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Interview

Kyle Nasser

Saxophone

By Eric Nemeyer

JI: Could you talk about your obsession with "traditional" uses of counterpoint, form, and large-scale harmonic progression?

KN: At Berklee, students are required to take classes on traditional (Western classical) harmony and counterpoint. I was immediately transfixed by melodic counterpoint and began studying it intensively. This changed the way I thought about jazz composition and even improvisation - assigning primacy to the relationships in the movement and resolution of lines. The primary foundation of my compositions usually rests upon two or three-part counterpoint, with any additional harmonic material pulled from the implications of the melodic lines. I use traditional, modern, and self-derived methods of counterpoint to drive the small and large-scale harmonic motion in my pieces. Also, I often use classical forms (sonata-allegro, arch, rondo) and compositional devices (tone rows, melodic cells, aleatoricism, and polytonality.)

JI: What were the jazz recordings and or artists or performances that you were exposed to that inspired you and magnetized your interest in jazz?

KN: I had a few exceptional teachers that were early inspirations for me, especially Al Oliveira, who helped encourage me to play in the first place and Rick Britto, who really helped me assimilate theory with jazz vernacular. When I started playing jazz, Joshua Redman and Joe Lovano were quite popular. Their recordings from the 90's were the first jazz recordings to really grab my attention and pull me strongly to the music. I remember being really into Redman's *Moodswing* and Lovano's *Quartets at the Vanguard* and *Celebrating Sinatra*. I then went back and checked out a bunch of classic 50's and 60's records. I was particularly influenced by Shorter's *Speak No Evil*, Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*, Dolphy's *Out to Lunch*, and Coltrane's *Blue Trane* and *Coltrane's Sound*.

JI: Could you talk about the dichotomy between your matriculation at Harvard and your musical pursuits at Berklee College of Music? How did those work together if at all?

KN: Well, I suppose the best way to answer this question is to say that my studies at Harvard caused me to think seriously about how I wanted to live and what I wanted to do, and the result of this deliberation was that I wanted to pursue music as a saxophonist and composer. So, I went to Berklee. Though extremely different environments, both schools were full of people that were digging very deeply into their chosen fields. So, in that sense, they were quite similar.

JI: What kinds of challenges did you experience when you moved to New York to pursue performance opportunities?

KN: New York is a challenging place in many ways. It's expensive, big, and chock full of a seemingly infinite number of people that do whatever it is you do at an extremely high level. In Boston, I was able to make a living just playing music. However, in New York, gigs that pay well (or even at all!) are hard to come by, so I had to find teaching work a couple days a week to supplement my income. I still do that. It's worth noting that the rewards that come from being around such a rich and creative scene far outweigh the challenges one faces to be here - at least they do for me!

JI: Could you discuss your album *Restive Soul* from your initial concept to the finished work of art?

KN: In 2011, I began a weekly gig at the 5th Estate in Brooklyn and started playing with a very regular group of musicians. At the time, I was writing a lot of contrapuntal music with long forms - stuff that required a lot of shaping apart from the notes on the page. Luckily the weekly performance let me sharpen the aesthetic of both my compositions and the group realization of them. The tunes on Restive Soul are mostly the ones written in the months prior to the recording in summer 2013. Thematically, the tunes are mostly about Eros, learning, and mortality. I was reading and thinking a lot about Plato's Symposium, among other works, at the time and was trying to express a lot of these concepts through music. I had the whole thing mixed and mastered a year ago, but I suffered an abdominal injury that prevented me from playing for seven months, so I had to push back the release until now.

JI: What have you discovered about human nature that has helped you navigate the music business?

KN: Ask me this in 10-20 years and you might get an answer worth reading.

JI: If there are some words of wisdom or unforgettable conversations you may have had with one of more of your mentors or influential artists - that guide your life, could you talk about those a little?

KN: I met a librarian at Harvard named John Collins. He'd been a grad student in political philosophy, and though he never pursued it as a career, had an immense amount of knowl-

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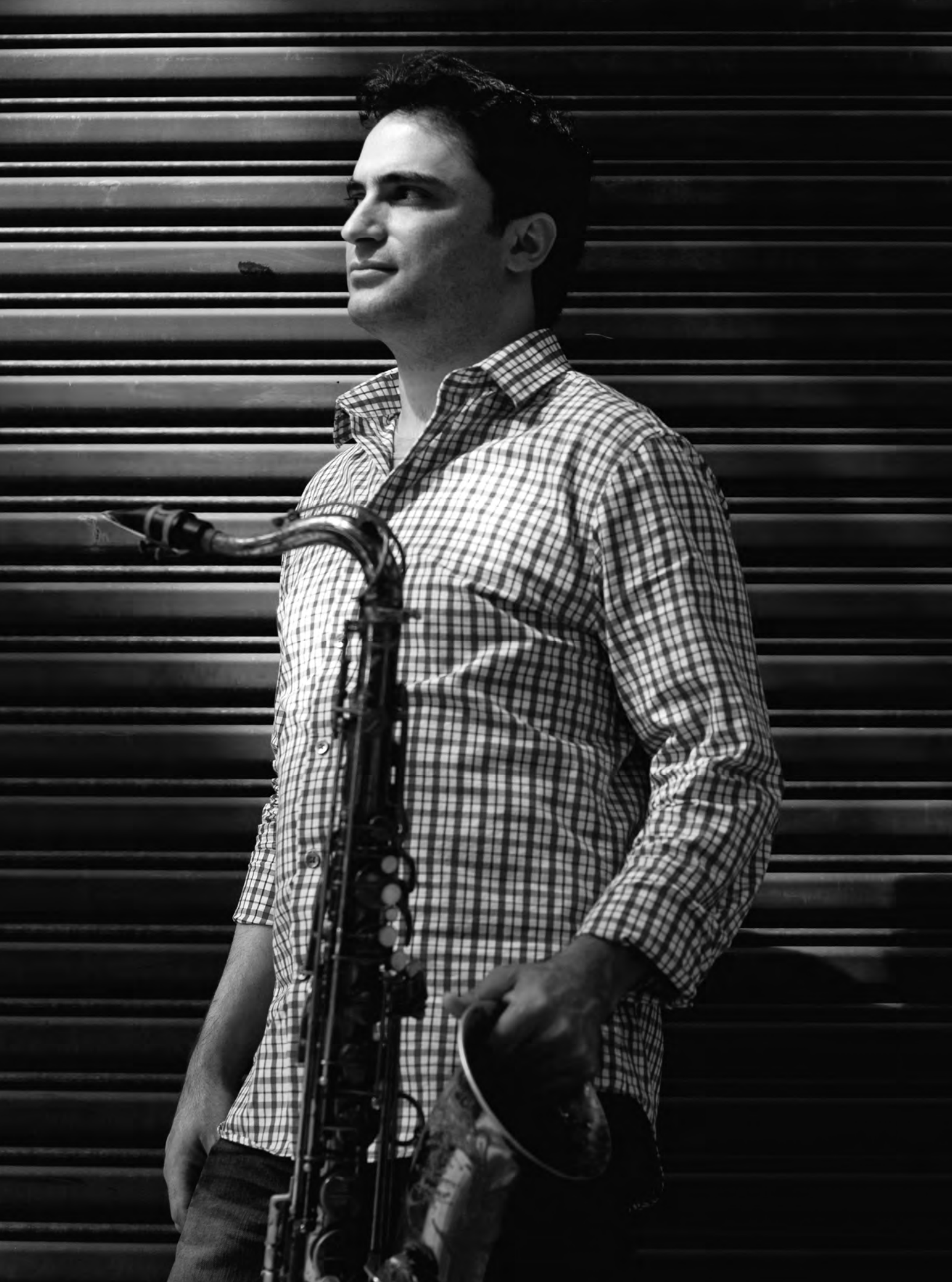
"in New York, gigs that pay well—or even at all—are hard to come by, so had to find teaching work a couple days a week to supplement my income ... It's worth noting that the rewards that come from being around such a rich and creative scene far outweigh the challenges one faces to be here - at least they do for me!"



Kyle Nasser

edge of the Western canon. We became very good friends, and he was a big intellectual mentor for me. We would meet to discuss major works of philosophy, life, and art. What I learned during the course of these conversations really shaped the person that I've become - the way I view people, nature, everything really. Another standout teacher whose advice continues to guide my musical pursuits is Hal Crook. While my study of classical music and counterpoint shaped my writing, Hal was instrumental in shaping my playing. He really instilled that we should think about improvisation from a more macroscopic perspective. That you had to learn the nuts and bolts of your craft, but that the point of all that stuff was to serve the larger aesthetic of the music, what you were really trying to say with your playing. He had very particular and original ways of teaching people to think this way, and this advice is with me every time I pick up the horn.

JI: Given the nature of the niche that jazz is, the current reality of this being a contracting market, the challenges of selling prerecorded music, because of illegal downloading, copyright infringement and so on—what kind of vision do you have for yourself about experiencing some of your hopes and goals in the next five or even ten years?

KN: I think that this is a very important topic for broad societal and political conversation. Though there are many important things that could be done to improve the ability for musicians to make fair money from their recordings, these concerns shouldn't distract musicians from their primary goal - making good music. Musicians can't stop making music because the conditions in the music economy aren't ideal. I don't think they were ever very ideal. Though it's important to make a living, the profitability of my art isn't the real motivating factor. I'm going to continue to write music, improve my playing, perform constantly (where money can still be made) and make records that document this progression. This is really my ultimate goal. In other words, I knew what I was getting into when I decided to pursue jazz and improvised music. I've been lucky enough to do a couple of great tours recently, and I aim to build on that.

JI: What are your perspectives on balancing a purity of purpose about creating music that you hear and want to see come to life, with the simultaneous attractor and consideration of trying to connect with and or please your current and potential audiences?

KN: To be honest, I don't think about this much. Perhaps I'm not in a position to weigh in on this yet, as this is my debut record as a leader; most audiences don't have an idea of what to expect from me in the first place. I do think, though, that an artist's "purity of purpose" is fairly paramount. I've always been drawn more strongly to art that isn't overtly "commercial." That said, I think that any art that has a strong sense of intention and purpose can garner an audience, regardless of how out-of-the-"mainstream" it is. I believe the recent success of Steve Lehman and Wadada Leo Smith in last year's jazz critics' poll is a strong testament to this. So is Kendrick Lamar's most recent album for that matter, or recent works by Scott Walker and Flying Lotus. As long as music maintains balance among its elements and convincingly takes the listener somewhere, I think there can potentially be an audience.

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