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# ALEXA TARANTINO

BY RUSS MUSTO

Few decide what their life work will be before their tenth birthday. Even fewer are fortunate enough to have that youthful dream flourish into adulthood. Alexa Tarantino, one of those rare individuals, born on May 30th, 1992 in West Hartford, Connecticut, remembers, "I must have been probably a third grader and my parents took me to the local high school jazz concert and that's where I got the bug." The show was at what would be her future alma mater, Hall High School. She says, "Every March or so they put on a big show called Pops 'n Jazz and I saw Erica von Kleist play there and told my parents 'That's what I want to do.'" The following year she got her first alto. "My first lessons I started on saxophone and piano. My paternal grandmother was a pianist and she provided for her family by playing piano on the radio during the Great Depression. That story always stuck with me, so I wanted to learn the piano, as well." She confesses that she was soon obsessed with the idea of becoming a jazz saxophonist and moved precipitously in that direction. By the time she began at Hall she was well on her way, noting "I was in the second jazz band in my freshman year and then I was in the top jazz band my sophomore, junior and senior years. During those years I worked my way up to playing lead alto. That's where I really fell in love with playing lead alto and that's also where I fell in love with woodwind doubling."

These skills served her well during her years at the Eastman School of Music. Her doubling abilities garnered her a place with Ryan Truesdell's Gil Evans Project there and at the Umbria Jazz Festival. It was also at Eastman that she came to the attention of DIVA Orchestra bandleader, drummer Sherrie Maricle: "She called me and said that they needed a lead alto player for a gig at the Deer Head Inn. It was kind of a big moment for me to drive all that way by myself from Rochester to Pennsylvania. I really felt like maybe I was starting my career. The gig went over well and so Sherrie invited me to be the lead alto in the orchestra. At the time a nine-piece version of DIVA was the backing band for the Maurice Hines show *Tapping Through Life* and Sherrie offered me the alto position. The show spent six weeks at a theater in Delaware and then moved Off Broadway to New York. That was December 2015 and I figured that if there was ever a time to move to New York that was it."

Tarantino was about to start her first year at Juilliard when she saw an ad for open auditions for Arturo O'Farrill's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra. She says, "Of course I knew all about the band. I didn't expect to get the position. I just figured it was the end of the summer and I had the time to commit to the process and I would try my best." The saxophonist got the gig and spent two years with the band. "We went to Mexico and made an incredible documentary [*Fandango At The Wall*] and to Abu Dhabi, which is something that I will never forget, and a lot of other places in between, plus Birdland every Sunday night. That was a really special time." O'Farrill lauds the saxophonist proclaiming,

"Alexa is that rare combination of exceptional musician, truly soulful improviser and a deeply chill human being. You add that to her professionalism and ability to get along with folks on the bandstand and you really begin to see what musical greatness is all about."

Tarantino moved on from the band when she began touring with Cécile McLorin Salvant. She describes her work with the vocalist as a high point in her career. "We worked together on the small group run at the Vanguard and after that we took the 13-piece group with Darcy James Argue and the Ogresse ensemble on the road. We've become really, really close friends. When you're working with Cécile you just feel like you are there because she wants YOU there. She wants your input, she wants your opinion; she expects everyone to be on the top of their game, but she also has a great sense of humor and can laugh at herself. She's just incredible to work with and incredibly inspiring because she is so humble yet so knowledgeable." The admiration is mutual. Salvant notes, "Alexa is one of the most versatile musicians I know, it's been a joy working with her in different settings. She is always in service of the music, extremely creative, fun, tasteful, fluid."

Despite her well-earned reputation Tarantino took her time to step out front as a bandleader: "For a while I just wanted to play with other people because I wanted to gain that experience and I didn't know if I had quite enough repertoire to have my own band or if I had a band sound. Her debut album *Winds Of Change*, with Nick Finzer, Christian Sands, Joe Martin and Rudy Royston, proved that she not only had an appealing personal sound, but also an original compositional voice, having penned eight of the date's ten songs. Last year's *Clarity*, a quartet outing with Steven Feifke taking over the piano chair, further confirmed her abilities as a writer, with four new tunes, and as an interpreter of classics by Horace Silver and Kurt Weill. "I was lucky to have an organization like Jazz at Lincoln Center [JALC] behind me. When I first got involved with them they would offer me gigs in the Atrium or opening for someone. That gave me the encouragement to take it to the next level. I guess my next goal is to do more of that because after making a couple of records for Posi-Tone and playing some of those gigs and getting very positive reactions I just want to do more and play for people and write more music and access more of my creative sound as a bandleader, composer and a saxophonist."

Tarantino was on stage at the Paramount Theater for SFJAZZ with Salvant when the pandemic hit hard. "We were getting ready to do our final run through when the producer came out and said the governor just shut everything down and we have to send you all home." Back in New York she has stayed busy with a JALC-sponsored videocast "The Well Rounded Musician" and other online projects. And she recorded a new album for Posi-Tone, the centerpiece of which is her new suite "A Moment In Time", which not surprising is based on the COVID experience. ❖

For more information, visit [alexatarantino.com](http://alexatarantino.com). Tarantino live-streams Sundays at [alexatarantino.com/projects/quarantine-concerts-with-steven-feifke](http://alexatarantino.com/projects/quarantine-concerts-with-steven-feifke).

#### Recommended Listening:

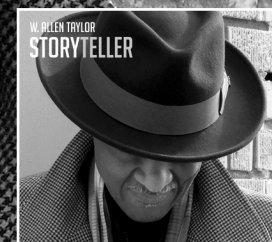
- DIVA Jazz Orchestra — 25th Anniversary Project (ArtistShare, 2017)
- Lauren Sevian — *Bliss* (Posi-Tone, 2017)
- Lioness — *Pride & Joy* (Posi-Tone, 2018)
- Chris Teal Trio — *Analog Dreams* (Outside In Music, 2018)
- Alexa Tarantino — *Winds of Change* (Posi-Tone, 2018)
- Alexa Tarantino — *Clarity* (Posi-Tone, 2019)

"His natural swing and taste allow him to revisit well-throttled standards with gusto and originality..."

A welcome debut by an artist who definitely deserves wider exposure and appreciation."

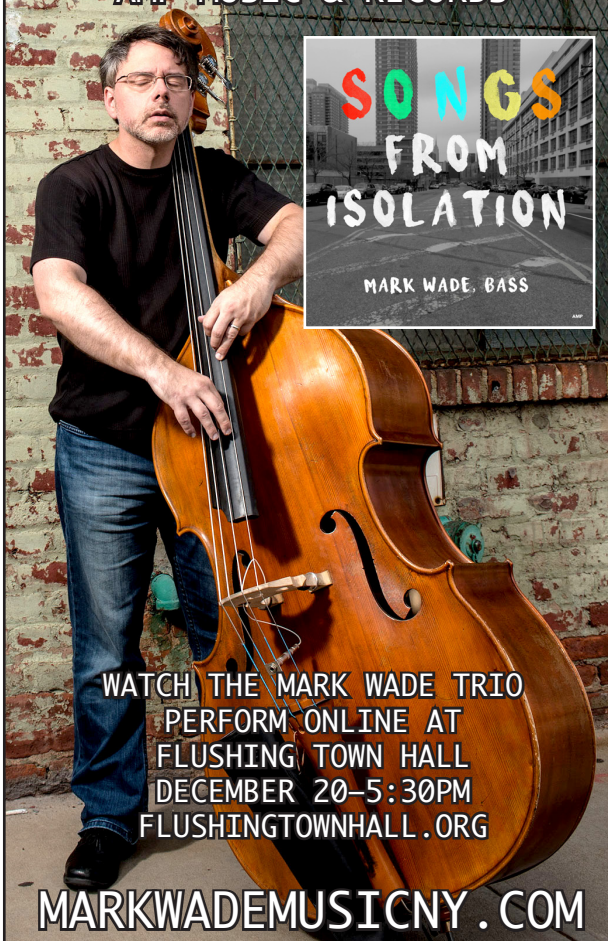
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