

We Jazz

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MILES DAVIS BY ALEX COLES, PHIL FREEMAN, TONY HIGGINS, ASHLEY KAHN, TADAYUKI NAITOH & ANTON SPICE
SPIRITUAL JAZZ BY PIERRE CRÉPON & FRANCIS GOODING / JONAH PARZEN-JOHNSON BY GIULIO PECCI
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JONAH PARZEN- JOHNSON

BY GIULIO PECCI

Illustration by Matti Nives

Playing solo is like walking in the dark. If you're improvising, the path gets even trickier: potholes, low branches, constant forks. This is true for both the performer and the listener. Surrounded by darkness, the soloist moves on instinct, guided by what feels right, by the hints and nudges buried deep inside. These hints are nothing more than the distilled sum of their most private emotional baggage, fused with the sharpest technical skills they've honed over the years.

All those years of practice, of music played alone or with others, in silence or for an audience, are like a faint glow, barely lighting the soles of the musician's shoes. But the real guiding light—the "third eye" that lets the performer move confidently even while stumbling—is the emotional charge they pour into every note. It comes from the deepest folds of their soul and reveals itself in every sound, strong or fragile. The result is a chain of miraculous sounds that flashes into existence like lightning, illuminating everything for a moment before vanishing. A luminous garland, ephemeral and immaterial, whose beauty is inseparable from its fleeting nature.

This is exactly why I was immediately drawn to Jonah Parzen-Johnson's music. The Chicago-born, New York-based saxophonist has made a name for himself with a series of remarkable solo records, which reveal even more of his unique playing in live performance: delicate yet powerful, tender yet assertive. Jonah invites listeners into his world, telling stories with the patience and confidence of a craftsman who has spent countless hours honing his art and, as a result, feels no need to prove anything to anyone just because.

His last two albums, however, come with a delightful twist: both are duo records. The first, *It Was Always Time*, features Turkish drummer and percussionist Berke Can Özcan, while the second, *A Few We Remember*, pairs him with Finnish composer Lau Nau. Here, Johnson explores new possibilities for a voice that is already recognizable, opening it up to external worlds with the same curiosity and creativity that define his solo work. I spoke with Jonah by phone (with a brief appearance from Lau Nau) to discuss it all: his beginnings in Chicago, the move to New York, his connection with We Jazz Records, the latest album, future projects, and what it means to learn to play as yourself.

GIULIO PECCI: *Let's start from the beginning. When and how did you start playing? And what was the first sound or moment that made you think, "Wow, I want to do this"?*

JONAH PARZEN-JOHNSON: I grew up in a house where the stereo was always on: some jazz, but a large mix of all kinds of music. I remember hearing Paul Simon's *Graceland* a lot when I was a kid, but also Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, an Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers album that my parents loved. When I was a kid, I had a CD-ROM encyclopedia that included a section with a few-second clip of every instrument. I remember I listened to the saxophone and immediately knew: this is the instrument I want to play. So I asked my parents for a saxophone, and they got me a skateboard with a saxophone picture on it. I said no, I really want a saxophone! So they rented me one, and that's how it started. When I was fourteen years old, I started playing baritone instead of alto in the concert band at school. A year later, I got a teacher, Mwata Bowden, a great saxophonist and a member of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians). In my first lesson, I said "You know, Mr. Bowden, I play alto saxophone, too." And he said "No, you don't. You're a baritone player. You're one of us now." I never really played alto again after that.

GP: *All of this happened on the South Side of Chicago, right?*

JPJ: Yes, I grew up in High Park, which is there, near the university.

GP: *It's a place with a very special musical history. Was that something you were already aware of growing up, or did you realize it later?*

JPJ: I started to learn about it when I was in my teens. First, I found out about Bronzeville, a neighborhood just above High Park, which is really important for the history of blues. Then I started studying musicians, and I would see things like Charlie Parker live at the Beehive, discovering that it used to be a club right by my house. Or read about Herbie Hancock, and he'd say, "When I started playing, I first got excited because I would see all the musicians walking on 47th Street with their instrument cases." That's just right by my house, too!

When I was fifteen, I started finding out more about the AACM. I went to see the Art Ensemble of Chicago at Mandel Hall, an important venue for them, and this huge community of people. And also every teacher I had ever had and musicians that I had seen around the city. I started to realize that there was this cultural history to the area, especially with black intellectuals, with musicians, creative artists of all kinds. Mwata Bowden taught me a lot about the history of the AACM, and at the same time, I was going to the jam sessions at the Velvet Lounge, which was owned by the saxophone player Fred Anderson. I found out about him just by wondering who he was, and then I suddenly

discovered that he's this incredible musician with this huge Chicago sound. That's when I started hearing about the idea of the Chicago saxophone sound.

GP: Could you try to describe this Chicago saxophone sound?

JPJ: The thing I feel the most is that the sound of a musician, and specifically a Chicago saxophone player, comes from inside of them. In New York, there's this sort of competition to sound a certain way, and sometimes it feels like the sound isn't coming from inside of the people, but from the city itself. In Chicago, it really feels like each musician took their time to explore how they could connect with the saxophone, to build this sort of resonance, richness, and fullness. And even though we are talking about a Chicago sound, each one is almost like its own, uniquely gigantic. Von Freeman, Ari Brown, Eddie Harris, Gene Ammons, Roscoe Mitchell. It's coming from inside of them instead of trying to be trendy or be part of a scene.

GP: Many musicians from Chicago have talked to me about the long, heavy winters and how life often happens indoors. Do you think this influenced the music, creating this more introspective, "from-the-inside" kind of sound?

JPJ: In a way, but at the same time, I'll say my experience in the world is this: the coldest places always have the warmest rooms.

GP: If you can be outside, at least you want to be good inside.

JPJ: Yes! I'd say in Chicago, there was a great sense of gathering. There were so many different weekly sessions, presided over by incredible saxophone players. It was very much like: let's gather and show me what you've been working on. I haven't lived there in a very long time, but when I was a kid, the sense of community was stronger than anywhere else I've ever experienced. I felt mentored, supported, and part of a group of like-minded people in every way as a musician there. Sometimes I also felt like I needed to struggle just to keep up, but I was inspired to do that because I felt like everybody was sort of pulling together.

GP: You already touched on this, but I'd like to go back to the move from Chicago to New York. What were the main differences, and how do you think each city helped shape the musician you are today?

JPJ: When I moved to New York, I got the sensation that genre was really very clearly defined there. You had the downtown scene, the new classical improvised scene, or bebop, you had the jam sessions playing modern hard bop, the organ jam in Harlem. Every place came with a genre. In Chicago, I always felt, at least at the Velvet Lounge, that a song could go in so many different places. They're

playing a blues in the beginning, then someone gets up, and they're playing free all of a sudden, then they're back to blues, et cetera: all different styles depending on the players. In New York, it really felt like there was a ticket of entry to each room. Maybe because it's such a big scene, there are so many clubs. There's definitely every kind of scene in New York; whatever kind of music you're into, there's a community of musicians doing it really well. But those communities sometimes feel very separated.

GP: Do you see positive aspects in both?

JPJ: For sure. I have a very competitive spirit, and New York is a very competitive place. I enjoy feeling challenged, I enjoy wanting to do things at a high level and feeling like everybody else does too, that everybody's sort of struggling to be the best they can be. There's nowhere I've experienced in the world where it feels like everybody agrees that they want to try as hard as possible. I love that. And I definitely think there were many points when I got here where it was made very clear to me that if I tried harder, I could do it better. Learning that and then having to push more, definitely made me the musician I am. Also, the fact that there are so many incredible musicians here, so many people I was exposed to.

GP: Do you have some specific names in mind?

JPJ: I did some ensembles with Joe Lovano in college, and he really struck me. Maybe he doesn't feel so present today, but he's one of the most versatile, curious, and explored musicians I've encountered. It feels like he's interested in everything, and his way of playing reflects that: he's mapping a path of all of his favorite styles. He gets associated with more straight-ahead jazz these days, but the truth is that he played almost everything. Going to see him playing with the Paul Motian and Bill Frisell trio was hugely influential for me.

One of my biggest influences was surprising, but stayed there my entire life: Lenny Pickett from Tower of Power and the Saturday Night Live band. I studied with him for a few years in college. He really taught me how to study music, find what you really love about it, understand who you want to be as a musician, and decide what kind of music you want to make.

GP: I'd like to go back to the saxophone for a moment. Was it always jazz from the beginning, or did you explore other sounds and influences early on?

JPJ: I definitely started with jazz. I think I have an experimental spirit. I love the idea of making something that's never been made before, which is very hard to do, but something I always aspire to. So I would say jazz is definitely a base. And, you know, with that, all of the incredible tradition of

black American music in Northern America, which includes also blues, rock, R&B, and electronic music, all come out of the same tradition. That's at the core of what I do. I would say that what I strive to do specifically is two things: to make music that connects with people while challenging them; to make music that is in search of what has never been done before.

GP: *On a more technical level, is there a particular aspect of your playing that you've worked hard to develop and now consider one of your strengths—something you're especially proud of? Conversely, is there still an area that feels challenging or uncomfortable, something you're continuing to work on?*

JPJ: The thing that I care the most about and that I'm most proud of is definitely sound. I work very hard on the sound of my instrument. I think it's the thing that greets people, brings them in, and keeps them connected. I've worked many years to make the baritone feel the same as when I speak. I'm able to speak with my voice on the instrument. And that's been hard, I'm really proud of it. I'm insecure about everything else. There's always a voice in my head saying, "Could you be playing something more interesting, more technically precise? Could you be playing a better melody, be more patient?

Could you be leaving more space and being more empathetic as a performer?" Everything else I'm always striving to improve upon.

GP: *You became known through a lot of solo playing. Playing solo takes confidence and courage. You're completely on your own. What is your relationship with solo performance today?*

JPJ: I've thought about playing solo since I was very young. I first started thinking about it because Mwata Bowden talked about how one of the things that AACM members needed to do as part of their initiation process was to perform a solo concert. So I always thought that was a really cool thing to do. But it's much harder than you think: time goes very slowly when you're up on stage by yourself. Over many years of developing a concept of what it means to play solo, I think that the most important thing is to understand the difference between playing by yourself and playing alone. Because you can play by yourself, like a one-man band, and create every element and fill every space. In that way, you are playing by yourself, but you're not creating the sensation for the audience that you're alone. One of the things I've learned over the years is that, for me, a large part of playing solo is performing vulnerability. That means really making it feel that you're alone when you're playing.

GP: *Can you recall specific epiphanies?*

JPJ: The biggest epiphany is when you write a song, you think it's amazing, and when you perform it, the audience isn't with you. I don't expect every person to love everything I do. I think music is like food: you have ingredients that you like and ingredients you don't like. But there's a sensation when you really feel that you've lost the attention, the energy, the curiosity of the audience. And it doesn't mean you abandon it. Sometimes it's just about understanding how to present it the right way. It's part of why I try to talk when I perform. When I speak, I can share a part of who I am that helps you begin to contextualize the music and connect with me and my music further.

GP: *In recent years, though, you've also released records in duo settings, *It Was Always Time with Berke Can Özcan* (We Jazz Records, 2024) and *A Few We Remember with Lau Nau* (We Jazz Records, 2025). What does that mean for you in your artistic path? Was it a need to share the creative process?*

JPJ: Earlier, you said you feel you have to be very confident to play solo. That's true, but in a funny way, I think you have to be even braver to ask other musicians to play your music. There's something very safe to me about playing solo. I used to say to people, when you're the only person in your band, you can treat it much worse than you would if there were other people in it. It took a long time for me to build the courage and confidence in my



own playing to feel that other people would want to play with me. Once I did, I was very excited to start to explore how I could be myself in different contexts. For example, these two duo records are with very different musicians. I love how that gives me an opportunity to understand my own playing and how it best serves this different context.

GP: Let's talk about *We Jazz Records*. How did that relationship begin? Did you know each other beforehand, or did they approach you?

JPJ: I think we first connected because Matti Nives shared one of my earlier solo albums on Instagram. He invited me to play at We Jazz Festival, and as I learned more about everything, I started thinking it would be really cool to be part of this community. So I reached out to him about a new record I had, saying that I was not just looking for a label; I wanted to feel like something where we could build and grow together. That was five releases ago, it's been really fun growing the different projects and my own playing along with the label. I think *We Jazz Records* is led by a person who really cares about music and thinks of each musician as a person, as a human being.

GP: And do you have a favorite record of your own on the label?

JPJ: I think the rule is that the favorite is always the most recent, right? So that would be *A Few We Remember*, the album with Lau Nau, who is based in Finland. We first met in Brooklyn at a concert. I heard her playing in a trio and thought, "Wow, I'd really like to make some music with her." We Jazz connected us and suggested we play a duo concert at the festival: everybody was interested and it was better than my wildest imagination. After that, I knew we needed to record. A few months later, we met at her home on an island in the archipelago of Finland, and recorded the album.

GP: Jonah, Laura, how did the album come together? What was the creative process between you two like?

JPJ: First of all, one of the things that I learned is there's a very big difference between playing electronics and playing in a project with a person who is playing electronics. I only played saxophone on the album, and that was incredibly freeing. It was really fun to just be a person reacting to the music happening around me. Laura is an incredible master of her instruments. So being around that really inspired me to be patient, restrained, and focused on playing only the best things. She also has a really calming energy and spirit, so I feel like this is definitely the most subtle and intimate music that I've ever made. That's really because she set this incredible tone for it.

LAURA NAUKKARINEN: It was super nice and easy, cozy too. Jonah has these stories as a score, so we use

those as an inspiration for each improvisation. We decided not to tell the exact story in music, but to play after reading it, with the feeling that is left. That's where the improvisation started from.

GP: Another thing I'm curious about is the recording process. Were these tracks improvised pieces that you played in one take, or did you work on them more in post-production?

JPJ: We did all of the pieces as complete takes, all improvised. The format is that we would read the score together and then improvise the piece. And we tried not to do the same piece over and over again. There are some small cuts; maybe sometimes you're not hearing the entire take, but there's no looping or overdubbing. Everything was performed live. One stereo track of all of her electronics and one saxophone track. There are many times when she's playing lots of little instruments, but she was playing them into a microphone that fed into her modular synth signal chain.

LN: I often play with acoustic instruments. I especially love taking the acoustic signal and manipulating it through my modular synthesizer system. Jonah's playing is so nice that it can go from airy, fragile, breathing structures into something very loud and massive. So that kind of dynamic scale was something new and really exciting. And I think our styles somehow clicked very fast, working together very nicely. And I know, Jonah, that you maybe had to play a bit quieter than you usually play. But I think that also created something beautiful in our interplay.

JPJ: I would go even further and say that you helped me unlock a part of myself that I didn't even know was there.

GP: How does this record translate to live performances? Is it more like a long improvisation, or do you have specific cues or structured moments you follow?

LN: When you listen to the record, you're hearing a live performance. As Jonah was saying, there are no overdubs and no big edits. It's quite pure in that sense.

JPJ: I would say that when we're playing live, we are using the same pieces as jumping off points. But the music is also completely improvised. So it's going to be different every time, while following a structure of seven or eight tracks, each with its own ambiance and moments.

GP: Jonah, I'd like to ask about Finland. You've spent quite a bit of time there now. What is it about the place that resonates with you — the landscape, the scene, the atmosphere?

JPJ: There are different countries that I really like

to play in, each one for different reasons. Italy is one of my favorite countries to play music in for sure. In Finland, I feel like the audience is earnestly engaged in what you're doing. They're really there for the music. So getting to play for an audience that's really, in a completely unironic and honest way, interested in what you're doing is really fun. I find that the people I interact with in Finland, although they can sometimes be quiet, are always very warm and have a really nice sense of humor, very self-deprecating. I think this is the case in many Northern European countries: there's infrastructure in place to make a life in music or the arts possible, and because of that, I feel a sense of freedom and creativity among the musicians I interact with. They really are determined to explore music in an important and serious way. That makes for a very cool set of musicians.

GP: *Since you mentioned it, I have to ask: why Italy? What makes it special for you?*

JPJ: Oh, it's just so much fun! All the Italian people that I've interacted with really love music in a way that seems to be connected to the culture, you know? Music seems to be something that everybody agrees is a joyful and energizing experience. And the hang is always great. The audience is similar to Americans. They give you a lot back while you're performing. I can really feel the audience present in the room.

GP: *And finally: what's next?*

JPJ: In the immediate term, I'm excited to play live this year with Lau Nau, supporting the new album. After the release, it's easy to feel like things are finished, and it's important to remember that it's actually just the beginning. I'm also working on new music with Berke, so hopefully there'll be another album by the two of us at some point in the future. Also, spending these last two years doing so much collaboration has made me want to play a bunch of solo shows, too. So I've been working on a whole solo album to start performing, especially since the government has made it very hard for people from outside the United States to come play here. So these two projects I'm working on don't really have many opportunities to play in my own country. Then there are a few different musicians in the United States that I've been talking to about working on some stuff. I have a platform of compositions that Lau Nau and I use for our pieces, which I call narrative scores: basically, each piece is a very short story that becomes a launching point for improvisation. I've really enjoyed the format, and I've been writing more pieces, then taking them around to different musicians in New York and Chicago, and exploring how it feels to play with them. So I'm looking forward to making another album with the same compositional structure. wu

Jonah Parzen-Johnson & Lau Nau Live in Italy will be released by We Jazz during fall 2026.