

Alexa Tarantino Juggles the Jazz Life

INTERVIEW, NEWS, ALEXA TARANTINO, LIONESS, DIVA JAZZ ORCHESTRA, RUDY ROYSTON, JOE MARTIN, CHRISTIAN SANDS

By Kira Grunenberg | Jun. 6, 2019



Despite possessing an increasingly impressive résumé, saxophonist Alexa Tarantino projects an air of humility and seems intent on giving back as much knowledge, support and inspiration as she's received.

Nowhere is this selfless nature more apparent than in the recent college graduate's drive to motivate younger performers—whether directly as a teacher or indirectly through her own musical pursuits. Tarantino's faculty position with Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jazz Academy, her work as director of the Rockport Jazz Workshop and her guidance in the applied studios of Hobart and William Smith Colleges draws a direct line between the saxophonist and those who aspire to play. Factor in her supportive role in the ensemble Lioness, as well as recently becoming leader of her own quintet, and Tarantino displays clear aptitude when it comes to figuring out how to wrangle the scholastic, professional and shared spaces of jazz.

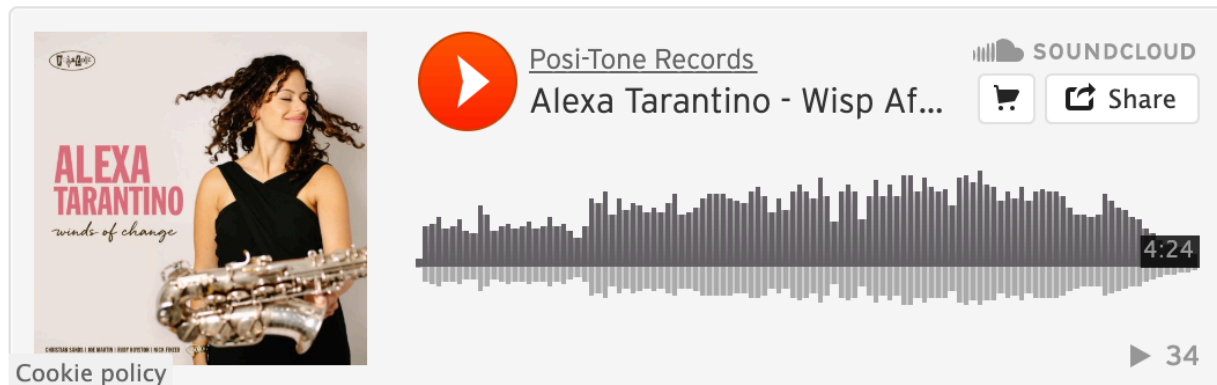
The saxophonist recently chatted with DownBeat about her leader debut, *Winds Of Change* (Posi-Tone), working in a band comprised of accomplished veterans and juggling the component parts of her career.

The following has been edited for length and clarity.

As a recent grad of the Eastman School of Music and now studying at Juilliard, how do you balance academia and everyday jazz life alongside the development of so many professional opportunities?

As soon as I was done with [Eastman], it turned out [DIVA Jazz Orchestra](#) was in need of a lead alto player. There was a show they were working on with Maurice Hines, [which] ended up moving off Broadway in New York. And then I started working in Jazz at Lincoln Center in the education department. But I knew I wanted to get my master's at some point, for the potential for a higher education opportunity later in life. So, I ended up enrolling at Juilliard. It's definitely be tricky to navigate, but I'm so appreciative of everyone's flexibility and I've been fortunate to play with some really amazing people.

[Attending school and performing] is definitely hard to balance, but there are types of gigs and types of collaborations where you prioritize that. And while school is always a priority, I know to kind of save my absences and things like that for the [opportunities] that are really important. It's a lot of time management. It's been a lot of adjusting, but I just try to go through it as professionally as I can.



Moving from sideperson to bandleader with your debut, *Winds Of Change*, what are some of the biggest changes in perspective you've gleaned from working in a leadership role?

It just feels really great to have that extra dimension of, 'Yeah, this is my baby and these people are working with me.' So, I just felt like the people on [*Winds Of Change*] were an all-star team. With [Christian Sands](#) and [Joe Martin](#) and [Rudy Royston](#)—they were incredible. And my friend [Nick Finzer](#) as well. More importantly, I was playing with people I really admired. So, it was just really a nice reminder of people you keep yourself close to and how they can bring that relationship to the music.

I think because I've spent so much time working as a sideperson, I often can overthink my compositional process. I generally feel like I'm a little bit of a perfectionist, and I think that might come having mostly done sideperson things. But I really enjoyed this opportunity to take ownership for my musical voice, and it was just a really great way to remind myself to stick to my voice and not be changed by what other people's voices are, because we all have our opportunities [and] we all have our outlets.

What's the one takeaway you hope someone gets when they're introduced to Lioness' *Pride & Joy* and *Winds Of Change*?

I want to say strength, and it applies differently to the two records. I think putting together an all-female ensemble [with Lioness], you have so many different experiences that come together. And especially with everything that's going on today, [female empowerment] being such a hot topic, I think [*Pride & Joy*] definitely was a symbol of strength and collaboration and camaraderie; we're stronger together than we are apart.

In terms of my record, I'm trying my best. I'm on this path and I find that I'm just figuring out my musical voice and my voice as a bandleader. So, it's like finding your strength. It's my first presentation to the world like, "Here we go!" I wanted to get off on my best foot; I would hope that comes through. I think some of my music is pretty relaxed on [the album], and it's very flowy and it goes with the title of the record, *Winds Of Change*. But I find that there might be more of a subtle strength in there, as opposed to what you'd associate with the word "strength"—something like hard-hitting, fast swing.

Since pursuing a career in jazz, what have you figured out that everyone should know when just beginning their studies?

I would say, believe in yourself and don't worry about what anyone else is doing or thinking, because I definitely was questioning, comparing myself to other people's careers or what they're doing. It's really easy to become distracted by things like summer programs and scholarships, and awards and the fastest solos and all that stuff. But really, it should all be about the music, which is coming down to self-expression. So, I would say, don't be afraid to play differently, as long as you're being honest. **DB**