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Alexa Tarantino “Winds Of Change” - artist notes

Winds Of Change is my first record as a leader. The music on this record embodies a blend of where I have come from and the direction I am headed as a composer, saxophonist, and bandleader. Some of the original compositions on this record were written years ago but were never fully brought to life. Others are fresh off the press and were inspired by my more recent experiences and influences.

Wisp After Wisp - I wrote this piece several years ago for my grandmother. I hadn't played it in a few years but was excited to bring it to this group of musicians to interpret. Upon first listen, it sounds like a melancholy piece, but I actually feel propelled by joy and light when I play it. The texture and shape of the composition feels soothing and cathartic. I hope you will think so too!

Face Value - This is a quirky and playful tune with some surprises, both melodically and harmonically. This composition is inspired by the phrase “Don't judge a book by its cover.” While the groove is rather straight-forward and it feels like a natural up-tempo swing tune, there are some hurdles that make it challenging and exciting for the improviser. I hope the listener will be able to feel the driving and focused energy that we had in the studio!

Seesaw - This is a composition by my good friend, bassist Noriko Ueda. Noriko and I met when I joined Sherrie Maricle & The DIVA Jazz Orchestra. She brought this piece to the band for our 25th Anniversary Project recording session to feature soprano saxophone. I fell in love with it and asked her to adapt it for me to play with my quartet. Soprano saxophone is one of my favorite instruments. I love the range of color that the soprano brings. Rudy Royston's groove on this is one of my favorite elements of the record!

Breeze - This is an easy-going medium-swing composition that has a few deceptive moments to keep you on your toes. I wanted to write a tune that was in the songbook-style, but also had moments of quirkiness or cleverness, so that it wasn't exactly a breeze to play. You'll notice that there are occasional unexpected sidestep or altered moments in the harmony. The melody also takes a different direction towards the end, which is meant to create a refreshing and heightening feeling, similar to the effect of wind or a breeze on a walk outside.

Zingaro - You may or may not already know that I experiment with other woodwind instruments besides alto saxophone. You've heard the soprano saxophone on "Seesaw," but flute is my secondary instrument, which I love bringing into jazz settings for improvisation. "Zingaro" (aka "Retrato Em Branco E Preto") is one of my favorite Antonio Carlos Jobim compositions. I gravitated to this composition even more after hearing Rich Perry's quartet version on his record "To Start Again," with one of my former teachers, Harold Danko on piano. The range and color of the alto flute complements Jobim's melody so well, I'm not sure I can ever play this song on anything else!

Square One - Square One was my first original composition that I ever brought into the world. It was inspired by the music of Kenny Wheeler. When I first started writing I was second-guessing my ideas, but I figured I had to start from somewhere, which is where the title comes from. My focus in the compositional process was in directing the harmony in subtle and small ways, rather than making large leaps or stark contrasts in sounds. Christian Sands and Rudy Royston really shine on this!

Calm - This is one of my oldest compositions. It has only been played in a couple of formats, and has never really been performed for the public. The melody is focused around a couple of main intervals, the major sixth and minor sixth, which creates a wide and open palette. The melody is written in canon which creates moments of tension and release. This is the "calm before the storm." The ebb and flow of the composition eventually builds to a point of organized chaos, and things disintegrate from there. I was thrilled to have one of my best friends and favorite musicians, Nick Finzer (trombone), join me on this piece along with a few others on the record.

Undercurrent - I titled this tune "Undercurrent" because I originally came up with the bass line first. This line directed where the piece went, similar to an undercurrent directing waves in the ocean. Joe Martin is the undercurrent of this tune, and I just love how the rhythm section captured the flow of this piece. It is laid-back but also very much persistent in the groove and direction of the melody.

Ready or Not - Another new composition, this tune speaks for itself. This is a hard-hitter right out of the gate. Christian Sands, Joe Martin, and Rudy Royston are an amazing team who make it so comfortable to play at a burning tempo! Fun fact: we originally intended to record this at a slower tempo, but producer Marc Free encouraged us to do a take at this fast tempo (whether we were ready or not!), and we loved it!

Without - One of my favorite settings to play and explore in is duo, particularly with piano. One of my earlier projects was a duo with pianist Dariusz Terefenko, who is a Professor at the Eastman School of Music. While it is very difficult to play duo, it opens up paths in the music that you would never expect. When I wrote this ballad, I knew I wanted most of it to remain duo with Christian Sands before bringing in the rest of the band to fill out the texture.