

ACCOUNT

SUBSCRIBE

JazzTimes
AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

FAVORITES



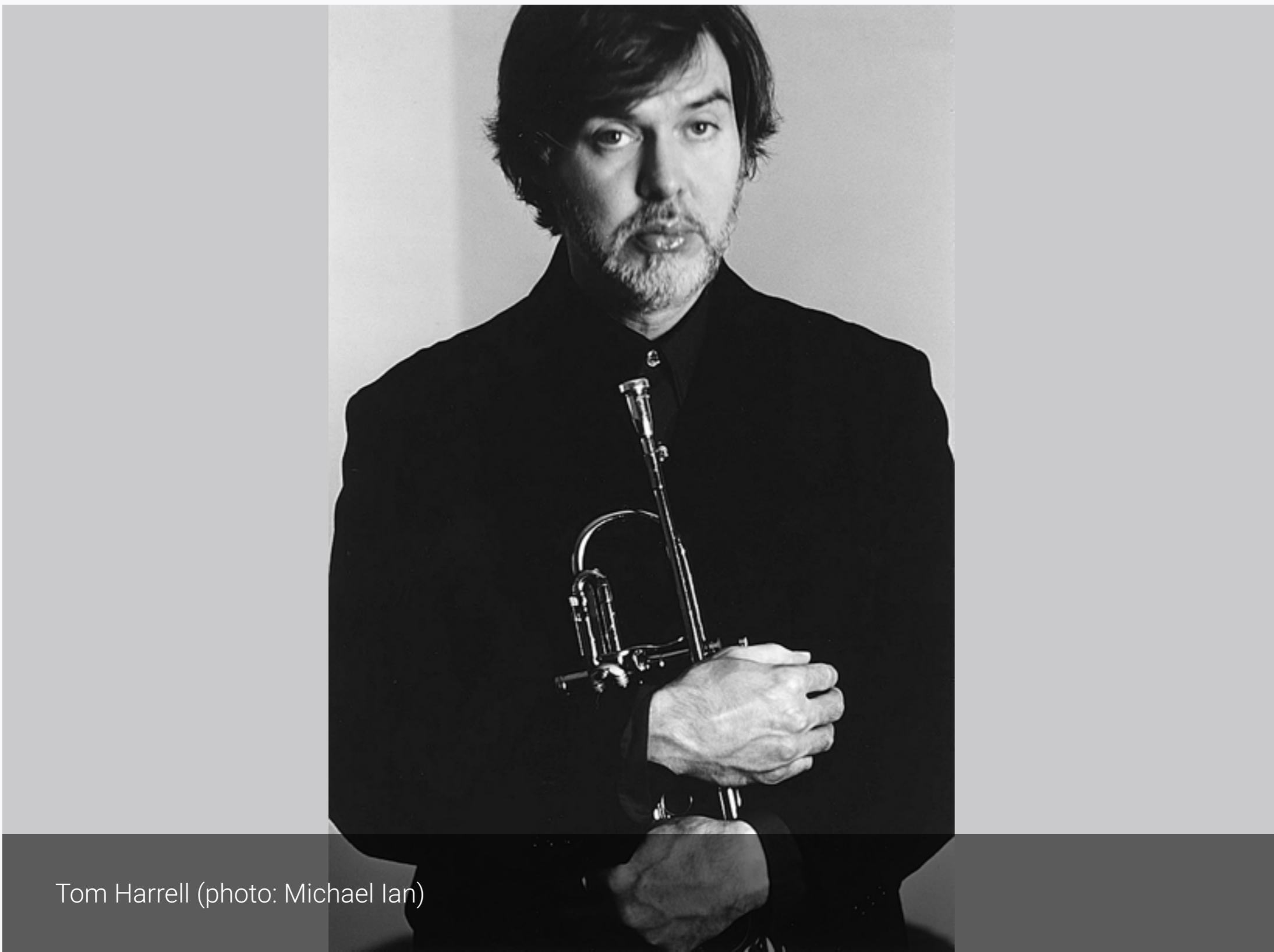
[Features](#) [Reviews](#) [Festivals & Events](#) [Audio & Video](#) [Guides](#) [News](#) [Magazine](#)

Advertisement

[Home](#) > [JT Archives](#) > [Tom Harrell](#) > Tom Harrell: Senses and Sensibilities

Tom Harrell: Senses and Sensibilities

UPDATED JUNE 11, 2020 – BILL MILKOWSKI



Tom Harrell (photo: Michael Ian)

The sight of Tom Harrell shuffling down the street in the evening to get a quart of milk at the corner bodega can be quite unsettling. To the uninitiated in his Washington Heights neighborhood (a.k.a. Dominican Heights...so far Uptown in Manhattan that Harlem is Downtown), he's an oddity, a tripped-out white dude who walks around like he's in some kind of trance. Arms stiff at his sides, neck craning like a vulture, eyes fixed in a downward gaze, head a-wobble in tremors, Harrell cuts quite the anomalous figure on his nightly strolls. Little do gawking onlookers know that beneath this disturbing countenance (the side effects from psychotropic drugs he uses to manage a schizophrenic disorder) lurks a bona fide genius. He's been called that by no less than Phil Woods. Colleagues like Joe Lovano, Kenny Werner and Ray Drummond stand in awe of Harrell's composing and arranging talents.

"He's one of the heaviest writers I know," says saxophonist Greg Tardy, who plays a key role on *The Art Of Rhythm*, Harrell's second release for RCA/Victor. "A misunderstood person but a really, really highly intelligent, beautiful human being; one of the most inspirational people I've ever met in my life."

Talking with the 51-year-old trumpeter-composer-arranger, one can sense the depth of his knowledge and understanding of music, his scope of the big picture. The sheer volume of his thoughts pouring forth on a variety of subjects is nearly overwhelming. It's a steady stream-of-consciousness rap, and yet there's a brilliant logic to the flow, an inherent interconnectedness to the fragments. You can almost hear his magnificent mind whirring as he makes the connections and draws the parallels: between James Joyce's "Finnegan's Wake" and Miles Davis' *On The Corner*, Thelonious Monk and Burt Bacharach, Wayne Shorter and Anton Webern, Ravi Shankar and Herbie Nichols, Harry Partch's "The Hobo Letter" and John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." He illuminates the conversation with a comparative analysis of flamenco and gamelan scales then points out the similarities between Bo Diddley and the clave, chorinos and bebop. He quotes Marcus Aurelius before bringing in a reference to Ravel's "Daphne And Chloe."

Like a musical shaman, he hears melody and harmony in everything around him. The sound of an early '60s car going uphill or downhill, he explains, is a C7th with an added 9th. The refrigerator has a Bflat pedal, he notes, and all machinery generates the overtone series. The wind outside his window in the morning blows in parallel tritones. The birds sing in triads. That boat passing by is a Bflat.

"I was listening to water pouring from a faucet today in a stainless steel sink," he continues, "and it sounded really similar...maybe this is crazy...but it reminded me of a chord Stravinsky used in *The Rite Of Spring*, the E major triad with the Eflat 7th in the 'Dance Of The Adolescents.'"

There is no one in jazz today writing with more intelligence, depth and heart than Tom Harrell. "There's a real craft to writing and harmony, to putting the right tones together," says Lovano, "and Tom really knows his craft, man. He's really something else! His compositions are so clear and beautiful. He has a real full scope of the picture of each tune that he works on and each tune has its own character. And that comes from Tom's experience playing other great music. I don't think you can really write like that or conceive pieces like that unless you have played masterpieces by others first. And Tom has totally absorbed all of Horace Silver's music, all of Charlie Parker and Dizzy's music, Benny Golson's music...he has an amazing history of repertoire that carries into Stravinsky and Mahler and Bartok and ethnic musics. Tom has studied and loved all music and through the years he's tried to incorporate those things into his own writing."

Presently, Harrell is expanding his palette, incorporating five and six horn voicings and introducing new timbres and textures from oboe, bassoon, marimba, acoustic guitar, strings, percussion. While he firmly established his reputation in the '80s through a series of fine recordings for the Contemporary and Chesky labels, Harrell leaps to a higher plateau with his latest offering. And though he alluded to his love affair with Latin rhythms on his 1996 RCA/Victor debut *Labyrinth* (particularly on the lively opener "Samba Mate" and the insinuating "Marimba Song"), he delves into that rich musical territory with more clarity and conviction on *The Art Of Rhythm*.

Romero Lubambo's nylon string acoustic guitar plays an important role in setting the alluring vibe throughout this Afro-Cuban/Afro-Caribbean/Brazilian project. His unhurried comping on the opening bossa, "Petals Danse," creates a sense of ease while Harrell's keen arranging instincts are played out through a string trio of Regina Carter, Ron Lawrence and Akua Dixon. Tardy plays clarinet on that soothing track as well as on two other Brazilian flavored pieces, "Las Almas" and "Exit In." "To be honest," says Tardy, "clarinet is an instrument I haven't really played seriously in about ten years. But Tom had faith in me to be able to get it together by the date."

Harrell's use of texture and mood on the ominous "Oasis" recall Miles' provocative work during his On The Corner-Get Up With It phase. Tenor sax great Dewey Redman provides some heroic blowing on "Oasis" and Harrell himself responds to the churning Afro-Cuban undercurrent with some of his most adventurous playing on the record. Redman straddles the inside-outside aesthetic on a Caribbean-flavored "Caribe" and he flows with impunity over the changes to the jaunty "Doo-Bop," a tune that Tom readily acknowledges as having a Monkish quality.

Harrell's playing on trumpet or fluegelhorn is equally breathtaking and cliché-free throughout The Art Of Rhythm. "I consider him a very thorough, multi-dimensional musician," says Tardy. "He has real command of the bebop language and a real command of more modern, angular, linear type playing and free playing. He's got the whole spectrum. He's a master."

Again, Lovano concurs. "He's got this amazing counterbalance in what he plays. All the greatest players in history have had that. They played the opposite of what's happening. The drummer's playing busy, you play simple. The drummer's playing simple, you play busy. It's like checking each other out to a point where you're playing contrasting things. And Tom really has that ability to focus on what others are playing around him."

Harrell has long been regarded as one of the most accomplished trumpeters on the scene, going back to his apprenticeship with Horace Silver (1973-1977), his brief stint with Bill Evans (1979) and his tenure with Phil Woods (1983-1989). He has also distinguished himself as a refreshing soloist in Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra, the Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra, the Lee Konitz nonet and George Russell's New York Big Band. For more recent examples of his playing, check out Tom's restrained lyricism on an intimate duet of "Skylark" with Jim Hall from the guitarist's Dialogues (Telarc) or his mercurial, free-form interaction with Joe Lovano on Ornette Coleman's "Fort Worth" from the saxophonist's live at the Village Vanguard double CD, Quartets (Blue Note).

As a teenager growing up in the Bay Area, Harrell studied with John Handy and Lee Konitz while somehow summoning up the courage to sit in with such seasoned jazz veterans as Philly Joe Jones, Sonny Stitt, Charles McPherson, Lee Morgan and Rahsaan Roland Kirk. "I sat in with Rahsaan one time at Slug's in 1966," he recalls. "I played 'Three Flowers' and 'Cherokee.' He criticized me for...I could hear him saying I only played scales but it was still a thrill to play with him. When I first heard We Free Kings, it was like a new way of thinking about music. The freedom and spontaneity really inspired me. I guess that's the thing...to try and seek experiences like that."

It was also in 1966, while attending Stanford University, that his mental problems began manifesting in a heavy sense. Following a suicide attempt, he was diagnosed as a borderline schizophrenic and placed on medication to help him regain his emotional balance. By 1969, he had graduated from Stanford with a B.A. degree in music composition and was on the road with Stan Kenton's band. Through 1970 and 1971 he played in Woody Herman's Thundering Herb before joining the innovative Latin-jazz fusion band Azteca in 1972.

Around that same time, bossa nova had a huge impact on him. "I remember driving to a gig and hearing Jobim on the car radio, and it suddenly hit me. I had heard this kind of music before. I was in high school when Stan Getz's recording of 'Desafinado' came out but it didn't get me then, even though some of my friends were really into it. I dunno, sometimes I've been asleep on things that are really valid. But other times it hits me over the head, like hearing this Jobim tune on the car radio. The use of space was so innovative to me."

After moving to New York in October of 1973, Harrell joined Horace Silver's band. Today he has a comprehensive knowledge of Silver's entire repertoire. Harrell's "Bear That In Mind" from Labyrinth bears Horace's unmistakable stamp.

"Horace once told me that whenever he writes something he waits until after it's done to count the bars," he notes. "And that's why some of his songs, especially from the '50s, like 'Metamorphosis' and 'The Outlaw,' have odd numbers of phrases. He didn't do it consciously, it just came out that way spontaneously. It's like Miles said, 'Let's play it first and talk about it later.'"

Though he says he struggled with his direction through the '70s, he got on track working with Phil Woods. "I was worried about being old fashioned in the '70s," he explains, "but at the same time I was afraid of being too modern and inaccessible, so there was this kind of double reality going on. After Phil gave me an outlet for my writing, I began combining more modern kinds of harmonies with more traditional forms. A lot of the songs were still 32 bars long but maybe the bar structure would be like ten and six and maybe the harmony would be dissonant. Since then I never underestimate anyone's capacity to hear. I think everyone has the capability of being really sensitive and also creative...in an audience or in a group.

"I think it's really important for music to communicate with everyone," he continues, "but you don't have to do it at the expense of your art. Like, you can hear Coltrane like on 'A Love Supreme,' he was creating on a level of total artistry and also it's very accessible. Miles could reach a wide audience and also be very deep. I'm trying to do the same with my music."

Harrell credits his sidemen on *The Art Of Rhythm* with pushing him to situations where he hears differently. "It's like opening a door," he says. "You unlock a new way of dealing. And that's hard to generate by myself."

He says he also draws great inspiration from Joe Lovano. "It takes amazing courage to really play without cliches and Joe has had the courage to do that himself and make it work while still being very visible...and a nice person at the same time. If I try to play without cliches for too long I lose my focus and I start using phrases that I've heard before. But Joe inspires me to reach for something new."

Lovano sounds equally inspired playing alongside Harrell. "Yeah, man, he's a lot of fun to play with. And when we get into exploring things together it takes on its own life, it's own form and sound. That moment is there because of the two of us playing together. He has that special quality that he creates with everybody he plays with. That's really the beauty of this whole artform, man."

Gearbox

Tom plays a Conn Constellation trumpet and a Couesnon fluegelhorn.

Listening Pleasures

Tadd Dameron: *Fontainebleau* (Prestige P-7037 OJCCD-055-2)

Dizzy Gillespie: *Dizzier and Dizzier* (Victor Jazz [09026-68517-2](#))

Fats Navarro: *Nostalgia* (Savoy MG 12133 SV-0123)

Charlie Parker: *Charlie Parker Story On Dial, Vol 2: New York Days* (Stateside CP32-5104)

Originally Published May 1, 1998

Festivals & Events



Dec 17

From 9:00 PM to 11:00 PM EST
Pink Martini: Home for the Holidays



Dec 18

From 5:00 PM to 5:00 PM EST
Music of Brazilian Piano Masters II

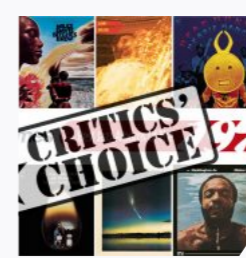


Dec 19

From 8:00 PM to 10:00 PM EST
Nicole Henry's Eighth Annual Winter Concert

[SEE MORE](#)

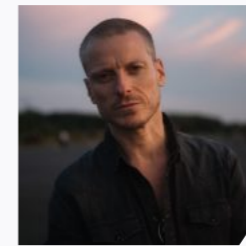
Editor's Picks



LISTS

10 Best Jazz Albums of the 1970s: Critics' Picks

What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary...



SPEAKIN' MY PIECE WITH DEKEL BOR

Speakin' My Piece with Dekel Bor

JazzTimes, in association with Ropeadope Records,...



PROFILES

The Changing Nature of Protest in Jazz

What we went to offer is a positive notion, a...

JazzTimes
AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

NEW JAZZ NOW
New jazz albums you need to know about

SEE MORE

Visible text on collage: LUCHO VALDES, Connie Han, CHRIS MCBRIDE, BERN, SOUL FINGERS, BOBBY, GARY BURTON, isaiahstewart summerbeat, DAVID HAZ, ROY CARTER, The Time It

Advertisement



Scott LaFaro

Previously unavailable recordings and a new bio illuminate the legend of bassist Scott LaFaro



Uncovered: Album Art in the Digital Age

Can jazz's rich tradition of eye-catching cover art survive in the MP3 era?

Kurt Elling: Man in the Air

Nate Chinen makes the argument that Kurt Elling is the most influential jazz vocalist of our time

Harry Connick, Jr.: Direct Hits

Two decades after his commercial breakthrough, Harry Connick Jr. taps legendary producer Clive Davis for an album of crooner roots and beloved tunes

Advertisement

JazzTimes Newsletter

America's jazz resource, delivered to your inbox

SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE NEWSLETTER

[Home](#)

[About JazzTimes](#)

[Advertising](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Manage Your Consent](#)

JazzTimes
AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

Published since 1970, *JazzTimes*—“America’s Jazz Magazine”—provides comprehensive and in-depth coverage of the jazz scene. Often controversial, always entertaining, *JazzTimes* is a favorite of musicians and fans alike.

FOLLOW US

