

AMALGAM MUSIC

SENSE OF COMMUNITY
BY ERIC WENDELL

If ever there was a city truly dedicated to jazz as an artform, it would surely be Chicago. From the legendary musicians born there (Nat “King” Cole, Bud Freeman, Quincy Jones, Ramsey Lewis, Dinah Washington, Von Freeman, Lee Konitz, Herbie Hancock) to the musicians who made Chicago their home (King Oliver, Earl Hines, Eddie Condon, Fred Anderson, Ken Vandermark, Jason Stein), the Chicago scene has constantly produced new and exciting sounds in the jazz arena. And many of those sounds from the Windy City’s past decade can be found on the Chicago-based label Amalgam Music, founded by drummer Bill Harris.

Born in Pittsburgh, Harris began to play the drums around the age of seven. After graduating from high school, he made his way to Kent State University, where he studied math and computer science but continued to practice and study music on his own. He moved to Chicago around 2011 after his partner got a job there. “The first weekend I moved to Chicago, I stumbled upon Umbrella Music, which was an organization out here coordinating shows at different venues throughout the week. I saw their calendar, and the first weekend I went out to Elastic Arts Foundation and saw (drummer) Frank Rosaly and (saxophonist) Dave Rempis do a duo set and it completely blew my mind,” says Harris. He began to make his own way

in the Chicago scene by befriending musicians and cutting his teeth at various venues. “(Drummer) Mike Reed was running two series at Constellation; one was called the Sound of the City Workshop, which was a weekly free improvisational jam. Then Mike asked me to play on another series called Three on Three; he would ask three artists to put some new group together they’d never played with before and then they would have a concert.”

In a city that houses notable labels such as Delmark, Southport, International Anthem and Catalytic Sound, Amalgam came about in a different way. It was conceived by Harris in 2015 with the idea that it would be 100% artist-run, and 100% of the sales would go directly to the artist. “It was originally intended to be more of a collective. Part of the reason it came to fruition was I was having frustration with getting music released. What it felt like was there were a particular group of people doing this kind of music, and it seemed like if you weren’t into this upper echelon of things then no one would ever give you any consideration for anything. Amalgam came out of that need to have a platform for like-minded artists and musicians to put our music out and present it.”

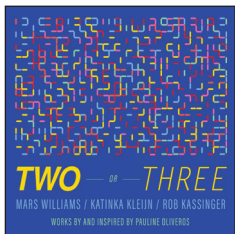
Amalgam’s first release was *Amsterdam/Chicago Duo* (2015), a duo record featuring Amsterdam’s Oscar Jan Hoogland (electric clavichord) and Chicago’s Matt Piet (electric piano). That same year also saw Harris’ first label appearance with his band Four Letter Words, consisting of Harris (drums), Piet (piano) and Jake Wark (tenor), on *Blow*, an album that garnered glowing reviews. And since its inception, Amalgam has released dozens more albums highlighting Chicago’s

robust music scene, including luminaries such as (from Harris’ first Chicago encounter) saxophonist Rempis, as well as drummer Tim Daisy, bassist Steve Kaiser, saxophonist Mars Williams and many others.

When it comes to selecting releases for the label, Harris balances promoting albums by colleagues versus the work of people he was previously unfamiliar with. “There are a number of releases from people I’ve never even met before, if I really like it, and I try to think of that in a very objective way.” Creating and fostering a sense of collaboration is particularly important to Amalgam’s overall mission. A perfect example is the label’s latest release *Dura*, with Harris alongside pianist Jim Baker and bassist Brandon Lopez. Lopez recalls, “it worked organically. It’s three like-minded musicians that get together that make something work, which is kind of the ideal for me.”

When it comes to the future of the label, Harris has sights on things other than improvised music. “I don’t want it to just be improvised jazz music. My interests are in punk and DIY and noise and all sorts of things. I don’t want it to be too focused on just one thing, but I also don’t want it to be all over the place.” In terms of the next five to ten years, he hopes to continue to foster a strong sense of community: “What I’d like to see is being able to hand the keys over to other people in the community that I trust and know as friends and also as artists; that by handing the keys over to them, they’re going to do something that’s good for the label. What I’d like to see them do is turn this into a community tool—for everyone in Chicago.”

For more info visit amalgamusic.org



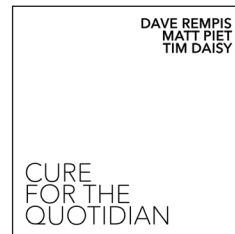
Two or Three
Mars Williams/Katinka Kleijn/Rob Kassinger



Dura
Jim Baker/Brandon Lopez/Bill Harris



Plays Clinkers
The Flake



Cure The Quotidian
Dave Rempis/Matt Piet/Tim Daisy



Amsterdam/Chicago Duo
Oscar Jan Hoogland/Matt Piet

VOXNEWS

DEFIANCE

BY SUZANNE LORGE

Last year, vocalist **Veronica Swift** did a radio interview with Eric Jackson for WGBH in Boston, a few months before the legendary broadcast journalist passed away. During their chat, the discussion turned to the topic of the singer’s radical eclecticism.

“My music-making is not confined. I don’t confine myself to stylistic things,” she explained. “Instead, if I’m writing or singing, I let the song dictate what happens stylistically.” The example she gives is “Don’t Rain on My Parade” (from *Funny Girl*). To Swift, this is a punk rock tune, all middle fingers in the air; when she sings it with a jackhammer drum line and distorted vocals, the sound serves the tune’s story. And, Swift asserts, she’s a storyteller first, before she’s a musician. The term she uses to describe her approach to music is “trans-genre,” meaning across or beyond genre. Or, simply, defying classification.

Swift’s upcoming third album, *TransGenre* (Mack Avenue), exemplifies her ideology. The album opens with Swift scatting masterfully atop a swinging high hat, before segueing into the head of “I Am What I Am” (from the Broadway musical *La Cage aux Folles*). The major gear shift comes midway through, during the solo breaks, when she cavorts with piano in a baroque

fugue for a bit before the swing returns. (To hear for yourself, look for the teaser track of “I Am What I Am”, available this month as a single.) The whole album is full of stylistic U-turns like this. Nine Inch Nails’ “Closer” is framed as a soul burner and moves in and out of bebop riffs. Ellington’s “Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me” is a big band chart featuring bluesy electric guitar and gravelly, retro vocals. There’s a French chanson treatment of Charles Gounod’s aria for lyric soprano, “Je Veux Vivre” from the opera *Roméo et Juliette*, which offers a musette vocalese section. A rendition of Queen’s debut single, “Keep Yourself Alive”, culminates as a Scott Joplin-esque rock-blues anthem. And, of course, there’s the aforementioned punk version of the Barbra Streisand hit.

Two Swift originals also appear on the set list: “Severed Heads”, a lilting, cheery duet with a comic dark undertone (longtime friend Austin Patterson assists) and “In the Moonlight”, a simple ballad atop Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”, which hits a feverish note before settling down again. Needless to say, Swift brings top-notch musicianship to each of these tunes, regardless of where they land on the trans-genre spectrum. She can do it all, it seems, so why would she not?

Like Swift, Aut Records in Germany is a proponent of genre defiance, though its artists apply the concept differently. Listen to *An Artist’s Life Manifesto*, a recent release from the label by Italian singer **Valentina Fin** on which she uses the beauty of her voice and avant garde improvisation to dig into emotional truths that transcend

any particular formal structure—it’s captivating stuff.

Which isn’t to suggest that artistic confrontation can’t appear in more conventional stylistic attire. Take **Diana Torti**, another naturally gifted Italian singer. On *It’s All We Have* (Tambora Music), her latest album, she doesn’t hesitate to use her lyrics—self-penned or otherwise—to call attention to social justice issues. Because, as she sings on “Beyond Clouds”: “Tears speak louder through joined hands.”

Or consider **Lucy Yeghiazaryan**, who placed in the top ten of the 2015 Thelonious Monk Competition (the year that Swift came in second). Growing up in post-Soviet Armenia, Yeghiazaryan learned jazz—and singing in English—by listening to her father’s “once-contraband” jazz records. Today her NY-based career is soaring. Most recently, she contributed vocals to *With Roses* (Triangle 7), saxophonist Harry Allen’s new big band record of all originals. Her cool stance towards the material speaks to her hard-won confidence as a singer, whether on a traditional swing number (“It All Catches Up With You in the End”), a sultry bossa (“Takes a Moment”), a catchy odd-meter tune (“Be the One”) or a vulnerable ballad, like the title cut. Yeghiazaryan will appear at Mezzrow Aug. 10 and at Joe’s Pub Aug. 11.

Summer outings: vocal powerhouse **Allan Harris** will introduce *Live at Blue Llama Jazz Club* at Smoke Aug. 3. **Queen Esther** conjures the ‘20s at the annual Jazz Age Lawn Party on Governors Island Aug. 12-13. And **Dianne Reeves** headlines Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in a free outdoor concert at Marcus Garvey Park Aug. 25.