

## WHAT THE PRESS HAVE SAID ABOUT

CLAUDIA QUINTET+1 FT. KURT ELLING AND THEO BLACKMANN

WHAT IS THE BEAUTIFUL?

CUNEIFORM 2011

“American poet Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) has been a favorite of musicians for over half a century, from composer John Cage to saxophonist Peter Brotzmann and bassist William Parker. This everyman writer, considered to be the "father of the Beats," is their direct link to Walt Whitman and William Blake. ... To celebrate Patchen's 100th birthday, The University of Rochester commissioned drummer/composer John Hollenbeck to interpret a selection the poet's writings with The Claudia Quintet. ...the Quintet + 1 settles into its now familiar mix of chamber jazz-meets-pop-and-minimalism... Hollenbeck writes music suggestive of both Raymond Scott and Steve Reich... When he turns his attention to Patchen, Hollenbeck's focus is directed to the theatrical and the ethereal. Elling fills the differing thespian roles well... From everyman, Hollenbeck turns to the heavens, utilizing Bleckmann's operatic voice... Hollenbeck's Claudia Quintet seems predisposed to the grace and fluidity of Patchen's poetry. Certainly, if the great man were alive today he would want to perform with this band.”

– Mark Corotto, *All About Jazz*, December 10, 2011

“The Claudia Quintet... is a disciplined, pitch-perfect ensemble. It can master with grace styles ranging from classic and classical to hip, retro-West coast reenactments, sometimes veering towards a chilly academicism. The blissfully naïve and optimistic poetry of Kenneth Patchen has an Americanized surrealist quality, so the limits and openings of music and poem... work together in a mutually corrective and complementing way.”

– Gordon Marshall, *All About Jazz*, July 21, 2012

“Poetry has always been the libretto of jazz music. ... Kenneth Patchen, one of The Rebel Poets of America, an enigmatic legend who, if he chose, might have laid claim to creating special arias in the realm of jazz. Not only did they pulse the meter of their verse around the beat of jazz (especially bebop), but sometimes they even cut up or shred words like the melodic lines of the musical idiom of jazz... Whole verses meandered like rampant improvisations, dallying before or after the shuffle and swing of the music... The jazz arias of Kenneth Patchen... It has taken decades for percussionist John Hollenbeck to create something as exquisite as *What Is The Beautiful* for his Claudia Quintet +1. Here, Patchen is sung or recited by vocalists Kurt Elling, in his inimitable baritone, and Theo Bleckmann, who brings to life the dreamy earthen landscapes the poet fashioned like complex tapestries... the two vocalists conjure the spirit of the poet as they re-imagine the beautiful dreamscapes in their own singular manners. The lyricism of the poetry is sublimely captured by John Hollenbeck in his music. Long, dallying notes meander as they are squeezed out of the bellows of the accordion, plucked from the bass, smelted by the hammering on the anvil of the drums, and, of course, caressed out of the ebony and ivory of the piano keyboard. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, especially when Theo Bleckmann narrates "Limpidity of Silences"... barely above a whisper. ... That this chart is followed by "Opening the Window," with Elling reading in something of a drunken voice, appropriately suggests Patchen himself closing out this amazing odyssey.”

– Raul D’Gama Rose, *All About Jazz*, March 17, 2012

“Jazz and poetry have a longstanding relationship that precedes the postwar experiments of the Beats, dating back to the Harlem Renaissance. ... One of the first artists to successfully explore this territory (with John Cage and Charles Mingus) was Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972), a poet, novelist and painter whose innovative work ranges from political protest and sardonic humor to sentimental romance. ... Hollenbeck recruited two very different vocalists... Theo Bleckmann is one of Hollenbeck's most dependable collaborators, often performing with him in a variety of contexts... His ethereal phrasing and diaphanous tone infuses a song-like air to one half of the album... One of today's most celebrated male vocalists, Elling's rich tenor and dramatic cadences bring a cinematic flair to Patchen's surreal and emotionally profound narratives. ... The core ensemble's remarkable timbral versatility is emphasized on three instrumental numbers commissioned by the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival. The contrapuntal workout "Flock" is the most spectacular... that recalls the ground-breaking work of avant-garde composers like George Antheil and Harry Partch. ...that Bleckmann and Elling so convincingly assimilate themselves into the veteran unit's sound world is most impressive... Bleckmann's impressionistic detours drift gracefully into semi-abstraction, fading into the ether as easily as Speed's breathy clarinet. Elling's ability to modulate his diction into different personalities is even more striking... The Claudia Quintet integrates Patchen's iconic verse into their oeuvre with an organic grace that brings his words to life. A unique merger of evocative poetry and avant-garde jazz, *What Is the Beautiful?* is a sophisticated work of art whose emotional resonance is as profound as the intricate formal elements that support it.”

– Troy Collins, *All About Jazz*, October 5, 2011

“The confluence of poetry or spoken word with improvisational music goes as far back as the Harlem renaissance, became synonymous with the Beats, figured heavily in proto-rap music... and continues to flourish. .... One hundred years after Patchen's birth, composer/drummer John Hollenbeck and The Claudia Quintet +1 have released... celebratory hour-long Patchen tribute, *What Is the Beautiful?*, which reimagines Patchen's texts in a unique musical setting. ... The result is a mixture of poetry and jazz which veers from sublime accessibility to keening experimentalism and includes music with... intimate intensity... Some compositions mimic Patchen's innate rhythmic sensibility, such as the opening number, “Showtime/23rd Street Runs into Heaven” and the somber love ode “Do Me that Love.” These cuts do not push the envelope but rather render Patchen's words into flowing arcs of music and lyrical temperament. ... The truly outstanding tunes are bold statements which transform Patchen's lines as they converge with Hollenbeck's compositional ideas. The philosophical title track is an example of this union of imagination. Elling's rich enunciation is pointed and precise while the band provides apropos backing which swings with finesse and authority. ... When Hollenbeck was in pre-production

planning, he immediately thought Elling would be a perfect fit, not knowing Elling was already a Patchen aficionado. Instead of offering his typical singing style, Elling populates Patchen's poems as an actor would a stage role. ... Bleckmann is impeccably cast as the singer for the impressionistic material... Filling out the album are three instrumentals, two of which were commissioned by the Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival. ... contrapuntal undertaking "Flock" is the most tumultuous presentation, a deeply rhythmic avant-garde outlet which evokes Harry Partch or Louis "Moondog" Hardin. More traditional is "Mates for Life," ... The title also reflects Patchen's penchant for romantic poetry... The brief "Peace of Green" marries the rhythmic inclinations of "Flock" with a jazz disposition... Engineer Andy Taub is also a Patchen admirer and brought stimulating suggestions to the recording process."

– Doug Simpson, *Audiophile Audition*, December 14, 2011

"While some falsely aligned him with the Beats, Patchen remained an elusive and idiosyncratic artist up to his death in 1972, producing an eclectic body of work that ranged from political polemics, to surreal and childlike 'painted poems', and deeply felt love poetry. ... the University of Rochester commissioned New York's Claudia Quintet... revisit Patchen's jazz-plus-poetry experiments, by setting some of his poems to new music. The result is the group's most compelling album to date. ...the unit is also augmented by two vocalists with contrasting styles, who take the album into some interesting new territory. Theo Bleckmann... interprets a handful of pieces with a soft, wispy singing voice that conveys a mournful quality perfectly suited to the dreamy, rippling ballad, The Snow is Deep on the Ground. ... Nonetheless, it's crooner Kurt Elling who steals the show, inhabiting tracks with a rich, spoken baritone and an actor's sense of character and timing that bring Patchen's words vibrantly to life. Moreover, there's a neat conjunction between Elling's interest in vocalese and Patchen's experiments with speech-poetry. ... It all comes together on the title-track: an intensely compassionate piece of writing, bursting with apocalyptic love for humanity, and punctuated by the repeated refrain: "Pause. And begin again." ... it's genuinely moving – and easily elevates the album to the status of vital, living art."

– Daniel Spicer, *BBC*, November 9, 2011

"...Hollenbeck... doesn't like to affix labels to his music, and no wonder. ...Hollenbeck... released a remarkable album (with The Claudia Quintet, *What Is the Beautiful* on Cuneiform). The album is an examination of the work of late proto-beat poet Kenneth Patchen. ... Hollenbeck steers "What is the Beautiful" into less familiar territory, drawing on all his influences to produce a score that accentuates and reveals hidden meanings in Patchen's words, particularly on the apocalyptic title track."

– Devin Leonard, *Capital*, December 26, 2011

"With guest voices Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann, this superlative setting of poems by the great US avant-gardist Kenneth Patchen opens with Elling curling his rich voice around Showtime/23 St Runs Into Heaven, against a cubist walking bass and stop-start ensemble gait that brings new life and vitality to Patchen's imagistic poetry. Band leader/drummer John Hollenbeck's arrangements mix vibes, accordion, clarinet, sax and piano in refreshing and inventive ways. If you buy only one poetry-jazz album this year..."

– Tim Cumming, *Independent*, February 11, 2012

"Patchen... was more a loner, writing darkly political works informed by pacifist views as well as lyrical love poems and short, funny verses. He often performed with bebop musicians... Elling – a Patchen devotee – is angular and expressive in his spoken delivery, Blackmann in contrast a more soothing, singing presence. Accompaniment to the poems is kept to a minimum, allowing the words to be heard to their full. The odd accordion wheeze, shimmering vibes or piano flurries add atmosphere to a basic soundtrack of slow bass and subdued drums. ... this subtle and often mesmeric collection is one of the best examples I have heard of setting poetry to music. A fine tribute to a special poet."

– Simon Adams, *Jazz Journal*, March 13, 2012

"Augmented by pianist Matt Mitchell, the record is a meeting between the knotty compositions of drummer John Hollenbeck and the poetry of the late Kenneth Patchen... Though Hollenbeck's arrangements are as evocative as ever in crafting a lush maze of percussion, accordion and woodwinds, Patchen's words remain on equal footing with the help of Theo Bleckmann and Kurt Elling. ... While Bleckmann's otherworldly voice lends an ethereal quality to tracks such as "The Snow Is Deep on the Ground," Elling nearly steals the record with his trademark baritone. Burrowing into Patchen's words with sly gravity and wit, Elling adds a working-class patter to the twisted work parable "Job" and taps into his inner Tom Waits with a stumbling slur on "Opening The Window." The meeting reaches its peak on the title track, which features Elling and the band slowly gathering power with each recitation of Patchen's calm command, "Pause. And begin again." – Chris Barton, *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2011

"John Hollenbeck never fails to amaze: as a drummer, composer and bandleader he's an artist to keep your eyes and ears on. *What is the Beautiful?*, his sixth all-original project with the Claudia Quintet... Hollenbeck set the singular bard's verses to apposite musical milieus, each filtered through his own singular vision of small group composition and improvisation. ... In the resultant tableau, Elling and Bleckmann, two remarkably different vocalists, serve as distinctive character actors: the former varying his intoned persona from "sportscaster" to "barroom lush"... the latter delivering the lyrics with uncanny intervallic leaps and lucent vulnerability... In spite of the strong vocal performances, the quintet comes most alive on three instrumental tracks... where the leader's less-can-be-much-more approach to drumming, alone with the immaculate simpatico of the like-timbered 'melody' instruments, amalgamate in a truly collective concept. Reichman, Speed and Moran are distinctive stylists, but here they form part of a broader palette, blending and bleeding 'colors' in novel tints and tinges. Mitchell's playing... is a welcome addition."

– Tom Greenland, *The New York City Jazz Record*, November 28, 2011

“Hollenbeck’s work generally gives listeners something concrete — an effect or an event or a process in the music — without becoming condescending or obvious. ... Sometimes that simply means that musicians mimic the words’ rhythm and melody... or their meaning, as in “Limpidity of Silence,” which is basically a classical-music piece that indeed involves a lot of limpidity and silence. ... But sometimes it means much more. With the singer Kurt Elling reading some texts, and Theo Bleckmann singing others, Mr. Hollenbeck respects how the poems begin, modulate and end. ... he has let the poems write the music for him.... The title track, with the poem excellently read over the music by Mr. Elling, is a good example, probably the best. ... At the end of every stanza comes the word “pause,” followed by “and begin again,” which of course likewise happens in the music. ... There’s steady rhythm and a few levels of harmonic motion from the different instruments, some repeated and steady, some wayward. ... And the piece as a whole has its own cumulative momentum... For seven minutes, everything logically and constantly grows, until the chilling and unresolved end. It’s a piece with a lot of improvisation, one that takes a lot of cues from its literary source, but at the same time it’s a marvel of composition.” – Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, October 10, 2011

“*What Is the Beautiful?* Is an astonishing new record that sets the poetry of Kenneth Patchen to music. ... these tunes take a dozen radically different approaches, requiring the musicians to create many different moods and grooves. ... Matt Moran is the vibraphonist... he works as a fully integrated part of the ensemble at all times. ...the vibes are proven again and again to be useful in creating feelings that go beyond “jazz”. On “Flock”, the rippling patterns of the whole band sound like a cross between Glassian minimalism (with looping, repeating patterns) and avant-garde jazz.”  
– Will Layman, *PopMatters*, November 22, 2011

“...here’s a “shout-out!” to more of the most exciting music from the past 12 months... Drummer John Hollenbeck continues to mature as composer, arranger, and musician. This year... Claudia Quintet released “What Is The Beautiful” (Cuneiform Records), a collection of songs paired with the poems of Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972). ... This is one of those recordings that each time I play it, something new is revealed either in the words or music that frames the poems.”  
– Richard B. Kamins, *Step Tempest*, December 24, 2011

“...*What Is the Beautiful?*... lovely but unsettling new album... Elling doesn’t sing here. ... He dominates the ensemble’s matrix of timbre and polyrhythm. And as good as his singing is, his speaking voice—a rich, sonorous tenor with a bit of flint and an actor’s confidence—is even better. ... Elling delivers stark Patchen lines about destroying the world as part of a job application (“Job”) and societal complicity in a lynching (“The Bloodhounds”), but it’s the musicians... who give them depth. ... After those songs, the deluge: “What is the Beautiful?” asks Elling in the title song. ... Theo Bleckmann sings the other four poems. ... Bleckmann omits two lines that completely change the tone—“The war has failed ” and “Only a few go mad.” Their absence is far more disturbing than their inclusion would have been. ...it’s the poet’s words—and Elling’s and Bleckmann’s treatments of them—that give *What Is the Beautiful?* its spellbinding, nerve-rattling grandeur.” – Michael J. West, *Washington City Paper*, October 7, 2011

“Drummer and composer John Hollenbeck treats the text in the manner of a classical composer “setting poetry” into art songs, while also riffing on the old Beat/bohemian mode. ...the Claudia Quintet are chamber-esque idiom-bridgers. Utilizing a distinctive palette that includes Ted Reichman’s accordion and Matt Moran’s vibraphone, they deftly mix jazz lingo with the structural and musical linguistics of new music. ... Elling reveals artsier ambitions here than on his own recordings. ...the album abounds with pleasures approached from multiple angles. ... Taken as a varied, suite-like whole, *What is the Beautiful?*... jazz-infused song cycle of dimensional variety. What begins with the stage-setting word “Showtime!” ends with the utterance “all things do come to an end sometime... as for me, I took the next day off and moved into the broom closet of the YMCA.”... these closing lines are intoned by Elling in a dryly witty impression of William Burroughs. Poetry comes in many forms on this uncommon word-music pairing.”  
– Josef Woodard, *Jazziz*, Winter 2011/2012

“[4½ stars] John Hollenbeck continues to astound as a composer, prone to value accessibility as much he does adventure, on the fascinating *What Is The Beautiful?*... Hollenbeck recruited Elling to read some of Patchen’s work before he composed the music. Hints of overdubs are remarkably absent, because the ensemble couches Elling’s recitations beautifully... The overall effect is mesmerizing. ... Elling’s gift for interpreting spoken word is made all the more apparent in his ability to affect different characters. ... On other occasions, Patchen’s prose comes to life via Bleckmann’s ethereal singing. Bleckmann is particularly bewitching on “The Snow Is Deep On The Ground” on which his otherworldly crooning is swept afloat by the rolling, counterpointing melodies and rhythms of piano, vibraphone, accordion and bass. ... While Hollenbeck employs virtuoso drumming in full service of his compositions, a closer listen reveals him to be a sparkling rhythmic engine, capable to driving the ensemble with supple grace.”  
– John Murph, *Downbeat*, December 2011

“The first four selections in particular I want to sep-a-rate out as meriting extra attention for their deep ambition, as well as their sheer musical accomplishment. ... *What is the Beautiful*, Claudia Quintet + 1... There’s a big difference between writing a pop song, even a sophisticated, complex song like “Lush Life” or “The Pea-cocks,” and an art song, and that’s what a com-poser does when they set the poetry of some-one else to music. Pop song lyrics are crafted to work implic-itly with music, poetry must be made to fit, and even more the com-poser must have an idea of what the poetry means to fit it in any way that has meaning. ... That was Steve Lacy’s great break-through and contribution, above and beyond his great musicianship: he took poetry and made it into jazz art songs. ... The Claudia Quintet disc is... an important addition to the jazz art song, and completely satisfying. All the poetry comes from one source, Kenneth Patchen, an associate of the beats and of jazz poetry, perhaps most well known for his collaboration with John Cage on “The

City Wears a Slouch Hat.” He was smart, irreverent, romantic, hip, and from the opening sound of the record, Kurt Elling’s dry baritone with it’s mordant edge, pronouncing the word “showtime,” you know this is going to be something special. ... Elling is the leading jazz singer on the planet, but he’s also an exceptional reader. Bleckmann, with his intimately insinuating tenor, conveys the poet’s cool warmth. And leader and composer John Hollenbeck has things to say about the poetry in the best way a composer can, by making the text clear, by meaning every note he sets under the words and by pushing the emphasis on certain phrases and passages. ...these are art songs... they mean some-thing to Hollenbeck. ...The music does not disguise, nor avoid, the poetry, but reveals it. The crafting of “Do Me That Love” is plangently beau-ti-ful, the music for the title track is a les-son in how simplicity is an essen-tial value. This is modern jazz of the high-est order, music that enter-tains and informs in equal, generous amounts. A gentle, thoughtful record, with great weight behind it. Special men-tion must be made for Elling, who is utterly masterful in his phras-ing, his ability to use different colors and accents, his own comfort and confidence in what he is doing. It’s rare to hear poetry read at this high a level, not to mention, with jazz!” – George Grella, *The Big City*, December 23, 2011

“Best jazz albums of 2011... “What Is the Beautiful?” The Claudia Quintet, featuring Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann (Cuneiform)” – George Varga, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 20, 2011

“The Top 50 Releases of 2011... 21. The Claudia Quintet +1 Featuring Kurt Elling and Theo Bleckmann” – *JazzTimes*

“2011 Jazz Critics’ Poll Results... 20. The Claudia Quintet, featuring Kurt Elling & Theo Bleckmann, What Is the Beautiful? (Cuneiform) 59 (12)” – Francis Davis and Tom Hull, *Rhapsody*, January 10, 2012

“Best Vocal Album... 5. The Claudia Quintet, featuring Kurt Elling & Theo Bleckmann, What Is the Beautiful? (Cuneiform) 7” – Francis Davis and Tom Hull, *Rhapsody*, January 10, 2012

“Recommended New Releases... The Claudia Quintet + 1 – *What Is the Beautiful?* (Cuneiform)” – David Adler, *New York @ Night*, November 14, 2011

“Small groups... The Claudia Quintet + 1 – What Is The Beautiful – Cuneiform” – Jim Wilke, *Jazz After Hours*

“Vocalists? You couldn’t do much better than this year’s GRAMMY nominees in the jazz vocal category. ... The fifth nominee is ex-Chicagoan Kurt Elling, whose *The Gate* (Concord) sought to expand his audience with conceptual smarts, sleek production, and his usual keen musicianship; meanwhile, Elling maintained his more adventurous bonafides on *What Is The Beautiful?* (Cuneiform) from drummer-composer John Hollenbeck’s engrossing *Claudia Quintet*.” – Neil Tesser, *Examiner*, December 30, 2011

“Top Songs... Claudia Quintet +1 Featuring Kurt Elling “What Is the Beautiful” (Cuneiform)” – Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, December 15, 2011

“Mark Corroto’s Best Releases of 2011... The Claudia Quintet *What Is The Beautiful?* (Cuneiform)” – Mark Corroto, *All About Jazz*, December 19, 2011