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Alexa Tarantino: Clarity



By **DAN BILAWSKY**

June 7, 2020

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Alto saxophonist [Alexa Tarantino](#) is an indefatigable spirit, plain and simple. In the past two years alone she's worked with everybody from trumpeter [Wynton Marsalis](#) to vocalist [Cecile McLorin Salvant](#), held down the lead alto chair in [The DIVA Jazz Orchestra](#), co-led the fiery LSAT quintet with baritone saxophonist [Lauren Sevian](#), directed her self-founded Rockport Jazz Workshop, and appeared on more than a half dozen albums, including three collective-minded gatherings on the Posi-Tone imprint and her own debut for the label. Even homebound, in the age of COVID-19, she remains one of the busiest musicians



The aforementioned list is just a partial breakdown of what Tarantino's been up to, so to say she's busy and call her a rising star is a gross understatement. But to what does she owe all of that success and demand? Strong musical skills? Absolutely. A positive attitude toward work and personal improvement? Without a doubt. But it's more than that. If you boil it down to one word, it's clarity. There's clear understanding and meaning behind every artistic endeavor she creates and every job she takes on, and that most certainly includes the mantle of leadership. On *Winds of Change* (Posi-Tone, 2019) Tarantino demonstrated that by serving up a cross-section of material from different stages of her development, and with this follow-up date she changes gears by focusing on the now. Her originals, which account for about half of the playlist, were all penned within the year prior to this album's release, and the program in its entirety speaks to her strengths as a front figure, collaborator, composer, arranger and multi-instrumentalist.

Leading a well-built quartet that includes Feifke, bassist [Joe Martin](#) and drummer [Rudy Royston](#), Tarantino toggles between instruments and moods like nobody's business. The album opens on "Through," a modal vehicle for her flute. Presenting with both cool traces and hard edges, it proves to be an alluring entrance to the set. "A Race Against Yourself," Tarantino's nod to her own internal drive and the difficulties inherent in keeping pace, follows. Providing the expected burn and a marked contrast to the opener, it also offers strong statements from the leader, Feifke and a rumbling Royston. Her two additional originals, spaced out across the album, further the picture of a musician who's both a team player and confident leader. "A Unified Front," which sourced the melody line of its first four bars by having each person in a group of friends provide one note apiece, rides an appealingly swinging line, and "Thank You For Your Silence," a groove-morphing vehicle that serves as a statement of self-trust, charms with its surprises.

The remaining material points to a variety of inspirations and ideals. Luis Demetrio's "La Puerta," a mellow and melodious vehicle which came to Tarantino through her work with [Arturo O'Farrill's](#) Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra, is capped by a gorgeous alto cadenza. [Horace Silver's](#) "Gregory is Here," from *In Pursuit of the 27th Man* (Blue Note, 1973), finds a light Fender Rhodes glaze supporting a seductive soprano. Feifke's "Karma," with pivoting rhythmic posts guiding (or matching) the melody's direction, and saxophonist [Levi Saelua's](#) "Breaking Cycles," drawing from a bright harmonic palette, were both commissioned by Tarantino. And Kurt Weill's "My Ship," a balladic sendoff for the leader's alto flute, floats the album across its finish line.

There's a good chance that Tarantino will have moved on to 10 other ideas or projects by the time these words are published, but that likelihood doesn't lessen the impact surrounding what she's accomplished here. Channeling personal resolve, passion and determination into a single statement, [Alexa Tarantino](#) provides a direct look at what clarity is all about.



Track Listing

Through; A Race Against Yourself; La Puerta; A Unified Front; Gregory is Here; Karma; Breaking Cycles; Thank You For Your Silence; My Ship.

Personnel

[Alexa Tarantino](#): saxophone, alto; [Steven Feifke](#): piano; [Joe Martin](#): bass, acoustic; [Rudy Royston](#): drums.

Album Information

Title: [Clarity](#) | Year Released: 2020 | Record Label: [Posi-Tone Records](#)



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Alexa Tarantino: Clarity



By **PAUL RAUCH**

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Saxophonist [Alexa Tarantino](#) has as impressive resume in jazz as any artist could hope for at this stage of a career. As a performer, she has contributed notably to [The DIVA Jazz Orchestra](#), the [Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra](#), the [Cecile McLorin Salvant Quintet](#) and [Arturo O’Farrill & The Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra](#), to note a few. She has lived the jazz life, juggling responsibilities as an educator, musician and curator, somehow fitting all the pieces together that illustrate the intricacies of being a jazz musician in the 21st century. She has in her time as well gained a well deserved reputation for humility and dedication to service, exhibiting a refreshingly selfless approach to her life as an artist.



That being said, when you break everything down, where one can truly witness her mettle as a saxophonist is when she performs with her quartet, or with the quintet she co-leads with baritone saxophonist [Lauren Sevia](#)n, LSAT. With her new release *Clarity* (Posi-Tone, 2020) Tarantino takes one step further in establishing herself as a strong, melody based, straight ahead improviser. She as well establishes her formidable chops as a bandleader.

This is the second quartet album for Tarantino, following the Posi-Tone model of frequent releases, reminiscent of a philosophy akin to the earlier days of Blue Note. Times however, are staggeringly different in the 2020's, with musicians spending less time in clubs and jam sessions, and more time as educators, curators and small business operators. In other words, when the time comes to record, no matter the frequency, there is an imperative to make it count. On her new release, Tarantino the saxophonist leaves no trace of doubt that she is playing at an extremely high level. While the music overall is dead-straight ahead, she displays a willingness to interpret on broader terms, not only in terms of musical vocabulary, but by witness of a stronger, more forceful tonality. The questions remaining regarding her prowess as a bandleader are answered in nine tracks.

The format for the album is virtually identical to her previous quartet release, *Winds of Change* (Posi-Tone, 2019), wisely bringing back bassist [Joe Martin](#) and the marvelous [Rudy Royston](#) on drums. The piano chair is held down aptly by the multi-talented [Steven Feifke](#), replacing [Christian Sands](#). Tarantino offers four originals, with Feifke chipping in one of his own. The selections are rounded out by four covers, including [Horace Silver's](#) "Gregory is Here."

The opening two tunes are Tarantino's, featuring the leader on flute for "Through," and alto on the edgy, hard bop thriller, "A Race Against Yourself." Royston's symphonic drum and cymbal work creates a rhythmic wash of sound that carries the opener featuring Tarantino's rich toned solo. While she has played flute and alto flute with more frequency in current times, the second track clearly delineates where her true and original voice is. "A Race Against Yourself" is described by the artist as "How I feel in the moment, where I'm stretched too thin, or working with a lack of clarity." Tarantino's solo on the piece has plenty of clarity. What is clear is that she has abandoned many of the safe places many musicians of note seem to reside, until they approach the notion of an "original voice." Of course, any altoist bears the lineage of Bird and Cannonball, just as modern tenor players carry the sound of Coltrane somewhere in their musical DNA. But Tarantino seems to be shaking loose from the mold, and ascending with a distinct cadence, stronger presence, and adventurous spirit. With Royston and Martin driving the band, Tarantino's dazzling solo is followed by pianist Feifke's fluid playing featuring a hard driving left hand and fleet, melodic passages.

Luis Demetrio's "La Puerta" harkens back to Tarantino's time with Arturo O'Farrill. She sat next to the great [Bobby Porcelli](#) at Birdland for the gig, and seems to channel a bit of his sweet toned magic. "This was my thank you to Bobby for his beautiful sound and generous spirit," says Tarantino.

Silver's "Gregory is Here" barely resembles the original recording featuring Michael Brecker's tenor on the album, *In Pursuit of the 27th Man* (Blue Note, 1973). Brecker's snarling, gritty tenor is replaced by Tarantino's sweet, melodic soprano. The tune rides on a rhythmic wave that includes Feifke transitioning to Rhodes, giving the tune a much different feel from Silver's pounding, chordal approach to harmony on piano.

Feifke's "Karma" returns the band to its hard bop/post-bop persona, where it seems to find a distinct comfort zone. Tarantino's playing has an allure that somehow juxtaposes historic alto references to lines that are modern and thematic in nature. Feifke's piano solo is one of the true highlights of the album, leading to Royston's thunderous solo that accentuates his beautiful playing throughout this album. His presence alone speaks volumes of Tarantino's leadership, and the respect she has deservedly garnered on the bandstand.

There are perhaps two great dangers going forward for the present and future of jazz music. One is that the music bears the vibe and heavy handed influence of the conservatory as opposed to the mentor dominant old school of learning per the oral tradition and paying dues on the bandstand. The second is how modern capitalism and life in the twentieth century has stretched a professional musician's schedule so thin, to the point of not having nearly as much time to play and interact with other musicians. The demonetization of the recording industry, and the rising cost of doing business in general has presented the undeniable economic reality of having to pursue opportunities to earn a living aside from the discipline of being a world class jazz musician. The Covid-19 pandemic now threatens to decimate live performances, the life blood for a musician creatively, and in modern times, economically. Tarantino has traversed all of this in admirable fashion. From Julliard, to the Eastman School of Music, to her current world class statue as a musician and educator, she has set impossible goals for herself that she somehow continues to accomplish. Where she sets her sights as a bandleader next will surely be intriguing. Does she have the will to wander off the straight ahead path she has set for herself a bit, and explore other quadrants of the jazz universe? This record clearly expresses her deep soul as one of the finest alto players in jazz today. What will define her career will be her ability to continue to grow as a bandleader. Hip and relevant jazz music requires more than talent-it requires the efforts of hip and relevant musicians. For *Clarity*, Tarantino has assembled such a cast.



Track Listing

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Personnel

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Album Information

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Alexa Tarantino: Passion For Playing And Teaching



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#)



By [R.J. DELUKE](#)
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“ I’m still in awe of is the fact that we’re creating moments that will never happen again. Every gig. —Alexa Tarantino ”

Alexa Tarantino was bitten by the jazz bug at a young age. She was fortunate to grow up in a community where jazz is an important part of the musical fabric—rare these days. She swiftly grabbed hold of the music and has developed into an in-demand alto saxophonist, earning a series of high-profile gigs that slowed down a bit only recently because she is pushing forward with her own band and musical vision.

Her career includes playing sax on stage before age of 20 with [Earth, Wind & Fire](#), jumping from college to the DIVA Jazz Orchestra, touring with the [Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra](#) and [Arturo O’Farrill’s Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra](#), collaborating with decorated vocalist [Cecile McLorin Salvant](#)—among others—and teaching music as an artist-in-residence in a variety of settings—as far away as Poland for a brief time.

That's a pretty full resume for someone bitten "at an early age." That age is relative. The space between discovering the music and becoming a professional discovering her potential is not vacuous. The woman who has compiled these accomplishments already is only 28.

"I knew from a young age I wanted to do this professionally," she says, looking back on her beginnings in a small town near Hartford, CT.

What drew her to jazz was that it was "such a raw form of self expression through an instrument. Also the freedom you find in jazz, with improvisation and creativity and composition. Communicating with others on the bandstand. That type of freedom was really exciting to me. Now, to this day, what I'm still in awe of is the fact that we're creating moments that will never happen again, Every gig. Even every lesson. Every master class. Every performance. With improvisation, it's never going to be repeated the same way."

Things have slowed a bit because of the coronavirus situation. But Tarantino, a driven woman who doesn't sit still for long if she doesn't have to, still pushes forward, finding ways to adapt. She remains exuberant. She has a new CD out, *Clarity* (Posi-Tone), that is continuing to cement her reputation as a fine player. Her killer band on the disk is comprised of [Steven Feifke](#) on piano, [Joe Martin](#) on bass and [Rudy Royston](#) on drums. And throughout the shutdown caused by the COVID-19 virus pandemic, Tarantino works online, first in a series of duets with Feifke, and now with "A Step Ahead Jazz," a music education program for all ages and ability levels (June 29-July 3). It takes the place of the Rockport Jazz Workshop she founded and ran for a number of years, south of Boston, that had to be canceled because of the virus.

Putting it all together takes a great deal of persistence and effort. But Tarantino is indefatigable. Outwardly, it's just part of her daily life, working on her mission to bring music and music education to the people.

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Tarantino's path started with her taking up the piano and saxophone at the same time, around the age of 10, with the full support of family. "In the community, jazz was a big deal," she says. "The music program was incredible. I had many, many opportunities." When listening to music as a child, jazz was always in the forefront. She also enjoyed music of Motown, The Temptations, [Stevie Wonder](#) and [Marvin Gaye](#)—her mom's favorites. Her father played classic jazz for her like [Ella Fitzgerald](#) and [John Coltrane](#).

"When I was in elementary school, my family and I went to see one of the local high school jazz concerts. I was probably 9. I saw a young woman playing a ballad, a featured saxophone ballad with the big band. That's when I said, 'I wanna do that.'" Soon, she was in the elementary school jazz band and continued those studies up through Hall High School, whose alumni includes [Brad Mehldau](#) and [Phil Woods](#). As a rising musician, she also liked listening to [Dexter Gordon](#), [Charlie Parker](#) and [Cannonball Adderley](#) ("especially with [Nancy Wilson](#). I love that record. I love learning the melodies and playing melodies," she says). Later, on trips to New York City she was turned onto [Kenny Garrett](#) and at the Village Vanguard on Monday nights to [Dick Oatts](#) with the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra.

She left Eastman with a degree in jazz performance and music education; also a music business certificate. Later, after becoming a freelance musician in New York City, she earned a master's degree from Julliard, which she finished in 2019.

At Eastman, she made her first record, an independent production called *Crossing Paths* with one of Eastman's piano faculty members, Dariusz Terefenko. With Terefenko she toured and taught as an artist-in-residence at various universities. They even went to Poland and taught at the Academy of Music in Krakow for a couple of weeks during Tarantino's final year of college.

"My studies kept me busy, but there were a few groups, either led by faculty members or students, that would have regular weekly gigs," she says. "There were a lot of teaching opportunities. It was a great place to break into freelancing."

It was in college she picked up valuable lessons about leading bands. "That's where I started doing stuff just with my quartet. I did a little bit of quintet as well. On my last record, *Winds of Change* (Posi-Tone, 2019), there were a couple of quintet tunes with [Nick Finzer](#) on trombone. I usually had a quintet with alto saxophone and trombone. So, it was a great place to be."

After the school year ended, she would stay in town for the Rochester International Jazz Festival held in the summertime. Staying for the festival after her graduation proved fortuitous. "Earth, Wind and Fire was the headlining band. Through an amazing sequence of events I ended up playing with them during their concert. That was kind of my graduation," she recalls with a chuckle. "[Philip Bailey](#), who was so generous, had me do a featured song. We did a duet of 'I Remember You' with the rhythm section. Then he had me join the horn section for most of the rest of the show. That was my wrap-up time in Rochester."

After Eastman, Tarantino was "getting sort of recruited by [Sherrie Maricle](#) & the DIVA Jazz Orchestra," an all-female band that has been led by Maricle for about 25 years now. She had known the band leader somewhat over the years, and Maricle was now in the market for a lead alto saxophonist.

Recalls Tarantino, "So I went to the Deerhead Inn in Delaware Water Gap (PA), which is where Phil Woods was living at the time. I remember driving several hours from Rochester to Pennsylvania. I had been working on the music forever. They sent it to me a couple weeks ahead of time. I was eating, sleeping and breathing it because I wanted to get the gig. It was my first non-Rochester band to have the opportunity to play with. We had a great time and they asked me to join the band. The band was touring pretty significantly at that time."

A smaller group split that off from the band was also working with tap dancer Maurice Hines' one-man show, which toured, and then settled in off-Broadway in Manhattan. "That was when I made the decision to move permanently to New York. That was before Julliard." In the Big Apple, she started teaching at Jazz at Lincoln Center and doing some work for them. "In that time with DIVA, the year before I started Julliard, I was hanging out in New York and going to clubs," Tarantino says. "Mostly I was hanging out at Dizzy's Club, at Jazz at Lincoln Center. That's when I started doing some work with [Wynton Marsalis](#) and the jazz orchestra. I did some touring with them. DIVA was still traveling a little bit for things like the Hollywood Bowl or the Kennedy Center

Tarantino was undeterred. "Between DIVA and some things with Wynton and Jazz at Lincoln Center and teaching, I had a pretty full plate. I was trying to get my name out as much as I could. When I went to Julliard, I wasn't able to go out all the time. I was trying to take all the gigs I could get and get to class also," she says.

She also pursued her own projects as time allowed. And there were other great opportunities.

"For two years I was in Arturo O'Farrill's Afro-Latin Jazz Orchestra. They did a fair amount of touring. I also started working with [Darcy James Argue](#) with his Secret Society. Then I started collaborating with Cecile McLorin Salvant who has the project Ogresse with Darcy James Argue. I've also been collaborating with her new quintet as a flautist," says Tarantino.

"That was all happening during Julliard. The Wynton stuff, the Arturo stuff, Darcy, Cecile, Arturo and my own stuff. It was a mad, crazy schedule in terms of trying to make sure I was focused in school and making all my classes. I really wanted to prioritize that. But at the same time, if these amazing opportunities came up, I couldn't say no. I was very fortunate that my teachers and my professors were really helpful. I learned a lot and they also understood what I was up to."

O'Farrill's band became quality opportunity for Tarantino in a setting involving the exotic rhythms and music from the Latin genre. "I loved playing with that band. I spent two years with them and I just recently moved on because I'm trying to do more touring with my own group as a quartet. We had so much fun. We did some great tours. Great traveling. The music is incredible. I love playing that classic style like [Tito Puente](#), [Machito](#), [Chico O'Farrill](#). We had a nice mix with Arturo's original compositions. It was a very exciting project to be a part of because there was always something new that Arturo was doing. Always a new collaboration."

She adds, "I really gravitated toward the old-school classics. In the beginning of my time with the band, I sat next to [Bobby Porcelli](#), who is an alto legend. He did a lot of work with all those bands back in the day, then went on to work with [T.S. Monk](#). As soon as I met him and heard his sound, he became another influence for me and mentor for me."

It was only about a year ago that those gigs ran their course for the most part, as Tarantino pressed on with her own work. The relationships, however, are invaluable and cherished.

She says Marsalis is among her most valued mentors. "I actually met him in high school. Hall High School went to compete at Jazz at Lincoln Center in an Essentially Ellington program, a competition they hold every year. I made a point to reconnect at Jazz at Lincoln Center when I officially landed in New York. That's when I started teaching for them, in their youth education program [Jazz for Young People] ... We are still in touch." She did some online work for Jazz at Lincoln Center's programs during the quarantine, hosting a weekly show for awhile. Last year, she went with the trumpeter to France to play with his septet at Jazz in Marciac. "He's been really great to me."

She also worked with baritone saxophonist [Lauren Sevia](#)n, whom she met through DIVA. "She helped me immensely when I first got here," says Tarantino. "There are many people" who have been helpful. "Dick Oatts has also been incredible and brought me in to sit next to him in the Vanguard Orchestra."

Working with a singer, and a great one in Salvant, has also been enlightening for Tarantino. She says the award winning vocalists works in a unique way— not at all as a star who just needs musicians behind her for support.

"I don't even think of her as a vocalist. A lot of people have a stereotype of what working with a vocalist is. Working with DIVA, we would occasionally do cabaret-style things, or things where you're the backing band for a vocalist ... I also did something with [Kurt Elling](#), with the [Ulysses Owens, Jr.](#) big band backing him and [Dee Dee Bridgewater](#). Those situations are more where the singer is in the forefront, and the band is in the back and maybe has their moments.

"But with Cecile, it's different. It doesn't feel like there's any real forefront or back burner. It's all one living, breathing organism. With her Ogresse show, with her and Darcy, it's the most incredible fairytale narrative. It's like a drama, with a story line and really intense, beautiful music. You're always focused. I play six instruments in that project, so I'm always focused," she says, gleefully. "I never feel like I'm on the back burner. Everyone is in it 100 percent. She's very creative and always very focused on instrumentalists. I just love the atmosphere she created. It's been a real joy to work with her."

Tarantino plays flute with Salvant, and has expanded to use that instrument more in other projects. She plays with a full, luscious tone and creates beautiful, soulful sounds. It's a sweet change of pace that enhances her overall presentation and musicianship. Some of that can be heard on her new recording.

"I love playing flute and I love doubling. I love woodwind doubling. At one point last year, on *Winds of Change*, we decided to do one tune on alto flute. It was an 'ah-hah' moment that I wanted to do more playing as a flutist in a jazz setting. On most of my gigs now as a leader, I'll play alto and soprano (sax) and flute, or alto saxophone and flute and alto flute. So I keep it in the mix. I think it brings a really nice texture and nice change to the ensemble. A new mood. It's beautiful to play with," she says.

The new recording, her second as the clear leader, separates Tarantino the composer and performer from someone who plays other music in other people's bands—as great as those experiences have been.

"When I finished Julliard, I made a little bit of a mental shift. I said, 'OK, what is my music going to sound like? What can I do with my band? What creative projects can I start to brainstorm and collaborate?' Definitely not trying to turn away from any of those sideperson collaborations, because I love them all. But just putting more of the focus on my compositions and what I can contribute as a band leader.

"I think that's where *Clarity* comes from," she says. "I had gathered all these experiences from all these different people. As I continue working with them, and hopefully with others, I'm trying to put everything together and clarify my own music ideas and opinions and express my own thing."

She says the recording came together easily in the studio. "The band was awesome. A lot of this music I actually wrote leading up to the session. Some of the tunes I chose because they are some of my die-hard favorites. 'My Ship' and 'Gregory's Here' are two non-original compositions that I just love. I love the melodies and I love the vibe."

"Through," she says, is a modal song she wrote to showcase the flute in an edgier, more abstract setting. "Thank You For Your Silence" is her composition to remind herself she doesn't have to please everyone all the time. There are also tunes that were commissioned for the album as well. Each are carried out with intensity and passion. The band is tight and fiery.

"This record it was sort of: I want to show people my writing and I want to present music that is me. I also wanted to pick a couple of things that just make me smile. With the contrast between my originals and those standards, we put it all together."

Tarantino was looking forward to releasing the CD at events this year, including the Rochester jazz festival. It's not possible now with the virus situation. Summer dates with Salvant and with Ulysses Owens Jr. were canceled, as well as some teaching gigs.

Under quarantine, she has been presenting Sunday night concerts, live-streamed through Crowdcast, with Feifke. Part of the proceeds are donated to organizations with emergency artist relief funds.

"That's what we've been doing to keep things moving. Before each concert we do a pre-concert conversation that's open to everybody and we answer questions and talk about the theme of the music for that night and our approach to the music. Every week is different. We did a Coltrane night, we did a [Gerry Mulligan](#) night. We did a night of our originals. It's been fun."

The Step Ahead jazz camp will keep her busy and involved in education, which is important to the young musician. "That, with performing—It's my mission to do both as much as possible."

"I try to combine education into my tour dates as much as I can (through "visiting artist" types of things). Also, I'm into the entrepreneur aspect of the business and how to drive your own success, create your own work, instead of relying on others. It's important to have many different avenues going."

Tarantino has a vision about her future, which portends to be long and fruitful.

"I would love to keep touring and performing with the amazing people I'm fortunate to work with. I love traveling and meeting people from all over. I'd love to do that more with my own group. Also continue the education. Down the line, I'd love to take a little bit of an ambassador role for the music, whether that be expanding my summer jazz program or getting more involved at an arts organization as some kind of artistic director or something like that. I'd like to be involved as much as I can throughout the community and in jazz education."

Photo courtesy of Alexa Tarantino



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