

Bio information: **TOMEKA REID QUARTET**

Title: **OLD NEW** (Cuneiform Rune 465) | Format: CD / DIGITAL
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FILE UNDER: **JAZZ**

**The Tomeka Reid Quartet Continues Exploring Verdant New Territory in *Old New*,
a Dazzling Program of Original Music by
the Award-Winning New York Cellist, Composer, and Arranger**

Featuring bassist Jason Roebke, drummer Tomas Fujiwara, and guitarist Mary Halvorson

The jazz polls might still list cello under the miscellaneous instrument category, but in the hands of **Tomeka Reid** it's an essential vehicle for unfettered jazz exploration. *Old New*, the second album by the Tomeka Reid Quartet, is a project that exemplifies why she's quickly become a definitive figure on the 21st century jazz scene. As a composer, arranger, improviser, bandleader, and impresario, she embodies jazz's progressive ethos. Crafting memorable tunes brimming with arresting textures and melodies, Reid creates music palpably connected to the tradition while recasting those sounds to meet her own expressive needs. *Old new*, indeed!

While Reid has recorded prolifically since making her debut on flutist Nicole Mitchell's 2002 Black Earth Ensemble album *Afrika Rising* (DreamTime Records), *Old New* is only her second album leading her own band, following up on the eponymous *Tomeka Reid Quartet* (Thirsty Ear). Like that 2015 release, the band's second album features a brilliant cast with guitarist **Mary Halvorson** and drummer **Tomas Fujiwara**, who play together in at least half a dozen different ensembles, and Chicago bassist **Jason Roebke**. It's essentially a string band, an electro-acoustic hybrid in which any player might take on bass, melodic or rhythmic responsibilities at any given time.

"I wanted to have a string-centered group," says Reid, who was recently voted Violinist/Violist/Cellist of the Year for the second consecutive time by the Jazz Journalists Association. "I wanted a harmonic instrument, but not piano and I wanted to go in a different direction. For this quartet I like Mary's manner of using pedals in interesting and creative ways. You can hear right away that it's her. I like that contrast with me being all acoustic in this ensemble."

Based in Queens since 2016, Reid wrote much of the *Old New* music with the support of a grant from Roulette Intermedium. The album opens with the title track, a slippery piece that almost serves as a manifesto for an artist consciously building on the work of her most adventurous string predecessors. It's a Reid original "that's an old form, a hymn," she says. In much the same way, "Wabash Blues" opens with Fujiwara's clattery trap work, a jittery introduction for an incident-filled soundscape inspired by the changeable energy of the Chicago block where she lived before moving to New York City.

Reid is as effective evoking people as places. "Niki's Bop" is a tribute to her dear friend and mentor Nicole Mitchell, a joyous, terpsichorean line that practically shimmies. "I could imagine her playing that melody on flute," Reid says. "She's a huge inspiration in my life. There's nothing better than writing a song for somebody."

Mary Halvorson was a source of inspiration for "Ballad" and the piece's coiled energy, conversational flow and wry asides seem to reveal facets of the guitarist that aren't necessarily apparent. "The melody reminded me of something about Mary's personality, sweet, no nonsense, reserved, and yet funnier than most people might know," Reid says.

Written for her maternal grandmother, "Sadie" is a boppish line that's as poised and elegant as the woman herself. Designed to feature Roebke, "Edelin" is a mysterious, slow-breath piece that takes on density as it goes. "Jason should be much better known," Reid says. "He does great, interesting work, and being in Chicago you can get overlooked. There are so many people doing interesting things there."

Reid closes the album with "Peripatetic," an Anthony Braxton-inspired tune that covers a lot of distance in a relatively short span, from the portentous opening statement to the skittery mid-section to the almost operatic conclusion. Speaking of gorgeous melodies, the pizzicato-powered "RN" offers a glimpse at Reid's love of pop music, with its incantatory refrain and unabashed lyricism. It's a sweet sign off, and an implicit promise that there are many more realms for this band to investigate.

If Reid's music seems to draw on a multiplicity of sources, that's because she's absorbed a mind-boggling array of influences in a relatively short period of time. Over the past decade she's collaborated with veteran visionaries connected to Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), performing and recording with Anthony Braxton, Nicole Mitchell, Roscoe Mitchell (no relation) and the collective he co-founded, the Art Ensemble of Chicago. She's also worked closely with contemporaries such as drummer Mike Reed, cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, and veteran masters such as Nicole Mitchell and pianist Myra Melford, among many others. Reid has embraced her role as a champion of creative string players, on and off the bandstand. "I'm a big advocate for strings in improvised music, particularly violinists, violists and cellists who are their own leaders," says Reid, who founded and runs the Chicago Jazz String Summit. "A lot of my projects are centered around string players."

Reid grew up outside of Washington D.C., and came to the cello relatively late. Concentrating on classical music in her teens and early 20s, she started investigating jazz her senior year at the University of Maryland, College Park when her undergrad mentor encouraged her to start exploring the tradition. "He came up with this book of Rufus Reid basslines and I'd just read these basslines and do these little gigs," she recalls.

Moving to Chicago in 2000 to attend a graduate music program at DePaul University she connected with flutist/composer Nicole Mitchell, a relationship that recalibrated her entire aesthetic orientation. While she was embraced by the improvisational music scene, Reid learned to make her own way, which was both liberating and extremely challenging. "After I met Nicole she introduced me to the Velvet Lounge where I encountered members of the AACM and learned about their work and aesthetic. I grew from there and started going to the Velvet Lounge, where I was often the only string player," Reid says, referring to the South Loop jazzspot that was then owned and run by tenor sax great Fred Anderson. "Everyone there was very supportive and encouraged me to find my own voice, which was great but also frustrating."

She found the ideal outfits for evolution as a member of several celebrated Chicago bands, including Mitchell's Black Earth Ensemble, vocalist Dee Alexander's Evolution Ensemble, and drummer Mike Reed's Loose Assembly. "They were really working bands, and I got to play a lot," Reid says. "With Nicole sometimes I'd play the bass role and sometimes lead. I was also doing harmonic stuff even if I was playing melody. I developed a comping style. With Dee, the instrumentation was bass, cello, violin, voice, and percussion, and I often doubled bass lines. And with Mike Reed I was more of a horn player, getting pushed more into soloing."

Reid is a 2016 recipient of a 3Arts award in music and received her doctorate in music from the University of Illinois, Urbana - Champaign in 2017. She also co-leads the adventurous string trio Hear in Now with violinist Mazz Swift and bassist Silvia Bolognesi. When the time came to launch a band to play her original music, she sought out advice from Nicole Mitchell, who suggested Halvorson. Reid was already working with Fujiwara in Mike Reed's fascinating Sun Ra-inspired ensemble Living By Lanterns (which released the acclaimed 2012 Cuneiform album *Old Myth, New Science*). Approaching both players made eminent sense. Halvorson and Fujiwara already played together in the collective trio Thumbscrew with bassist Michael Formanek, and power Formanek's Ensemble Kolossus. The three of them are also the foundation of Halvorson's quintet Code Girl, a project introduced on the acclaimed 2018 album of the same name. Halvorson and Fujiwara first started playing together in cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum's Sextet (Reid joined an expanded version of the band on 2016's *Enter the PlusTet*). Among other bands, they also work together in the collective quartets Reverse Blue (with Chris Speed and Eivind Opsvik) and The Thirteenth Assembly (with Bynum and violist Jessica Pavone), and the trio The Outlouds with clarinetist Ben Goldberg.

Recognized as one of the most important and resourceful new voices on guitar to emerge in the past decade, Halvorson is a doggedly idiosyncratic artist who "can define the character of an entire band's tonal makeup without have to scream for attention," says S. Victor Aaron. Raised in Boston and based in Brooklyn, she spent three formative years at Wesleyan University studying and playing with visionary composer and saxophonist Anthony Braxton, eventually performing on six of his recordings. Since graduating from Wesleyan in 2002, she's become a ubiquitous presence in the circles where left-field jazz and improvised music intersect. An invaluable collaborator, she's been sought out by bandleaders such as Tim Berne, Curtis Hasselbring, Myra Melford, Jason Moran, Ches Smith, Joe Morris, Tom Rainey, Marc Ribot, and Trevor Dunn.

Fujiwara is attracted to similarly polymorphous configurations. Born and raised in Boston, he spent his formative years studying with drum legend Alan Dawson. Since moving to New York City at 17 to study at the New School, he's become one of the leading drummers of his generation. He gained widespread attention via collaborations with Taylor Ho Bynum, including a high-wire duo, Bynum's Sextet, and the avant Afro-Caribbean little big band Positive Catastrophe. He's also a founding member of the bhangra-funk brass band Red Baraat, and baritone saxophonist Josh Sinton's Ideal Bread, a quartet devoted to the music of Steve Lacy. Fujiwara continues to work with contemporaries like saxophonist Matana Roberts, pianist Matt Mitchell, and trumpeter Amir ElSafar, and veteran masters such as Anthony Braxton, Roswell Rudd, Nicole Mitchell and Tim Berne.

Roebke is similarly expansive. He's a member of the Jeb Bishop Trio, Jason Adasiewicz Rolldown, Jason Stein's Locksmith Isidore, Mike Reed's People, Places, and Things, and Jorrit Dijkstra's Flatlands Collective & Pillow Circles. Born and raised in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, he started playing electric bass at age 14, inspired by Motown bassist James Jamerson. Pursuing a passion for jazz through

his undergraduate years, he moved to Madison upon graduation in 1996 to study with legendary saxophonist and composer Roscoe Mitchell, working with him daily for the next 18 months. A short stint at the University of Michigan in 1998 found him studying with bassist Rodney Whitaker, and by 1999 he'd relocated to Chicago, where he jumped into a thriving scene with fellow emerging improvisers such as saxophonists Aram Shelton, Dave Rempis and Matt Bauder, drummers Tim Daisy and Frank Rosaly and cornetist Josh Berman.

His first recording as a leader, a trio session with Aram Shelton and drummer Tim Daisy, came out in 2003, *Rapid Croche* (482 Music). He's worked extensively with cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm in the band Terminal 4 and Valentine Trio. He spearheaded three recordings with the improvising trio tigersmilk with cornetist Rob Mazurek and Vancouver drummer Dylan van der Schyff. And in 2012 he launched the Jason Roebke Octet, which has performed regularly and released the 2014 debut album *High/Red/Center* (Delmark Records). With his sonic resourcefulness and capacious textural palette he's been an ideal collaborator for Reid, who has become a leading force on her instrument.

"What's awesome as a cellist is that we can create a sound for ourselves," said Reid, who was recently awarded a prestigious grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. "We do have a history, but not the same kind as trumpet, saxophone and pianists for example, with hundreds and hundreds of predecessors. I've come to appreciate that a lot more." With *Old New*, Tomeka Reid has staked another flag in the future.

For more information on Tomeka Reid:
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Digital [High-Resolution] images available at <http://www.cuneiformrecords.com/bandshtml/tomekareid.html>

