



WITH A NEW CD, A DREAM GIG WITH WYNTON AND A SOLID TEACHING POST, TRUMPET PHENOM SEAN JONES IS LOVING LIFE—AND HELPING AUDIENCES LOVE IT, TOO

JOYFUL NOISE

It's late—almost 4 o'clock in the morning—and Sean Jones has just now returned to his hotel room in Peñíscola, on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. But the trumpeter sounds fully energized as he reflects on the remarkable career path that's led him here, a world away from his origins in the steel town of Warren, Ohio.

“When I was working on my bachelor's degree at Youngstown State, I asked my jazz band director, Tony Leonardi, for career advice,” says Jones. “And he told me to treat life like a fireplace: put as many irons in the fire as you can and when one of them gets hot, grab it. So I asked, what if they all get hot at once? And he said, ‘Grab all of ’em.’”

It's a philosophy that has served him well. Now 29, Jones has a high-profile gig playing alongside Wynton Marsalis as lead trumpet in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. When not on the road, Jones is a full-time university professor at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. A successful recording artist as well, Jones leads a strong yet flexible sextet and enjoys solid label support from Mack Avenue. His fourth CD, *Kaleidoscope*, was released in August to considerable buzz.

BY FORREST DYLAN BRYANT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANK STEWART





Kaleidoscope is a significant departure for Jones, placing his stirring, emotionally charged trumpet work alongside five up-and-coming vocalists. Gospel star Kim Burrell is perhaps the best known, but also on hand are Gretchen Parlato, winner of the 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocal

Competition; J.D. Walter, who Jones describes as “one of the greatest male voices on the scene”; Sachal Vasandani, who recently released his own debut on Mack Avenue; and newcomer Carolyn Perteete. The singers provide a host of fresh settings and unique directions for Jones’ sextet, with no two tracks yielding quite the same sound. Call it an anti-concept album.

Jones explains: “Nowadays, with iPods and downloads, people aren’t thinking in terms of albums anymore. They just want to buy songs. So I decided to put out a record that was nothing but singles. Every tune stands alone.” Further enhancing the kaleidoscopic effect, Jones democratized the selection of material. “Everyone contributed a piece,” he says. “I asked each vocalist to submit four songs that they thought best featured their own voice, and from those I would choose one or two. I wanted each song to be completely different from the next.”

Jones then challenged himself to merge each vocalist’s distinctive style with his own expressive sound. “With the vocalists choosing their own tunes, I had to adapt to their melodic approaches,” Jones says. “Take Gretchen Parlato: She’s very breathy and sings with a sort of rhythmic suspension. But Kim Burrell has a very soulful gospel sound. And J.D. Walter decided to scat.” Jones found the constantly shifting ground demanding but rewarding. “It’s really tough. You have to be very comfortable with who you are, very comfortable with your sound, and you have to have knowledge and awareness of the music that you’re playing.”

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The beginnings of that awareness came at the age of 10, when Jones entered his school’s music program. “I was a nerd,” he says. “I wanted the most challenging instrument, and that was trumpet. It took me about a month to get a sound out of it! I remember saying to myself, ‘It’s hard, but I’m gonna master this instrument. I’m gonna be able to do anything I want on it.’”

If such self-confidence and determination were to become the hallmarks of Jones’ young career, the cornerstone of his sound was in the Pentecostal church he attended as a youth. Jones can burn through bop lines with the best of them, as evidenced by his blistering solos in big-band settings, but his own recordings and concerts have always incorporated a strong gospel flavor and a buoyant spirituality. Listen, for example, to the intensely powerful reading of “Lift Every Voice” on his 2006 album, *Roots*. When Jones solos, soaring with a gentle strength as his band swells behind him, it’s not just a pretty melody, or even the “black national anthem,” as that song is sometimes called. It’s praise.

“Before I ever played a trumpet, before I knew what a trumpet was, I was singing in the choir,” Jones says. “If you grow up in a Pentecostal church, it’s just high energy all the time. There’s not a dull moment. There’s a lot of love, a lot of people kissing and hugging and praising God. That’s where all of the fire and soul in my playing comes from. It’s in my bones.” Identity and self-knowledge are important concepts to Jones. “A

lot of people try to run from who they are, but I think that’s a mistake. You should embrace it. And the *feeling* that was in the church I grew up with, that’s a big part of me. When I’m playing, I see it as God using me as an instrument. And I try to play to people’s emotions, to provide healing through music.”

When Jones talks about the healing power of music, he’s not speaking metaphorically. An experience in Italy when he was 19 years old demonstrated the literal truth of that oft-repeated axiom. “I was the featured soloist with this band that was like a pop orchestra,” he explains.

“I didn’t feel like playing the concert that night but I did it and I gave it my all. Then after the gig, this old man came up to me, speaking Italian, and he was crying and clutching his heart. I had someone come over to translate, and when she heard what the man had to say she started crying, too! The man was saying that he had wanted to die before the concert, and now he wanted to live. Because after hearing that music, he knew there was still beauty left to experience in this world. And that’s when I realized that music has a real power to heal people, to change someone’s whole course of action.”

The incident in Italy changed Jones’ course, too. “I have a serious job to do,” he says. “Every time I play, I remember that maybe there’s someone out there in the audience who doesn’t want to go on anymore. Or someone might be thinking about going home and abusing his wife, doing something destructive. But maybe I can play enough love into them to make them change their course. They don’t need *me*, but maybe they need something in the music, and

I can be the vessel it flows through. So I try to make sure that my mind is right, that I’m thinking as purely as I can. When I’m onstage, I put myself second, and I try to consider the needs of the people in that audience.”

Jones is firm in asserting the need for a positive attitude onstage, repeating the words of his high school mentor, trumpeter Dennis Reynolds: “He told me, ‘Music is not who you are, it’s what you do.’ Good music comes from being a great human being, not vice versa. Because it’s easy to get consumed with music, you know? It’s like you live for the gig, and you forget you have to take care of home, that you have to treat people right. You’re able to communicate the human story a lot better if you’re a good human being and you keep things in perspective.”

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In assembling his band, Jones has sought out musicians who share not only that positive attitude, but also his own eclectic tastes. “Great musicians who love and are influenced by all types of music, and just love life,” says Jones. *Kaleidoscope*, like all of Jones’ recordings, has a prominent role for pianist Orrin Evans. Jones refers to Evans as his “musical director,” both a collaborator and a guiding force. The two met while playing with drummer Ralph Peterson and immediately clicked. “Every note that I played, he had something ready to accompany it,” says Jones. “I felt like I could just fall down and he would catch me. He’s very soulful, very energetic, and very giving when he plays. And I try to get him out front as much as I can, because I feel like maybe he doesn’t get the recognition that he deserves. He can go anywhere; play in any style. He’s always right there with me.”

There’s a similar sentiment when the conversation turns to saxophonist Tia Fuller, who was a major presence on Jones’ prior albums. Indeed, the first two tracks on *Eternal Journey*, Jones’ 2004 debut, were



Fuller's compositions. "For a time there we were joined at the hip, like we were the same person," Jones says. "We'd seek advice from each other, we were there for each other, and I think it showed in the music."

Fuller has moved on, having found her own success with a well-received CD on Mack Avenue and a steady gig with R&B diva Beyoncé, but she and Jones remain close. Perhaps it's a testament to Fuller's importance that her place is now filled by two saxophonists, Brian Hogans on alto and Walter Smith III on tenor. The virtuosic bassist Luques Curtis and dynamically flowing drummer Obed Calvaire fill out the band.

Assembled onstage, the sextet puts Jones' ideals into practice. The band is bold and deep, capable of thundering complexity or sublime meditation, while inviting the audience to make a personal connection to the music. "You know, a lot of people just create art for art's sake, or music for music's sake," Jones says. "I don't want to be that kind of musician. I want to create music that speaks to people. We need to find that balance, to create music that is of quality and speaks to humanity, that people can grasp hold of."

Again for Jones, it's about healing: "People spend money for a concert ticket because they want to escape for a moment, to forget about everything, and it's my job to open the door to that other land they want to reach. So I want a positive, uplifting vibe onstage. I don't want it to be dark. If someone wants dark they can go watch a horror movie."

Jones brings the same sense of mission to his teaching career. As Assistant Professor of Jazz Studies at Duquesne, Jones runs the small ensemble program, directs and teaches a big band and conducts private lessons. Although his academic credentials—a master's from Rutgers and some work towards a Ph.D.—stand on their own, Jones believes that his experience on the road is a more valuable qualification.

"Duquesne is a model school," Jones asserts. "They realize that their professors need to be on the road, for scholarship as well as recruitment. And that's something that's kind of been the Achilles heel of the teaching jazz musician for a long time. Duquesne realizes the importance of a working, gigging musician coming into the classroom and bringing that real-world experience to the students. You can't teach that from a book."

Jones says he can see the difference this approach makes to his students: "I don't have to teach; I'm choosing to do it because I love it. I can bring what I've learned from having a good career onstage and having a

recording contract, and the students really latch on because of that. They get it. They can come to my gigs and I let them sit in, and they learn what's going on in the world, you know? What's really happening. I'm glad this is becoming a trend in universities now. Real education happens on the stage."

But Jones is still young, and he acknowledges that *he* is learning, too. You can hear it in his music. "Over the past few years, I've learned that less is more," he says thoughtfully. "I'm one of those guys who was classically trained and liked to play a lot of notes. But going back and listening to my records, sometimes I wish I had played less. The records that I enjoy the most are *Roots* and the new album, because the music breathes more."

He continues: "I think a lot of it is just maturity. When you're young, you want to run. But when you get a little bit older, that run turns into a slow jog. And after a while you settle down to a walk. Right now I'd say maybe I'm entering the slow-jog stage."

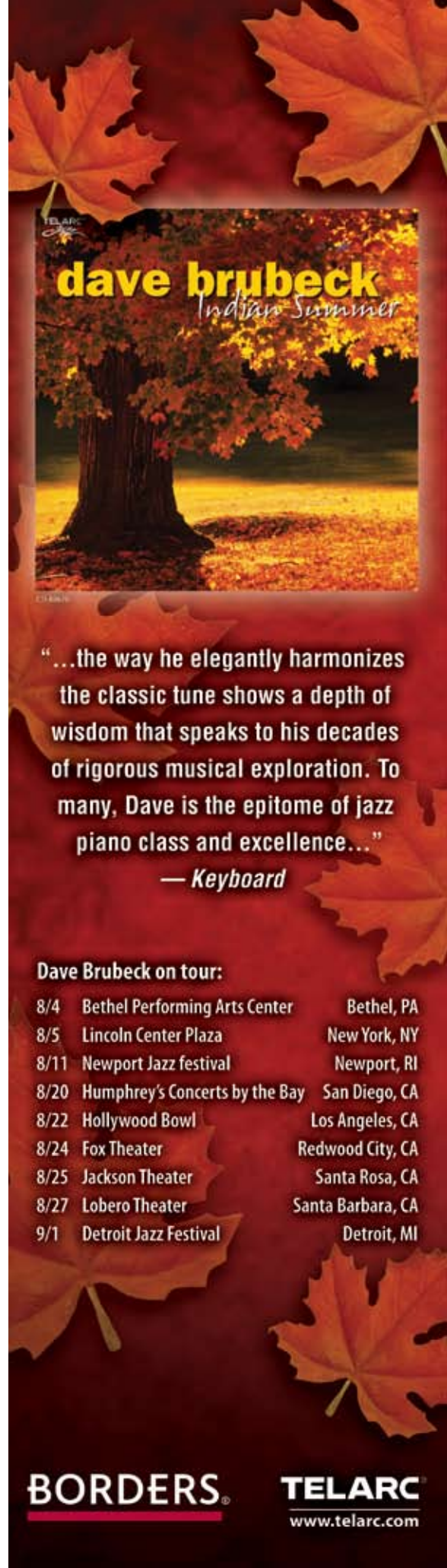
Along with more economical improvising, Jones is getting deeper into his compositional skills, and is now working on a suite. "For a long time, I didn't really consider myself to be a writer," he says. "I guess in jazz, like in anything else, you get some people who are jack-of-all-trades but master of none, who just write a bunch of stuff but aren't really writers, and it all sounds the same. I never wanted to be one of those people, but now I'm hearing more music in my head, so my thinking is changing. I still don't sit down and try to write things, just for the sake of writing. I have to hear it first, and it has to speak to me."

With the suite most likely being the focus of his next recording project, Jones is already looking beyond the vocal experiments of *Kaleidoscope*: "I'll probably leave the voices for a while; I loved the experience, I learned a lot and I look forward to doing it again. Maybe every fourth or fifth album I'll do another vocal record!"

In the meantime, Jones hopes to pursue bigger game. Inspired by the work of Darren Atwater, composer-in-residence at the Baltimore Symphony, Jones would like someday to write a large-scale work combining classical music, jazz and gospel into a single vision. "That's my dream," he says. "Because my generation, we don't really see music in terms of genre anymore. Everything is coming together." **JT**

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