also wanted to have complete artistic freedom to release the music we want, with the graphic design we want, when we feel comfortable with it and to promote it the best we can.”

So far Phonogram Unit appears to be doing just that. One recent masterwork is the brilliantly counter-intuitive *Interdependence* by the Pinheiro-led quintet Hyper.Object with Faustino, Valinho, trumpeter João Almeida and electronic musician Carlos Santos. The pianist proposed that, “besides having complete freedom to improvise and to choose musical ideas, there should be an active focus for each one to develop their ideas individually and to not immediately react or engage in direct dialogue with the other musicians from the group.” The result? A collective improvisation distinguished by extraordinary levels of design and formal coherence.

Meanwhile Pinheiro describes the label’s expanding horizons: “Until now, the label has focused exclusively on releasing music from the founders. We started slowly, releasing a few records each year and slowly increasing it, so that we can adapt and optimize our internal processes as the demand grows. We’re now reaching a point where we’re starting to be more comfortable releasing records from people outside our collective. We’re always exploring and trying to get better.” ❖

For more information, visit [phonogramunit.bandcamp.com](http://phonogramunit.bandcamp.com)