

Bio information: **LUKE STEWART'S SILT TRIO**

Title: **THE BOTTOM** (Cuneiform Rune 487)

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FILE UNDER: **JAZZ / FREE JAZZ / SPIRITUAL JAZZ**

**Called "One of the 25 Most Influential Jazz Artists of His Generation" by DownBeat
Polymathic Bassist LUKE STEWART
A Creative Catalyst on the Washington D.C. (and Beyond) Scene for Almost Two Decades
and a Member of Several Earth-Shaking Ensembles
Introduces His SILT TRIO
Featuring Chicago Drum Legend CHAD TAYLOR and
Powerhouse DC Saxophonist BRIAN SETTLES**

A casual observer of the Washington D.C. music scene could easily get the mistaken impression that there are four or five guys coincidentally named **Luke Stewart** playing leading roles in a disparate array of musical communities. In fact, Stewart is a singular, uncontainable artist whose work as a bassist, saxophonist, producer, broadcaster, and all-around mover and shaker has deepened and extended the District's legacy as a hotbed for creative music. Given his many pursuits, a single album can only capture a small portion of Stewart's oceanic sonic continuum, but *The Bottom* offers a deep dive into a particularly inviting pool with his loose and limber trio featuring Chicago drum legend **Chad Taylor** and powerhouse D.C. saxophonist **Brian Settles**.

A highly cohesive triumvirate in close communion, the band plays with the conversational ease of longtime, comfortable friends. Untethered to any particular stylistic convention, particularly bebop's head-solo-head format, the music's ebb and flow feels utterly in the moment. While only two of the pieces were freely improvised at the session the ethos of spontaneous composition pervades the album, which unfolds with the contours of an ongoing narrative.

"I approached the recording session as closely as possible to playing a set, arranging the sequence with that in mind," says Stewart, who was born and raised in Mississippi. "Like a set compositions are coupled by moments of free improvisation, but that free improv is contextualized by what happened before and after. It's a journey, and the recording session reflects that."

The album opens with "Reminiscence," a piece featuring Taylor's incantatory playing on a Zimbabwean mbira, the thumb piano that's a central component of Shona culture. Stewart has been studying mbira with Taylor in recent years, and he loosely based the piece on a traditional Shona melody.

The session turns deeply funky with "Roots," a pointillistic investigation into the music's spiritual core. It's a four-minute tour de force that encompasses West Africa, the Caribbean, New Orleans, Chicago, Harlem and D.C. within its irresistible polyrhythmic swirl.

A lengthy freely improvised piece, "Angles" is up next. an extended, picaresque sojourn that evokes a descent into subterranean spaces. If the album has a centerpiece it's "The Bottom," which is built on Stewart's huge, snapping bass lines. The performance exemplifies the trio's love of building tension and intensity without increasing volume or velocity. Evoking a spiritual quest or a search for origins, the tune was partly inspired by a road trip that Stewart took looking for his grandfather's childhood home in Marks, Miss. Driving west on Highway 6, "I was mostly struck by the stark changes in the landscape," he says. "Marks is a borderline dividing rolling hills and the last town before you get to the Delta."

The brief, coiled improvised blast “Circles” ends up fading into the closing piece of the album, “Dream House”, evoking another universe of ancestors – a piece inspired by Stewart’s cross borough view of pioneering minimalist composer La Monte Young’s Dream House art space in Tribeca from his artist residency in Red Hook, Brooklyn at Pioneer Works (where he wrote most of the album’s material). The tune doesn’t evoke a dreamscape or minimalism so much as an urban ramble with no particular destination. Taylor’s terpsichorean brush work and Stewart’s mobile bass suggest a jaunty mood, while Settles’s tenor sax takes in the passing scene, reflecting tartly and calmly on the faces and places that go by.

The trio’s potent synergy is built on the musicians’ deep interlocking ties. Stewart met Settles at the first jam session he attended in D.C., though their friendship developed mostly off the bandstand. “I was always a fan,” Stewart says. “He’s been one of my favorite horn players in the area since I’ve been around. We’ve performed a number of times in the past, but we’ve never had a gig playing standards in a restaurant or a club. It’s always been in a creative music context.”

The trio with Settles first took shape with drummer Warren “Trae” Crudup III, a close musical confidant who was Stewart’s housemate at the time (the group released an album on Bandcamp in March 2020, *No Trespassing*). Taylor came into the picture when Stewart had a chance to record at his Pioneer Works residency. “I’ve been a fan of Chad’s since I was in high school, in terms of listening to contemporary jazz and early Chicago Underground recordings,” says Stewart, who first heard Taylor perform in Settles’s quartet, and first played with the drummer while subbing in Chicago trumpeter Jaimie Branch’s *Fly or Die*.

It’s hard to overstate Taylor’s contributions to improvised music over the past three decades. A composer, scholar and educator as well as a capaciously inventive percussionist now living in Philadelphia, Taylor is probably best known as co-founder of the Chicago Underground Duo with trumpeter Rob Mazurek (and the numerous Underground iterations that have spun off of that original partnership). A professional on the Chicago scene from the age of 16, he became a rhythmic muse for many of the most celebrated artists in improvised music, including Fred Anderson, Pharoah Sanders, Nicole Mitchell, Matana Roberts, Ken Vandermark, Darius Jones, James Brandon Lewis, Derek Bailey, Marc Ribot, and Peter Brötzmann. He’s also led numerous acclaimed ensembles of his own, including is the trio with Settles and pianist Neil Podgurski he documented on the acclaimed 2020 Cuneiform album *The Daily Biological*.

A Washington D.C. native, Settles performs regularly with some of modern jazz’s leading groups, including Tomas Fujiwara and The Hook Up, Michael Formanek’s *Cheating Heart* and Big Band Kolossus, and bands led by Jonathan Finlayson. A protégé of Stanley Turrentine, he released two albums as a leader focusing on his buoyant, pithy compositions. On 2011’s award-winning *Secret Handshake* (Engine) he featured the quintet Central Union, and followed up with 2013’s trio album *Folk* (Engine).

Born and raised in Mississippi, Stewart grew up in Ocean Springs, a small town on the coast just east of Biloxi. There was little access or exposure to jazz and improvised music in grade school, and he played alto sax in his junior high and high school concert and marching bands. Taking up electric bass at 13, he started a punk band with some high school friends while delving into electronic music and hip hop. He discovered jazz on his own and started a process of self-education, digging through record bins and sharing discoveries with similarly music obsessive friends.

“The good part of growing up in Mississippi was not having any sort of big overriding cultural force telling you what to do, which gave us the freedom to explore whatever we wanted to do,” he says. “The group that I found myself in, we were all voraciously into checking out all different types of music. We were very into listening, and that was key, coming to the music as a voracious listener.”

On scholarship at the University of Mississippi he majored in international studies and minored in music, but a summer internship in Washington turned into a new life path when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, including his hometown. He transferred to American University and ended up graduating with a double

major in international studies and audio production. He arrived in town equally committed to the alto sax and electric bass, until his jazz band professor, Dr. Will Smith, encouraged him to take up double bass. “It was a transition for sure,” Stewart says. “I was fascinated and enamored by investigating this instrument and immediately felt the spirit of it.”

After some informal lessons with veteran players like Herman Burney he started going to jam sessions and connecting with established musicians. His creative development has been rooted in D.C.’s verdant and often overlooked legacy of Black music and culture. Over the past two decades he’s woven himself into a myriad of scenes and idioms. Indeed, the trio with Settles and Taylor is only one chamber in the mansion that makes up Stewart’s musical world.

He plays bass and saxophone with Washington-based indie rock band Laughing Man. As an electronic artist, he’s performed alongside legendary hip hop artist Grap Luva, and DC beatmaker Damu the Fudgemunk. He’s also a member of the experimental electronic trio Mind Over Matter, Music Over Mind. On the jazz side, he was also a long-time member of Trio OOO, a collaborative ensemble featuring saxophonist Aaron Martin and drummer Sam Lohman. One of his bases of operation is the D.C. art space Union Arts and Manufacturing, where Stewart is an artist-in-residence. He’s also presented numerous concert series and festivals via CapitalBop.com, a D.C.-based jazz website and 501c3 non-profit organization that he co-founded.

By day Stewart is the production coordinator for the Pacifica radio station WPFW (89.3 FM) and hosts “The Vibes,” a weekly eclectic jazz program. Through WPFW he’s collaborated with seminal figures in music and the fight for social justice, including Chuck Brown, Yusef Lateef, Randy Weston, Muhal Richard Abrams, Juma Sultan, and Amiri Baraka. He credits his work at WPFW and mentorship by veteran DJ Jamal Muhammad with connecting him to the jazz scenes in D.C. and Harlem dating back to the rise of bebop.

No ensemble better reflects the depth of Stewart’s musical investigations than the trio with Taylor and Settles. The group’s open approach to form and commitment to rhythmic development defines a sound that’s both forward looking and rooted in the music’s adventuring past.

“I think it’s time to refocus on free rhythms and free grooves,” Stewart says. “Not on the Steve Coleman MBASE sense, but from the sense of the power that rhythm has to call forth spirits. We go into it with that intention. That knowledge is there and it comes out in that interaction. Chad is such a rhythmic player, one of the masters, and it’s really a perfect situation for me and Brian to explore that concept with him.”

For more information on Luke Stewart’s Silt Trio

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