

Bill Stevens

Friends



...a series of duets

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In 1999, after a six year leave from playing the trumpet, I had a desire to begin again. I reached out to a teacher, bassist Joe Solomon who through a study of Billie Holiday and Lester Young I found my way back to playing. It wasn't too long that Joe felt it would be good for me to start playing with other musicians again. He hooked me up with another of his students, bassist Mary Jo White, who had a weekly session at Michiko Studios on W 46th Street. After she spoke to the other players, I was invited to attend a Friday night session. At that session, I met Charlie Gushee, Terry Schwandron, Dean Luca, Elliot Honig and Don Perman. I was thrilled to be playing again and with some fine musicians.

Not long after this first session, both Mary Jo and Dean left the group and the bass chair was filled now by Rich Russo. This would become the band that would record my first New York City album Dedication in 2003.

Around this same time, I was now an Assistant Principal at Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts where I met a music teacher, percussionist Gary Fogel. Not long after we met, there was another change in personnel to this steady Friday night session. Don Perman left the ensemble and Gary filled in shortly after that. The sextet was now going by the name of Standard Time having just finished an almost two year residency at the Green Room in Chelsea, as well as recording another album of originals in the Winter of 2005 this time by both Gary and myself.

Around 2005 there were some additional changes precipitated more by me than the other members of the ensemble. The first was to create a trio with myself, Rich Russo on bass and Gary Fogel on drums, as well as to organize into a quintet with Charlie Gushee on tenor sax, Elliot Honig on piano, Colin Campbell on bass and Eric Peters on the drums. Over the next ten plus years these two groups became my main performance outlet with only a few changes in personnel, Paul Pricer replaced Colin Campbell in the bass chair of the quintet and Serge Terentev replaced Eric Peters when Eric left New York to move to Binghamton.

Around 2016 I formed another trio with Paul Pricer on bass and a new guitar player that I met through the New York Jazz Workshop Big Band, Corey Larson. This would be a drummer-less trio playing music from the songbooks of Chet Baker and Miles Davis.

In 2019 it hit me that I have been playing with literally the same personnel, the same friends for coming on 20 years, specifically Charlie Gushee, Elliot Honig, Paul Pricer, Rich Russo and Gary Fogel. And between the big band and the Songbook Trio I have known Corey for many years now. These guys are always there, now more monthly than weekly, but clearly wanting to continue to play in one form or another. Currently I play monthly in a quintet with Charlie, Elliot, Paul and Serge and in the Songbook Trio with Paul and Corey.

Additionally, I have recently started another trio called Sound House with Gary and a guitarist that I played with from my days at the University of Miami some 40 years ago, Doug Cuomo.

I felt it was time to do something for each of these musicians and friends. I set out to write a series of compositions for each of them that would be performed as duets.

Where the Stars Dwell, written for pianist Elliot Honig. I can very clearly remember that first session that Mary Jo invited me to at Michiko's. I was pretty nervous not having played with other people in over six years. Well, I do not remember the tune we played, but the minute I heard Elliot, I knew that I had found the real deal. Between his comping and soloing, I couldn't have asked for anything more. I clearly remember that at the end of that first tune, we passed a look to each other and a small nod of the head signaling a connection and I am thankful that this connection has lasted over 20 years and is still ongoing.

When We Walked Once Together, for bassist Rich Russo. When I first met Rich at the weekly Friday session at Michiko's he was playing electric bass, but what a sound on the electric. He had a touch that gave the impression of an upright. He played that electric through 2003 as documented on the album *Dedication*; however shortly after that Rich mentioned that he was practicing on an upright at home, but as of yet did not feel comfortable to bring it out. I may have pressured him a little, but I can remember saying to not worry about feeling uncomfortable, he was around supportive friends. Once Rich came out with that upright, we never let him go back to the electric again (although he did play electric in the trio with Gary Fogel on the spoken word studio recording of *La Jetee* in 2013). Playing with Rich in the trio was pure pleasure whether playing in a free linear fashion or on a groove or ostinato bass line. That band simmered, always in control, big fun.

Kindred Spirits, for saxophonist Charlie Gushee. When I first heard Charlie, I knew I had found my foil. At the beginning we were both pretty fiery players in a Jazz Messengers style, but as time went on and my playing began to wear down, Charlie was the perfect compliment. Solid time, rhythmically exciting, lines that went in unexpected places and always deep in the harmony, that was and is Charlie Gushee. We made a series of albums together - *Dedication*, *Midnight Sun*, *Full Circle* - every time I listen to Charlie's playing on these albums I always hear something new.

We Have Arrived, Together, Live Improvised Performance, Tenri Cultural Center - Breathing Peace, August 4, 2019 - Doug Cuomo/Bill Stevens

In my first semester at the University of Miami I met guitarist Doug Cuomo in an assigned small group class. Throughout the remainder of my time in Miami, we remained friends; however we played very seldom after that. Move the clock ahead almost 40 years and we re-connected once again in 2016. Doug is an accomplished composer for concert, opera and the theatrical stage, as well as for television and film. Not long after our reunion, we formed

a new improvisatory trio with Gary Fogel on drums that we call Sound House. Much of the performing that we do revolves around a concept of total free improvisation. What compositional elements that may exist are minimal in substance and are often designed as benchmarks, demarcation points within the improvisation. When we were asked to perform at the benefit Breathing Peace at the Tenri Cultural Center in New York I knew that I would have a piece to add to this collection as a means of featuring Doug as one of the musicians and friends that I am most closely associated with. After a brief discussion prior to our performance we proceeded to perform an approximately five minute improvisation on the theme of the benefit, a concert for peace.

Just Like This, written for guitarist Corey Larson. I have actually known Corey the least number of years than the others in this series; however I feel that I have known Corey my entire life. I met Corey in the New York Jazz Workshop Big Band and the minute I heard him play, I knew I had to get into some kind of playing situation right away. I asked him and bassist Paul Pricer if they would like to play in a drummer-less trio playing standards from the songbooks of Chet Baker and Miles Davis and from the first day, there was that feeling that we had found something very special. I call this tune, Just Like This, because when Corey plays, that's exactly what should be happening each moment throughout the song and throughout the set. He sets a groove, a feeling regardless of the style that you just sink into it feels so good. One evening we called the tune Estate to perform and I asked for an introduction to set up the head and when Corey started to play, I couldn't come in I just wanted to continue to listen to him. It was one of those beautiful moments that just stays with you.

Theme for a Dream, for bassist Paul Pricer. When the quintet in 2005 needed a new bass player, I asked Paul Pricer to play and immediately the sound of the group changed. The music began to breath with an openness to the sound that we had been looking for, but had not yet achieved. When I asked Paul if he wanted to play with Corey and myself in a new trio I knew that I had a solid bass player capable of performing without a drummer. What became immediately evident was that in that context, I finally understood in my own way how Bill Evans must have felt that first time he played with Scott LaFaro. With Paul playing a beautifully melodic style of bass in conjunction with Corey it was clear that the music came from Chet Baker and Miles Davis, but the feeling, the looseness, the melodic nature of the communication from the head to the solos was directly out of those great Bill Evans trios. I had found my dream.

Ears Wide Open, for drummer Gary Fogel. I first met Gary at LaGuardia High School and was asked to play on a few recordings of his original music, which was an incredible experience. Sort of a mix between Andrew Hill and Herbie Nichols. Rhythmically complex with interesting angular lines. He often writes for multiple horns creating some complex harmony and counterpoint. We also recorded an album of originals by both Gary and myself with a revised personnel of that Friday night sextet that we called Standard Time and most recently, Gary played on my new 2018 album, Connections. I had a blast playing with Gary

in the Bill Stevens, Rich Russo, Gary Fogel Trio which lasted close to a decade focusing on free linear improvisation, groove based material and some spoken word projects of mine. Currently, we play in a totally free improvisatory trio called Sound House with Doug Cuomo on guitar. Gary hears everything when he is playing and knows exactly what to do in any given moment. We used to joke that he knew what we were going to play before even we knew what we were going to play. Imaginative, highly musical and willing to put himself in any situation, that's Gary Fogel.

Bonus Track, Tune for Serge, for drummer Serge Terentev. Serge became a member of the quintet when drummer Eric Peters moved from New York to Binghamton. A solid, imaginative player, Serge approached me once with a piece of manuscript paper that had a series of rhythms sketched out. He asked me if I could write a tune using those rhythms. I came up with a rhythm change composition that I named for him and is on the album as a bonus track as performed by our Tuesday Night Michiko Quintet with Charlie, Paul and Elliot.

Unfinished Journey (with/for Laura)

In my continuing study of contemporary experimental music to find vehicles for my writing and improvisations, I came across the composer, David Dunn and specifically his work, Place. Place is a seven hour environmental piece where electronics record and play back ambient sounds, voices and instruments that trigger acoustic resonances in the local environment. Instruments imitate ambient sounds in real time and materials found on site sonically activate instruments in structured improvisations. These techniques blur distinctions between music and its surrounding environment, reimagining the very nature of music, and challenging divisions between nature and culture.

For many composers like David Dunn including Toby Marks, Israel M and Michael Red who performs under the name Souns, the natural world is a vast library of sounds, which can be selected, recorded, isolated and de-contextualized for musical purposes. My goal was to create a network between environmental sounds, including the repurposing of these natural sounds and the use of composition and improvisation, as a sort of acting on and responding to the environment.

On a recent trip to Tampa, Florida, Laura and I went to Lettuce Lake Park which is a beautiful setting, quiet and away from the sounds of the city. On this day, using my iPhone, I recorded a series of field recordings including birds chirping, cicadas, the wind rustling through the trees, water among others. When we returned to New York City, using my iPhone again, I made a series of city field recordings such as rain, thunder, traffic, car horns, subway sounds, people speaking, dogs barking, etc...

Many of these sounds I kept in their natural setting, but I also repurposed, de-contextualized many of the sounds using Audacity to mask the original environmental or city field recording. Once I had a series of workable sounds I began to place them into Audacity to create a setting or foundation that I would improvise over. The result is a three movement work called Unfinished Journey.

Unfinished Journey is written in three parts and placed among the duets as an Introduction, Interlude and as a Postlude. I consider this piece as a duet between myself and the environment, as well as a work for/with Laura. Invoking such relationships is not an abstract idea, but one with specific political implications. Our mutual love of the environment and of New York City, as an attempt to recapture an understanding that may be essential to the survival of our ecology that will surely only come from a more integrated relationship to the biosphere.

Throughout my musical life, I have been fortunate to play with many outstanding musicians. Laura and I have made New York City our home for the past 30 years and I am thankful that these eight friends found in this series of duets have been with me over the past 20 years. Thank you for listening and coming along for the ride.

Bill

Artwork by Laura Salzbe



Bill Stevens plays the trumpet and flugelhorn, is a composer and arranger and performs in New York City with many of his own ensembles. He has been a guest speaker at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo, Norway and the Australasian Jazz & Improvised Research Network in Melbourne, Australia. He has most recently served as the Assistant Principal - Administration, Supervisor of Arts Disciplines & Director of Jazz Studies at the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts.

Cover Art by Laura Salzberg

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