



Players >

## KYLE NASSER

### Taking the Jazz Path

GIUNARA KHAMATOVA

After graduating from Harvard University, Kyle Nasser had an open pathway to a doctorate in political philosophy and a career in academia. Instead, he decided to follow his heart and take a less certain road. He had been hooked on jazz since childhood, when he heard musicians playing in a restaurant near his home in southeastern Massachusetts. During his high school years, he took jazz saxophone lessons. Today, the Brooklyn-based saxophonist finds his career decision paying dividends, with the release of his album *Restive Soul* (Aisa), along with an increasing number of gigs as a bandleader. He also plays in the collective Beekman, which recently toured Chile.

Nasser recalled the fateful day back at Harvard when a visit by an 88-year-old jazz piano master convinced him of his true calling. “I actually got to play a concert with Hank Jones and [saxophonist] Joe Lovano,” he said. “I got to hang out with Hank, and go out to dinner with him and other members of the small college group that he was playing with. I found that really inspiring and deep.”

Nasser subsequently enrolled at Berklee College of Music, a few miles distance from Harvard Yard but a world apart. Studying jazz performance in improvisation classes under Hal Crook was highly productive, as was an

exploration of classical music, including modernists Charles Ives and György Ligeti.

Nasser’s tenor and soprano work on *Restive Soul* marks him as an inventive technician and an emotive assimilator well on his way to developing a unique voice. He can easily name-check his favorite players and explain their influences on him. Joe Henderson: “rhythmic bite and swing.” John Coltrane: “intensity, focus, harmonic delineation.” Stan Getz: “sound and phrasing.” Don Byas: “sound and arpeggiation.”

Nasser has also incorporated the emotional impact of certain blues, soul and r&b singers. After citing Nat “King” Cole’s vocal phrasing and timbre, he said, “Warmth and clarity are a goal for me on sax,” adding that the music of Otis Redding, Etta James and D’Angelo made him “realize that it’s really important to sing through the horn.”

A serious composer with all 10 album tracks spun from his imagination, Nasser recorded *Restive Soul* with guitarist Jeff Miles, pianist Dov Manski, bassist Chris Van Voorst and drummer Devin Drobka.

Nasser credits his close study of Plato’s *The Symposium* and other ancient classics for helping him focus on moods (“longing, eros, desire, love, relationships”) as he was developing emotional tones for the music. One aspect of com-

posing deeply resonated with him: “The album’s musical theme is counterpoint and its relation to form. That was what I was obsessing about when I was writing these tunes, the harmonic relationship. It was either two- or three-part counterpoint between either melody and bass or saxophone, guitar and bass.”

He relishes a regular weekly gig he’s had the past few years at the Fifth Estate bar in the South Slope section of Brooklyn. That’s where he met his bandmates and where they all tested and honed his dense yet accessible music. “Sound is a big thing for me,” he said. “I love the sound all the guys in my band get out of their instruments. Our guitarist, Jeff Miles, is kind of a wild man, and [pianist] Dov Manski makes everything sound great by playing with a beautiful harmonic palette. I love how [drummer] Devin Drobka makes everything sound like an orchestra with the way he fills in the spaces and plays everything very accurately but loosely. Chris Van Voorst plays such melodic bass lines. It’s not angular style; it makes everything else sing.”

Manski, in turn, complimented his bandleader: “Whenever Kyle is improvising, he is always looking to create a ‘vibe’ or ‘atmosphere’ that the entire band can play off of.”

—Frank-John Hadley