

HOT FLASHES

By Seton Hawkins

Artist Talks Inspirations: Alexa Tarantino

TO HEAR ALEXA TARANTINO PERFORM is to feel more secure about the future of jazz. An astonishing alto saxophone talent, Alexa has recently earned tremendous—and well deserved—accolades for her work with the DIVA Orchestra, Darcy James Argue and the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra. While primarily noted for her incredible alto work, Alexa has increasingly asserted her chops as a composer, demonstrating herself to be a talented writer with a fantastic ear for memorable melodies and unique orchestrations.



Alexa Tarantino

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Alexa cites Maria Schneider as an influence. "As I started to shape and form my own career, the fact that she had such a distinct voice as a composer and also as an activist was very inspiring to me," she notes. "Her work motivated me as I was trying to figure out how, when and why I was choosing to be a leader and choosing to write my own music." Initially hearing her music in high school, Alexa became deeply acquainted with Maria's compositions while studying at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester. "Studying this music in

in college really got me into woodwind doubling and into composition," Alexa explains. "I loved her use of varied woodwinds, the different voices and colors that would come from flutes, piccolos, and bass clarinets. I also spent a lot of time with the music of Gil Evans, as part of Ryan Truesdell's Gil Evans Project, during this time. These influences helped me develop my woodwind doubling skillset which proved a big help to me after I moved to New York."

Indeed, hearing Alexa's exquisite composition "Square One" for the DIVA Orchestra's recently released *25th Anniversary Project* album, one can hear the influence of Maria in its similarly melody-driven approach that incorporates unusual tonal colors. "It has a more flowing and contemplative vibe," Alexa notes. "The way I expanded the piece for the big band was different from what DIVA usually does. They usually perform more hard-hitting swing that's lots of fun. I wanted to provide a nice texture change, so I brought in elements of the woodwind doubles. I think it provides a little change from the usual direction."

At Birdland, Alexa leads her quartet in a performance that features her original works. "I've had my own quartet for a while, but the majority of my work since I've moved to New York has been in big band settings," she notes. "These have been my first few months of really bringing the quartet to public audiences. I recorded an album with Posi-Tone Records in September that featured my compositions, which was a blast and allowed me to take my tunes in different directions. I put together an all-star band [pianist Christian Sands, bassist Joe Martin, and drummer Rudy Royston] and we're going to close out these past few months at Birdland. I'm looking forward to debuting as a bandleader."

The Alexa Tarantino Quartet performs at **Birdland Dec. 7-8.**

New Year's Eve Celebrations

Jazzy New Year's Eve celebrations abound throughout the city. **The Mingus Big Band** rings in 2019 at Jazz Standard, paired with a prix-fixe menu and complimentary champagne toast. Make a reservation at www.jazzstandard.com. At the Jazz Forum, vocalist **Roberta Gambarini**

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