

Bio information: **THUMBSCREW**
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Celebrating ANTHONY BRAXTON on his 75th Birthday
THUMBSCREW Digs into the Tricentric Archives, Focusing on Previously Unrecorded Pieces by the
Legendary Composer, Multi-Wind Master and Bandleader
The All-Star Collective Trio, Featuring drummer/percussionist TOMAS FUJIWARA,
guitarist MARY HALVORSON and bassist MICHAEL FORMANEK,
Releases its Fifth Album for Cuneiform, *THE ANTHONY BRAXTON PROJECT*

Over the course of six decades NEA Jazz Master **Anthony Braxton** has created a singularly vast and variegated body of music as a composer and recording artist, an oeuvre encompassing projects ranging in scope from his pioneering 1969 solo saxophone album *For Alto* to 2016's epic opera *Trillium J (The Non-Unconfessionables)*. Musicians around the world have been coming together over the past year to celebrate his 75th birthday with an array of performances and recordings, but leave it to the all-star collective trio Thumbscrew to focus an utterly personal lens on previously unheard compositions with *The Anthony Braxton Project*. For fans familiar with Braxton's music the project offers a whole new window into his genius for designing protean musical situations pregnant with possibilities. Those less acquainted with his work might find themselves enthralled and amazed by the sheer diversity of rhythmic and melodic material explored by Thumbscrew. The trio's fifth album extends the group's relationship with Cuneiform, which has released all of the band's recordings.

Invited to explore the Tri-Centric Foundation's voluminous Braxton archives in New Haven, Conn. as part of the Braxton75 celebration, **drummer/percussionist Tomas Fujiwara, guitarist Mary Halvorson and bassist Michael Formanek** spent a long afternoon looking for rarely played pieces that could fit their instrumental palette. "The idea was for us to choose compositions of Anthony's, mostly early compositions, which hadn't been previously recorded (or, in a couple cases, recorded only once or twice)," says Halvorson. "We chose pieces that captured our imagination and that we thought would work well for the instrumentation of guitar, bass, and drums or vibraphone. Our choices included graphic scores, complex notated pieces, and everything in between."

Like with several previous Thumbscrew albums, the triumvirate used an extended, four-week residency at City of Asylum in Pittsburgh to prepare for the recording. Working on the music daily (while also honing a new book of original Thumbscrew compositions), they developed arrangements of varying detail based on the scores and the corresponding catalogue notes for each composition. While aiming to understand and execute Braxton's intention with each piece, the nature of his music required them to shape the material anew. "We have a shared language in terms of how we improvise, but the composition very much guides and informs our improvisations, so having music from a new composer puts us in a different frame of mind and adds another layer to what we do as a trio," Fujiwara says. "Looking through the Tri-Centric Archives, we were like kids in a candy store—a feeling that there were unlimited options that all would work for us and be a joy to explore—and we had a great guide in Tri-Centric's Carl Testa. Mention a certain flavor and he'd show us all we could ever dream of."

The album opens with "no. 52" a piece full of surprising twists, starting with the shuffle-like bass line, shifting rhythmic patterns and wild interval leaps. With all the twists, the track unfolds like a jazz tune, with a long opening theme followed by improvised passages that return briefly to the theme. On a different tack, "no. 157" is a brief, almost through composed tune built on two overlaying lines that run their course as disjointed counterpoint. All three players get a solo crack at the reoccurring "no. 14," a graphic score featuring a series of geometric shapes. Halvorson's meditative investigation feels like it's tinged with the blues, while Fujiwara leaves plenty of space as he builds tension rolling from his tom to his bass drum, and Formanek strolls insouciantly, like a man enjoying a late afternoon crossing a well-tended park. All three tracks were first takes, and carry Braxton's unmistakable DNA. "With all of Anthony's compositions the identity is so strong," Halvorson says. "You really feel you can go anywhere—it feels expansive, not limiting. He's setting a really strong energy and intention, but knowing him, you know he wants you to take risks, try things out. He wants us to be creative and explore within the parameters."

If "no. 14" is something of a bagatelle, "no. 68" is an intricate and detailed piece that introduces Fujiwara's vibes into the Thumbscrew mix for the first time. Atmospheric and redolent of shimmering horizons, the piece features the closest thing to a traditional three-part score of any composition they selected "with three lines of music, a top line that was probably for saxophone, a bass part marked with dynamics and arco and pizzicato, and a percussion line," Formanek says. "It's a very composed piece with intricate rhythms and dramatic interval leaps. In the last part we all play a rhythm together and that's the end."

Each piece shines a light on a different facet of Braxton's musical universe. "no. 274" is the only entry from Braxton's Ghost Trance work. Completely notated but requiring constant interpretation, it's built on musical cells with constantly shifting tempos. The point isn't to master the system. "It's about how you deal with music that's almost impossible to play and what happens when you do them with someone else, opening up possibilities you couldn't plan," Formanek says. The shadow of a march falls on "no. 61" a playfully stuttering and surging piece originally written for a saxophone/bass duo. The album closes with a blast of joy with Braxton's homage to the Southwest territory bands of the 1930s. With an irresistible walking bass line and ringing unison notes on guitar and vibes, it's a bright, sunny number "with very specific stylistic references," Formanek says. "The composition notes mentioned playing the way Basie might have played some of this music, with that bounce and feel. The written music really fits in that style, but in a really Braxton way."

Formanek's relationship with Braxton's music dates back to buying a compilation of his Arista Freedom recordings in the mid-1970s. Immediately struck by the music, he tried to decipher the symbols and diagrams that Braxton used as titles. He followed his output over the decades "amazed at the range of music and how much he pushed himself to be creative and indulge all of his curiosities, the way he used the musicians to help realize the vision," Formanek says. But it wasn't until the late 1990s that he had a chance perform with Braxton, joining a multimedia production at the Knitting Factory as the second bassist.

Wesleyan is where Halvorson came into Braxton's orbit during her undergrad years from 1998-2002, a creative relationship that launched her as one of the most celebrated improvisers to emerge in the 21st century. "I consider him one of the main catalysts for me deciding to become a musician," she says. "Studying with Anthony, learning his musical systems and playing music with him remains one of the most important and inspiring musical experiences of my life."

Fujiwara met Braxton through Taylor Ho Bynum when the trumpeter was attending Wesleyan, which led to several opportunities to perform with Braxton in different settings, including a trio with drummer Tom Rainey documented on the 2014 album *Trio (New Haven) 2013* (New Braxton House). "Having time to talk and hang out with Anthony, his energy and his whole presence has been very inspiring," Fujiwara says. "Both as a person and a musician he gives this real jolt of energy and creativity and positivity to try things and explore things and push myself."

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Born in Chicago on June 4, 1945, multi-wind master Anthony Braxton is one of the pivotal artists of the century. A dauntingly prolific composer, he's released more than 100 albums documenting his unbounded imagination and ever-expanding web of creative alliances. An early member of the pioneering African-American arts organization Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), he had emerged as a widely influential figure in free jazz and new music by the end of the 1960s. Drawing on more than a century of American music, from John Philip Sousa, Dave Brubeck and John Cage to Count Basie, ecstatic Sioux incantations and Cecil Taylor, Braxton's sui generis music is arguably more influential today than ever before. Awarded a "genius" fellowship by the MacArthur Foundation in 1994, he was given the nation's highest honor for jazz musicians in 2014 as a National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master. Amidst all of the laurels he's earned, Braxton is as productive and influential as ever, while also shaping the contemporary scene as a quietly charismatic educator. He left an enduring mark on the San Francisco Bay Area music scene during his 1985-90 stint on faculty at Mills College. But it was his almost quarter century tenure as Professor of Music at Wesleyan University from 1990 until his retirement in 2013 that introduced several new generations of improvisers to his music and methods.

In much the same way the album's compositions are indelibly Braxton, the interpretations are pure Thumbscrew. Part of what makes the ensemble so extraordinary is the sheer density of the musical connections running between the musicians. Beyond their work as a trio, they're the foundation for Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus, the hair-raising and ridiculously talent-laden large ensemble that released its 2016 debut on ECM *The Distance*. Formanek joined Halvorson on Tomas Fujiwara and The Hook Up's third release, the critically hailed 2015 album *After All Is Said* (482 Music). And Halvorson featured her Thumbscrew bandmates on 2018's lavishly praised release *Code Girl* (Firehouse 12), a song-based project with vocalist Amirtha Kidambi, and trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire. For Halvorson, Thumbscrew has become an invaluable creative foundation. "It's one of my favorite rhythm sections to be a part of, the power and energy and everything we create together," she says. "At this point, all of us have used this rhythm section as leaders."

Halvorson and Fujiwara first started playing together in cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum's Sextet. Among other bands, they also work together in Halvorson's Reverse Blue (with Chris Speed and Eivind Opsvik), the collective The Thirteenth Assembly (with Bynum and Jessica Pavone), and Mike Reed's fascinating Sun Ra-inspired ensemble Living By Lanterns, which released the acclaimed 2012 Cuneiform album *Old Myth, New Science*. They also join forces on cellist Tomeka Reid's debut album *Tomeka Reid Quartet* (Thirsty Ear) and with clarinetist Ben Goldberg on *The Out Louds* (Relative Pitch Records), a collective trio featuring their live-wire connection in a free improv setting. More recently, Halvorson joined Bynum, Gerald Cleaver, Brandon Seabrook and Ralph Alessi on Fujiwara's acclaimed 2017 album *Triple Double* (Firehouse 12 Records).

Based in Brooklyn, Fujiwara has also earned renown as a compose and bandleader who performs and records with some of the most exciting musicians of the current generation. He's been described by *Point of Departure* as "a ubiquitous presence in the New York scene...an artist whose urbane writing is equal to his impressively nuanced drumming." One of his primary vehicles for the past decade has been Tomas Fujiwara and the Hook Up, which debuted on 2010's *Actionspeak* (482 Music) with Halvorson, Jonathan

Finlayson, Brian Settles, and Danton Boller. Aside from Trevor Dunn and Formanek taking over from Boller on bass on 2012's *The Air Is Different* and 2015's *After All Is Said*, respectively, the quintet has featured the same players on the subsequent 482 Music albums.

Fujiwara's other notable ensembles include 7 Poets Trio with Tomeka Reid and Patricia Brennan, documented on 2019's eponymous RogueArt release, and his collaborative duo with cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, captured on 2007's *True Events* (482 Music), 2010's *Stepwise* (NotTwo) and 2014's self-released *Through Foundation*. Known for the diversity of his creative work, he's also performed with leading improvisers and composers such as John Zorn, Matana Roberts, Joe Morris, Nicole Mitchell, Amir ElSaffar, and Benoit Delbecq, among many others. The New York Times described him as a drummer who "works with rhythm as a pliable substance, solid but ever shifting. His style is forward-driving but rarely blunt or aggressive, and never random. He has a way of spreading out the center of a pulse while setting up a rigorous scaffolding of restraint...A conception of the drum set as a full-canvas instrument, almost orchestral in its scope."

Also based in Brooklyn, Halvorson has been described by *JazzTimes* as "a singular talent," and by the *Wall Street Journal* as "one of the most exciting and original guitarists in jazz—or otherwise." The Village Voice declared that she's "one of today's most formidable bandleaders," while City Arts noted that she's "NYC's least-predictable improviser." In recent *Downbeat's* Critics Polls Halvorson has been celebrated as guitarist, rising star jazz artist, and rising star composer of the year, and in 2019 she was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. One of New York City's most in-demand guitarists, over the past decade Halvorson has worked with such diverse musicians as Tim Berne, Taylor Ho Bynum, John Dieterich, Trevor Dunn, Bill Frisell, Ingrid Laubrock, Jason Moran, Joe Morris, Tom Rainey, Jessica Pavone, Tomeka Reid, Marc Ribot and John Zorn.

Halvorson has released a series of critically acclaimed albums on the Firehouse 12 label, from 2008's *Dragon's Head*, her trio debut featuring bassist John Hébert and drummer Ches Smith. The group expanded to a quintet with trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson and alto saxophonist Jon Irabagon on 2010's *Saturn Sings* and 2012's *Bending Bridges*, a septet with tenor saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock and trombonist Jacob Garchik on 2014's *Illusionary Sea*, and finally an octet with pedal steel guitarist Susan Alcorn on 2016's *Away With You*. She also released the 2015 solo recording *Meltframe*, and most recently debuted 2018's *Code Girl*, a new ensemble featuring Formanek, Fujiwara, trumpeter Adam O'Farrill, saxophonist/ vocalist Maria Grand, and vocalist Amirtha Kidambi (singing Halvorson's own lyrics).

Halvorson and Fujiwara connected with Formanek when he subbed in Bynum's band in 2011, and the chemistry was so readily apparent they immediately started looking into performance opportunities as a trio. He's been described as "a bold and unclassifiable bassist and composer," while *The New York Times* has noted that his music is always "graceful in its subversions, often even sumptuous." Whether it's for a small band or a large ensemble, he creates modern jazz that is earthy yet atmospheric, always alive with dark-hued melody and bone-deep rhythms, rich in dynamic possibility and the sound of surprise. Even with decades of experience to his credit – he got his start as a Bay Area teenager playing with the likes of Joe Henderson and Tony Williams – Formanek has made some of his keenest creative leaps in recent years, documented on a sequence of justly lauded recordings.

His three ECM albums as a leader each scored rare five-star reviews in *DownBeat*. These included two discs – *Small Places* (2012) and *The Rub and Spare Change* (2010) – featuring a powerhouse quartet with saxophonist Tim Berne, pianist Craig Taborn and drummer Gerald Cleaver; the third was a magnificent record – *The Distance* (2016) – that showcased his compositions for an all-star big band, playfully dubbed Ensemble Kolossus. Formanek's first album for the Intakt label, *Time Like This* (2018), saw him leading his new Elusion Quartet with saxophonist Tony Malaby, pianist Kris Davis and drummer/vibraphonist Ches Smith to "soul-stirring" effect, according to *All About Jazz*. Formanek's latest release is *Even Better*, which presents for the first time his Very Practical Trio, featuring Halvorson and altoist Tim Berne.

Born in San Francisco in 1958, Formanek has performed in myriad contexts over the decades, including with masters from Gerry Mulligan and Stan Getz to Freddie Hubbard and Fred Hersch. Among his peers, the bassist has collaborated closely with Tim Berne, making a duo album with the saxophonist (*Ornery People*) and performing extensively in Berne's iconic Bloodcount band in the '90s. Formanek also released a solo LP – *Am I Bothering You?* – via Berne's Screwgun label in 1998. Formanek's early recordings as a leader included a string of quartet and septet releases for Enja from 1990 to 1996. As a sideman, he has recorded with Uri Caine, Dave Burrell, Jane Ira Bloom, Gary Thomas, Jack Walrath, Harold Danko, Lee Konitz, Freddie Redd, Art Pepper, Chet Baker and even Elvis Costello, along with appearing on albums by such frequent partners as Halvorson and Fujiwara, Berne, Malaby, multi-reedist Marty Ehrlich, trumpeter Dave Ballou, saxophonist Ellery Eskelin, drummer Devin Gray and pianist Angelica Sanchez. From 2001 to 2018, Formanek taught jazz bass and jazz history at the Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where he also directed the Peabody Jazz Orchestra. He continues to teach at the School for Improvisational Music in New York, along with conducting workshops and masterclasses internationally.

For more information on Thumbscrew

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www.MichaelFormanek.com - www.TomasFujiwara.com - www.MaryHalvorson.com

PROMOTIONAL PHOTOS

Digital [High-Resolution] versions of these images are available on the Thumbscrew artist page @ www.cuneiformrecords.com

