



What is the

Chris Vitiello

Questions about the future of jazz don't yield a clear, singular answer. If you ask 10 aficionados, you'll get 10 different answers. Among jazz listeners, initiates and novices alike will plot a different array of musicians, genres, trends, and scenes.

But when you overlay the scatterplot answers of several listeners, you start to see something that looks more like a portrait than a Jackson Pollock. Trends and directions emerge from the noise. Musicians are opening jazz up — to diverse rhythms and sounds, different musical and artistic genres, new regional scenes, and to women.

Chilean saxophonist Melissa Aldana is a perfect example of who you'll see in jazz's crystal ball. She brings her hot blend of Afro-Latin grooves and Chilean street music to Memorial Hall on January 22 with bassist Pablo Menares and drummer Allan Mednard. In 2013, Aldana was the first female musician to take first prize in the prestigious Thelonious Monk International Jazz Saxophone Competition. "She won't be the last," says Tom Orange, who spins discs as the jazz director at Cleveland's 89.3 WCSB when he's not playing sax, booking touring bands, and teaching in the English department at Cleveland State University.

"Jazz has always been a boy's club and still is," Orange says. "Typically, if you were a woman jazz musician, you were a singer or a pianist. But now more women are involved and doing live performances and recordings and getting their stuff out there."

Off the top of his head, he counts off a quartet of female musicians on par with Aldana: Ingrid Laubrock, a German-born sax player based in New York; Mette Rasmussen, a Danish alto player working



Chilean saxophonist Melissa Aldana

**“ACT SO THAT
THERE IS NO USE IN A CENTRE.”**

— GERTRUDE STEIN

future of jazz?



in Norway; Susan Alcorn, an American pedal steel guitarist; and saxophonist Hailey Niswanger, based in Portland. Orange tabs New York-based independent record label Relative Pitch Records as one devoted to releasing music by and involving women more than most other labels.

The question of the future of jazz reminds Orange of another group of musicians that worked together to determine a specific answer to jazz's future in the 1960s. Experimentalists such as Anthony Braxton, Wadada Leo Smith, and Henry Threadgill founded the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) to safeguard an avant-garde tradition through the rise of rock music. The organization still exists, but it's opened up into multidisciplinary performance, as well as music.

Saxophonist Matana Roberts represents the cutting edge of the AACM with her self-described "panoramic sound quilting" composition techniques. Her epic *COIN COIN* project, of which three of an eventual 12 discs have been released, draws upon a wide range of sources and inspirations to express the African-American experience, from the slave trade to the present.

"It's solo work with her sax and speaking and singing voice and then found text and spoken word from other sources," Orange describes. "Really almost like a noise collage that at the same time is exploring African-American history and identity."

While Roberts' music might remain on the commercial fringe, she works with commercially successful jazz musicians like pianist and composer Vijay Iyer, whose "RADHE RADHE: Rites of Holi" commission was part of Carolina Performing Arts' "The Rite of Spring at 100" season in 2013. Iyer produced Roberts' 2008 album *The Chicago Project*.

To Steve Taxman, who's been broadcasting jazz on Durham-based 90.7 WNCU for 12 years, Iyer is a rising star whose intercontinental weave of jazz with Indian musical traditions is attracting new listeners.

"Vijay Iyer on piano and Rudresh Mahanthappa on alto sax," he



**Jason Moran (center)
and his group The Bandwagon**

notes. "They're bringing in a lot of sounds from India into their music and combining that with a modern conception of jazz to come up with something completely unique and very complex and absolutely fascinating.

"The fact that they're both doing very well — in fact Vijay Iyer is one of the best-selling piano players in jazz — means we'll be seeing more of that because people are receptive to it."

Taxman crafts two weekly broadcasts on WNCU — "Jazz Focus," a Saturday morning show of mainstream jazz and "The Loft," a Thursday night set ranging from classic bebop through hard bop into the avant garde. At first, Taxman's playlist for "The Loft"

concentrated on jazz legends like Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and the later John Coltrane, but the balance has shifted toward contemporary musicians.

"I'm finding over time that the show has become more modern and evolved to focus on today's artists more," Taxman says. "I think that's important because these guys are trying to make a living, and we need to support them so that, when they do come to town and play rooms like Memorial Hall, people come out to see them. Jason Moran is a perfect example of that."

Moran, a pianist who brings his band The Bandwagon to Memorial Hall on February 5, plays very listenable music that's nonetheless connected to outrider traditions. He knocked Taxman out with a 2004 set at the Parisian nightclub New Morning.

"One of the most innovative things I ever heard was on a tune called 'Straight Out of Istanbul,'" Taxman remembers, "where he took a Turkish phone call and converted the words into music and then played along on top of it. So he used the rhythm of the Turkish language and then added melody to it, and it was absolutely hypnotic. He understands the tradition, but he knows how to make it his own."

Something of a new-release junkie, Taxman listens to everything and thinks, "Is this jazz? Can I play this on The Loft?"

▶ CONNECTIONS ◀

JAZZ AT MEMORIAL HALL

JAN 22 **Melissa Aldana**, saxophone with **Pablo Menares** and **Allan Mednard**

FEB 5 **Jason Moran & The Bandwagon**

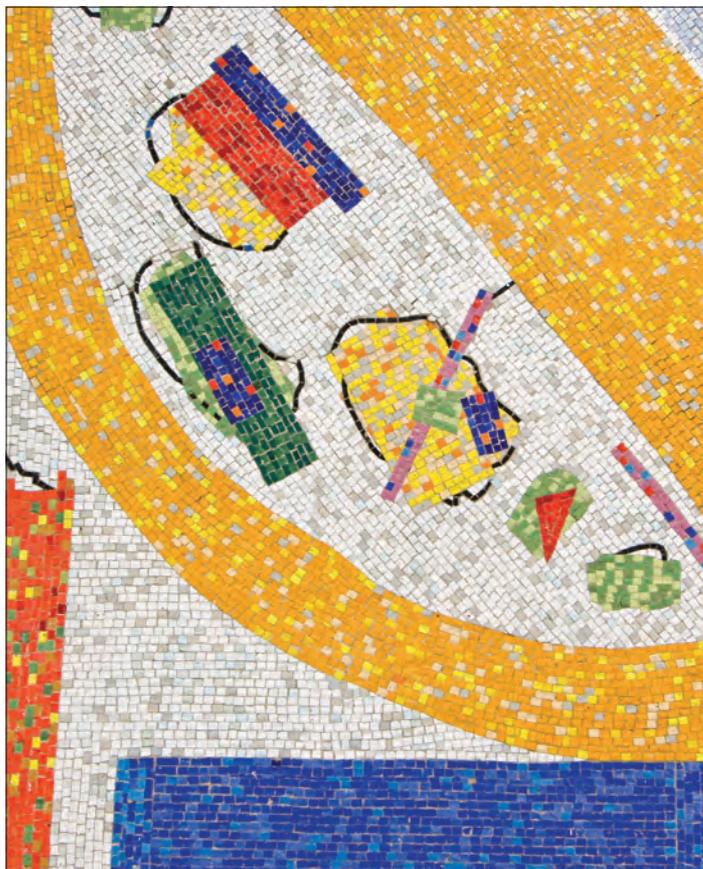
FEB 20 **The Count Basie Orchestra** with **Diane Schuur** and **New York Voices**

MAR 4 **Fred Hersch**, piano and **Julian Lage**, guitar

"A big trend that I hear right now is changing time in jazz — complex time signatures, complex rhythms, and rhythms from other cultures and other societies," he says. "A lot of musicians are bored with a 4/4 time signature and want to try something more."

"An extreme example of that is a wonderful alto saxophonist named Steve Lehman, who has these crazy time signatures that are so complex that it's hard to count them out, but they're all playing it on a dime; they always know where they are. It's exciting to see the ride they take you on."

Complex international mash-ups, complex unconventional time signatures, complex sound collages with field recordings — notice a theme?



Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), *Mosaic Mural, 711 Third Avenue, New York* (detail), 1956. Photograph by Paul Mutino. Works by Hans Hofmann used with permission of the Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust.

Walls of Color

The Murals of Hans Hofmann

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This exhibition was organized by the Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT, with the support of the Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust.

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Orange sees a renaissance in ornate, dense, complex music, pointing to the success of the improvisation-focused What You Will Festival founded on a farm outside Columbus, Ohio in 2011. To him, the festival is part of an emergence of regional scenes of likeminded jazz musicians hailing from smaller cities strewn throughout the Midwest — places like Buffalo, Erie, Detroit, and Cleveland.

“There’s something in the water for cities of our size,” Orange says, quoting Gertrude Stein’s famous line about there being no use in a center. “We have really active scenes and really talented players, many of whom are regional out of necessity. They have day jobs or work factory shifts, so they don’t have the means to take time off and tour. But there’s a kinship in that regionalism, and it’s not just limited to the Rust Belt.”

The rise of smaller, distinctive, regional scenes has a lot to do with jazz musicians taking responsibility for more than just keeping their chops up. Musicians are starting modest festivals to appeal to jazz traditionalists as well as new listeners, like Durham’s Art of Cool Fest. In the face of music education cuts, they’re opening their own jazz schools like the Music Settlement in Cleveland, which hosts classes for underprivileged youth during the day before becoming a club at night. You have to hit all of those notes now to guarantee the future of jazz.

Which brings Taxman back to Aldana, who won the Monk Competition at age 25. “I was excited when I saw that a young woman had won the Monk Competition for a change, and that she was Chilean to boot,” he says. “The first recording I put on, I heard her influences right away. I heard a lot of Sonny Rollins, and then after listening for a while I heard some Mark Turner in there too. She absolutely has her own thing going on, but she’s still young, and I think that’s going to develop over time.”

Aldana isn’t playing over phone conversations or blowing 11/4 time or embarking upon a multi-disc gesamtkunstwerk. She deploys a sophisticated harmonic sensibility through lightly articulated, clean lines. She plays it straight, but damn, she plays it so well.

“You talk about where it’s going,” Taxman says. “It’s not all just funky rhythms and avant-garde craziness. I think there will continue to be great mainstream, straight-ahead players as well, and they’ll be playing at a very high level.”

“It’s not just about it getting weird. Mainstream jazz is flourishing right now too.” ■

Chris Vitiello is a freelance writer based in Durham.



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