



Bio information: **THUMBSCREW**
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***THUMBSCREW, the All-Star Collective Trio Featuring
Bassist Michael Formanek, Drummer/Vibraphonist
Tomas Fujiwara, and Guitarist Mary Halvorson,
Crafts More Musical Treasure at City of Asylum***

Virginia Woolf was writing specifically about women when she observed that a room of one's own is a crucial ingredient in the creative process, but it's a truth universally acknowledged that artists of all stripes require their own space to thrive. The singular relationship between Thumbscrew and City of Asylum Pittsburgh vividly illustrates the creative synergy unleashed when collaborators share physical proximity for an extended period of time. *Wingbeats* is **Thumbscrew's** eighth album and the latest to emerge from one of the trio's three-week **City of Asylum Pittsburgh** residencies. It's no exaggeration to say that the group's productivity and sound is inextricably entwined with the grassroots program, with a purview that expanded from helping exiled writers resettle in the city to fostering a wide array of creative endeavors.

Featuring bassist **Michael Formanek**, drummer/vibraphonist **Tomas Fujiwara**, and guitarist **Mary Halvorson**, Thumbscrew brings together three of jazz's busiest and most acclaimed improvisers. City of Asylum has provided an oasis of concentrated time "and it's such a luxury to develop this music in that environment," says Halvorson. "We really have a flow with that, a system with how we work. We all arrive with our music fully or partially composed. From day one there are daily rehearsals, working through the material with the goal of recording. That's been the process for all of the albums after the first one."

From its inception, Thumbscrew possessed a singularly mobile, slippery sound. The repeated City of Asylum sequestrations have allowed the trio to deepen that elastic sense of time while honing new works with an attention to detail that would otherwise be unattainable. Knowing they'll have concentrated time together "means there are zero limitations on what I write for the group," Fujiwara says. "It takes out any voice in my head asking 'Are we really going to get this? Is this asking too much?'" With each composer represented by three tunes, the album is a gorgeous, consistently enthralling dispatch from jazz's creative frontier.

Wingbeats opens with Fujiwara's title track, which juxtaposes melodic simplicity with metrical complexity as his orchestrated drum part moves through a series of rhythmic structures. It's the kind of gravity-defying high-wire performance that has come to define the trio.

He dedicated "Irreverent Grace" to his mother ("Two words you wouldn't connect but that are both very apropos to her," he says), and the tune works backwards from Formanek's solo into the balladic theme featuring Fujiwara's bright, incantatory vibes work. "The two sections might sound unrelated, but there's a connection, with the A section emerging from the B according to my own logic," he says.

Halvorson's "Greenish Tents" is a quietly mysterious theme built on precisely calibrated passages. Designed to showcase Fujiwara's vibraphone, an instrumental addition that has reconfigured the band's sonic palette in recent years, the piece features interplay so interwoven it can be hard to discern her chiming guitar

notes from the vibes. In contrast to dense harmonies of “Greenish,” Halvorson’s “Singlet” is an unadorned rubato melody that wends along buoyed by Formanek’s counter line. A line sketch of a tune, parts of it feel like a round, with the trio shifting to a unison melody by the end.

Working backwards from the conclusion, Formanek’s “How May I Inconvenience You” opens with a bass-driven passage that evolved out of the concluding section, with Fujiwara soloing over his partners’ interplay. They don’t make it sound easy. For his vibes-tune contribution, Formanek created “Somewhat Agree,” a stutter-stepping dance between Fujiwara and Halvorson with repeated harmonic and sonic collisions as they move into the same terrain.

“This is the second album where we’ve composed for the vibes,” Formanek says. “It’s been fun to see Tomas take that on, and he put in an incredible amount of work to make it a viable option. Even having an unusual take on a guitar trio, it’s still a guitar trio. With the vibes, I think about the Red Norvo Trio with Tal Farlow and Mingus. This is totally different, but we’re still working with those colors.”

Best known as a vehicle for original compositions, Thumbscrew can deliver revelatory interpretations of tunes by a far-flung array of composers, from Anthony Braxton (on 2020’s *The Anthony Braxton Project*) to Benny Golson, Wayne Shorter, Jacob do Bandolim and Misha Mengelberg (on 2018’s *Theirs*). The album concludes with another masterful reinterpretation, Mingus’s “Orange Was the Color of Her Dress, Then Blue Silk,” a tune they introduced to the repertoire for a centennial celebration of the legendary bassist/composer at Constellation in Chicago. A piece recorded by Mingus in a variety of settings, from its solo piano debut to the epic version by the Changes quintet, “Orange” is Thumbscrew’s take on this extremely complex but naturally flowing song form, a deftly shaded interpretation built on subtle shifts in tempo and rhythm and odd bar structures.

“It’s one that I’ve always loved,” Formanek says. “We didn’t bring some big arrangement idea. One thing I always liked about ‘Orange’ is the way it evolved in the course of his recordings, with each one reflecting what he was thinking about at that time.”

While Thumbscrew has become one of the primary vehicles for collaboration between three artists in perpetual motion, it’s hardly their only project. Halvorson and Fujiwara first started playing together in cornetist **Taylor Ho Bynum’s Sextet** in the mid-aughts and have performed and recorded widely in each other’s ensembles. Based in Brooklyn, Fujiwara has also earned renown as a composer 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.” He leads and composes for a number of ensembles, including **Tomas Fujiwara’s Triple Double** (with Halvorson, **Taylor Ho Bynum**, **Ralph Alessi**, **Brandon Seabrook**, and **Gerald Cleaver**), and **Tomas Fujiwara’s 7 Poets Trio** (with **Patricia Brennan** and **Tomeka Reid**), which released its eponymous debut in 2019 on the **Rogue Art** label, and a 2023 sophomore album, *Pith*, on **Out of Your Head Records**. **Tomas Fujiwara & The Hook Up** (with Halvorson, **Jonathan Finlayson**, and **Brian Settles**) released three albums on the **482** label, including *Actionspeak* (2010, with bassist **Danton Boller**), *The Air Is Different* (2012, with bassist **Trevor Dunn**), and *After All Is Said* (2015, with Formanek).

Fujiwara engages in a diversity of creative work with **Anthony Braxton**, **John Zorn**, **Matana Roberts**, **Joe Morris**, **Nicole Mitchell**, **Ben Goldberg**, **Tomeka Reid**, **Amir ElSaffar**, **Benoit Delbecq**, and many others. In 2021, he won the **Downbeat Critics Poll** for **Rising Star Drummer**, and premiered two suites of new music as part of his Roulette Residency: “**You Don’t Have to Try**” (with **Meshell Ndegeocello**) and “**Shizuko**.” His most recent work is “**Dream Up**,” a suite for percussion quartet, commissioned by NYSCA and Roulette Intermedium, with an album release slated for early 2025.

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.” In recent **DownBeat 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, Halvorson has worked with a dauntingly diverse array of musicians such 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**. She released a series of critically acclaimed albums on the **Firehouse 12** label, including her acclaimed 2018 and 2020 albums with her band **Code Girl**, which features a rhythm section of Formanek and Fujiwara and a repertoire of songs with her original lyrics based around poetic forms. Recording for **Nonesuch**, she released two albums simultaneously in 2022, *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna*. The former features a new sextet with Fujiwara, vibraphonist **Patricia Brennan**, bassist **Nick Dunston**, trombonist **Jacob Garchik**, and trumpeter **Adam O'Farrill** (augmented by the **Mivos** string quartet on the album's second side). On *Belladonna*, Halvorson wrote solely for guitar and Mivos. Her latest album, 2024's *Cloudward*, adds **Laurie Anderson's** violin to the *Amaryllis* sextet.

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**. He recently launched his own label, **Circular File Records**, with *Were We Where We Were* by the **Michael Formanek Drome Trio** with **Chet Doxas** and **Vinnie Sperrazza**, though he's also recording for other labels like **Intakt**, which will soon document the **Splash Trio** with pianist **Myra Melford** and **Ches Smith** on drums and vibes.

Born in San Francisco in 1958 and now based in Portugal, **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 frequent partners such as Halvorson and Fujiwara, Berne, **Tony 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 and directed large and small ensembles at the **Peabody Institute of Johns Hopkins University** in Baltimore. He continues to teach, mainly giving workshops and masterclasses in universities and music schools worldwide.