

Alexa Tarantino Leads Charge for a More Inclusive Jazz Scene

The alto saxophonist and her ensemble, *Lioness* celebrates female jazz artistry

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Alexa Tarantino (photo by: Anna Yatskevich)

On their debut album, *Pride & Joy* (Posi-Tone), the all-female sextet Lioness makes a potent jazz statement while celebrating female jazz artistry past and present. The ensemble features six acclaimed musicians—alto saxophonist Alexa Tarantino, tenor saxophonist Jenny Hill, baritone saxophonist [Lauren Sevia](#)n, guitarist Amanda Monaco, organist Akiko Tsuruga, and drummer [Allison Miller](#)—and all the tracks were composed by women (okay, there's one man with a composer credit, but he's a co-composer). Fittingly, *Pride & Joy* was released on International Women's Day, March 8.

"Camaraderie is really the biggest thing," Tarantino tells me in the lobby of a hotel on New York's Upper West Side. The young altoist plays with another distinguished all-female ensemble, the [DIVA Jazz Orchestra](#), and she likens the vibe of the Lioness sessions to that of DIVA's recent shows with tap dancer Maurice Hines.

"I figured, this is what the guys have been feeling about their work all the time," she says. "It feels like a vacation: You're going on the road with your best girlfriends, your best buds. And I was like, wow, this is just so natural and so much fun, and everyone's celebrating each other, cheering people on during their solos." She adds, "I think—I would like to believe—that's what women in general want, to uplift and support and empower each other."

Monaco and Posi-Tone founder/producer Marc Free put Lioness together and chose the tracks for *Pride & Joy*. The album opens with Miller's tune "Mad Time," its playful strut driven by the horns and propelled by snare drum. Tarantino's composition, "Hurry Up and Wait," which she calls a "hard-hitting swinging minor blues," showcases her musical rapport with Sevan, a close friend with whom Tarantino co-leads a quintet called LSAT. The group delivers a moody, atmospheric take on Carla Bley's "Ida Lupino" and goes on a funky romp through Aretha Franklin's "Think."

The triple-saxophone frontline replaces the three-trombone lead on Melba Liston's "You Don't Say," Tarantino says, "That fresh take on having all saxophones—I think it speaks to Marc's vision of not only promoting the women composers and instrumentalists of today, but also highlighting the tradition and the past and showcasing the freshness of breathing new life into it."

That summation also describes Tarantino's own career. The Connecticut native, who just turned 27, decided to become a jazz saxophonist in the third grade, when her parents took her to a concert where she heard saxophonist Erica von Kleist. "I just said to my parents, 'Done. That's what I want to do. I'm sold,'" she recalls. Alto sax was always her instrument of choice. "I love the range of color that you can draw from the alto," she says. She received her undergraduate degree from the Eastman School of Music and just completed her master's at Juilliard.

Tarantino might be young, but she's already built an impressive résumé. A substitute in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, she's played in some of [Wynton Marsalis'](#) smaller groups, as well as with Arturo O'Farrill & the Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. She's also played with bandleader Darcy James Argue's Secret Society and in Cécile McLorin Salvant's song cycle *Ogresse*. Somehow, she found time to record her own album as a leader, *Winds of Change* (Posi-Tone).

The just-released quartet record spotlights Tarantino's elegant composing and arranging style, as well as her collaborative finesse. Pianist Christian Sands, bassist Joe Martin, and drummer Rudy Royston round out the ensemble; Tarantino deftly engages in musical dialogues with trombonist Nick Finzer on several tracks.

Off the bandstand, she's busy as a teacher and jazz ambassador for young musicians. She's part of Jazz at Lincoln Center's High School Jazz Academy, running one of its high-school big bands. She founded and directs a summer jazz program in Rockport, Mass., and she teaches and performs at colleges and high schools across the country. She says she's seeing more young women taking an interest in jazz: "Now I go to these master classes and I would say sometimes it could be 40 to 60 percent female."

Still, women jazz instrumentalists continue to be outnumbered by men, and it's not uncommon for them, even in the #MeToo era, to experience sexism and other obstacles. "We've all had our fair share of unfortunate moments and unfortunate encounters," Tarantino says diplomatically. But, she elaborates, focusing on the music helps break down barriers. She cites the work ethic her parents instilled in her, which she describes as "Put your head down and keep working and don't let anybody bring you down," adding, "It's all going to come out on the bandstand."

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