

# TO THE **OUTER** REACHES

**KRIS DAVIS LOOKS TO DISCOVER THE PIANO'S FULL POTENTIAL.**

BY TED PANKEN

**A**t 7 a.m., 90 minutes before our scheduled interview on Christmas Eve morning, Kris Davis sent an email: “bad night of sleep — call you when I’m up — around 9:30.” We were supposed to speak the previous night, but she emailed me before the appointed time to say that a second consecutive day of recording an orchestral album with saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock at Manhattan’s Power Station left her too punchy “to do you much good.” When we finally connected at 9:30 sharp, Davis explained that she’d been up most of the night soothing her 4-year-old son through serial nightmares.

It was our second rescheduling moment of the week. Six days earlier, we postponed our first scheduled interview when Davis awoke in the morning with a stomach virus her son had picked up at school. In that instance, too, we spoke the next

morning, after which, Davis told me later, she treated herself to a rare “day off” that entailed practice, exercise and hanging out with her son.

Between our conversations, Davis had pursued her customarily industrious schedule, which included a commute from her Ossining, New York, home to Manhattan to teach piano and guide the Herbie Hancock Ensemble at the New School; a two-hours-each-way drive to teach jazz piano at Princeton; and two long rehearsals with Laubrock. The day after our second talk, she led a new trio with Eric Revis and Johnathan Blake at a John Zorn-produced evening at the New School’s Tishman Auditorium, then worked three consecutive nights as a sidewoman, first in saxophonist Jure Pukl’s quintet at the Cornelia Street Café in Greenwich Village, then in a quintet assembled by Revis to play a newly commissioned suite over two nights at the Jazz Gallery in midtown Manhattan.







Davis hadn't exactly been slacking off before our first chat. On December 7th, she drove to New Haven for a free-improv concert with trumpeter Taylor Ho Bynum, followed by four collectively improvised sets over two nights at Manhattan's Jazz Gallery with Borderlands Trio — a cooperative unit with bassist Stephan Crump and drummer Eric McPherson — in support of their new album, *Asteroidea* (Intakt).

"The last three months I've been gone a lot," Davis said. "I was home just a few days in November." That month's itinerary included a week in Vancouver to premier a new orchestral piece with that city's world-class NOW Orchestra, a few two-piano concerts in Poland with prepared-piano specialist Benoît Delbecq, and a week-long workshop at Maryland's Towson State College. September and October found Davis doing "shorter tours over a weekend period, Thursday to Sunday, and then teaching Monday through Wednesday."

Somehow, Davis carved out time in 2016 and 2017 to debut and develop her own label, Pyroclastic, on which she released her 12th and 13th albums as a leader or co-leader. The 13th, *Octopus*, comprises six far-ranging piano duos with Craig Taborn culled from three concerts on a 12-date U.S. tour in October 2016. Their association gestated when they first made music together, on Davis' 12th album, *Duopoly*, a tour de force on which, over three days in May 2015, she recorded two duos apiece — one composed, one improvised — with guitarists Bill Frisell and Julian Lage, pianists Taborn and Angelica Sanchez, drummers Billy Drummond and Marcus Gilmore, and reedists Tim Berne (alto saxophone) and Don Byron (clarinet).

Throughout both albums, Davis incorporates prepared piano, minimalism, post-Webern serialism and jazz standards with



conceptual rigor and musicality. She also deploys the stylistic flexibility, harmonic and rhythmic erudition, quick-witted lucidity, impeccable chops and empathic conversational attitude that established her as someone to watch since she moved to Brooklyn from Canada in 2002. "Kris can obviously play any kind of style or idiom, but she doesn't wear it on her sleeve," Berne says. "You don't get the sense that, OK, now she's playing jazz, now she's playing free. It's all part of the same thing."

"Kris' statements are well thought-out and clear," Sanchez says. "She comes up with interesting shapes. She's really good at experimenting and pushing herself to find other spaces. She's a sincere, honest musician, and that's rare these days."

Sanchez was teaching improvisation and composition at the Banff Center for the Arts when she met Davis, just past her

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second year at the University of Toronto, in the summer of 2000. Born in Vancouver and raised in Calgary, Davis received classical training from age 6 and became enamored of jazz at 12, when her ability to read music and play scales gained her entry into her middle-school jazz band.

"Playing classical music, I was alone all the time," Davis recalls. "Jazz became the focus when I discovered how much fun it was to play music with other people." Her teacher introduced her to Miles Davis' *Four and More* and Keith Jarrett's *Live at the Deerhead Inn*, and she began to transcribe their solos, along with others by Bill Evans and Bud Powell. By the end of high school she was gigging in local restaurants, playing piano for the school choir and teaching theory to 10th-graders. As an undergraduate in Toronto, she says, "I had a gig every night for two or three years, playing with cabaret singers, doing restaurant gigs."

Meeting Sanchez and Banff faculty-mates Tony Malaby and Dave Ballou introduced Davis to the notion of free improvisation. "We'd been working on playing in a more open way, and we were there to share it," Sanchez says. "She hadn't felt that kind of energy first-hand. You could tell she had the fire and desire to search, and I knew I'd see her later on."

"I'd only played standards up to that point, and it was completely new and foreign and confusing to me," Davis says. "I hadn't composed either, so I didn't really have that mentality. But after leaving and having a year to think about the experience, I wanted to explore it more." She elaborates: "Monk was an innovator and everyone I was listening to was an innovator. They all had their own ways of learning from the past, synthesizing the material and then creating their own way. Something about that — exploring unknown and maybe less charted territory — intrigued me. I thought it might be fun to try and explore another way of thinking about the instrument."

**D**irectly after graduating, Davis moved to Brooklyn, where she reconnected with Malaby and Sanchez. A Canada Council grant enabled lessons with Jim McNeely, whose ideas on "non-functional harmony" inflect her rather mainstream 2002 debut, *Life Span*. That record, Davis says, reflects "a mentality of playing jazz, playing standards, coming from people like Kenny Wheeler, who is a big influence on Canadian artists." But you can hear her consciousness transforming on 2006's *The Slightest Shift* and 2008's *Rye Eclipse*, both venturesome quartet sessions with Malaby, and on the turbulent 2005 recording *Fiction Avalanche*, by the collective RIDD Quartet, with saxophonist Jon Irabagon, bassist Reuben Radding and drummer Jeff Davis.

"As I played more with Tony, everything changed," Davis says. "We talked about a more textural and abstract approach, using the extremes of the piano, thinking of the piano more as a linear instrument than a harmonic instrument. I'm a visual



person to the extreme, so ideas about playing like a painting, or thinking about my role as a voice or an orchestra or a bass player, or playing compositionally when you're improvising became modular concepts that I could see. That transformed the improvisation."

Also transformational for Davis was a summer 2005 trip to France spent studying prepared-piano concepts and techniques with Delbecq. She describes the sojourn as "another step in trying to explore the outer reaches of what could be accomplished on the piano, or how I might use the piano differently within an improvisational setting." Both were enamored of the polyphony-oriented, West African- and Balkan-inspired piano études of the Hungarian composer György Ligeti. "The idea of taking from different genres and using it for another purpose made a big impact," Davis says. Then Sanchez introduced her to the work of Austrian composer Thomas Larcher, who alters the harmonics of piano strings by applying gaffer tape and rubber wedges, and she analyzed his procedures.

"I never plan out my preparations," says Davis, who makes particularly effective use of gaffer tape, which, when applied to the strings, imparts a tamped-down, one-dimensional sound. "I know what they sound like, but I want to be surprised and

create. Whether I like whatever I started inside the piano or not, I'm going to commit to it completely and find music in it." As an example of that principle, she mentions her association with Laubrock and Tyshawn Sorey in the outer-partials-oriented trio *Paradoxical Frog*, whose eponymously titled debut CD was a highlight of 2009. "Often when you're playing free-improvised music with people, there's the feeling, 'If I stop, you're going to stop,' but it never feels like that with them," she says. "You feel everyone has your back, and you can do something completely off the wall, and we'll still be in this zone we've created."

Also in 2009, Davis, then 29, introduced her prepared-piano investigations on *Aeriol Piano*, a solo recital of great originality, and convened bassist John Hébert and drummer Tom Rainey to make *Good Citizen*, on which she refracted language culled from Ligeti, Monk, Morton Feldman, Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley and others into her own authoritative voice.

Stephan Crump admired *Paradoxical Frog* and *Aeriol Piano* so much that, according to the bassist, he called Davis in 2014 to meet for informal duo sessions "to get to know each other and see if there was chemistry." Over time, McPherson entered the mix, and each member agreed that on-the-spot improvisation (Crump calls it "spontaneous composition") should be the group's m.o.



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"Whether she's playing the piano wide-open or with some of her preparations, Kris clearly has a powerful sense of orchestration," Crump says. "By playing with the harmonics on the strings, she essentially creates different sections of her instrument, almost as if you had an orchestra with a woodwind section, a string section and percussion.

"I've listened to *Aeriol Piano* a lot. The second piece, 'Saturn,' blew my mind, the way she structures it and organizes it, the power and magnetism of her rhythmic sense, the fact that she has her own voice on the instrument. The album opens with 'All the Things You Are,' and I love how obliquely it deals with the core of the tune. There's power to that, and concept, and deep caring about the collective statement and collective development."

*Paradoxical Frog* also drew in Revis, whose latest release, *Sing Me Some Cry* (Ken Vandermark plays tenor sax and clarinet; Chad Taylor plays drums), marks his third leader recording with Davis. He toured that quartet last spring in Europe, and a trio with Davis and drummer John Betsch in the summer.

"She's a virtuoso, but it takes a back seat to what she's achieving musically," Revis says. "There's her sense of lyricism — she approaches it from left field, but it makes total sense. She has some fire behind her. She gets a very pointed sound from the piano. She has dynamic range. She always gets to the essence of what you're trying to convey." He recalled a show at Amsterdam's Bimhuis. "They give you a choice of grand pianos, and she said, 'It would be great if I could have two of them, so I could prepare one.' She's always adding something from day to day. This incredible sonic template opens up. We did a gig in Switzerland, and there was this horrendous upright piano. I apologized. She said, 'No, no, this is great!' There's no gradation of quality that she has problems with. It speaks to her as a person."

Asked about this occasion, Davis demurs. "Eric just means a piano that's not a stellar instrument, like you often find on tour," she says. "But I don't mind playing pianos that aren't perfect." She recalled one venue on the tour with Taborn that generated *Octopus* where the pianos were "funky." "We found what worked, and used it," she says. "It was fun."

About collaborating with Taborn, she says, "It was one of the hardest things I've ever done." She cites his

2001 trio album, *Light Made Lighter*, released a few years after her first record, as "a big influence," particularly the opening track, "Bodies We Came Out Of," a short form 5/8 tune built around a bassline, and an abstract reading of "I Cover the Waterfront."

"We share a lot of the same aesthetic, I think, in using jazz language and classical music and free music," Davis says. "Craig influenced me in being so free with the standards, pushing and pulling the time, and also on how to write very little and stretch it out and use the material to create a whole piece."

**D**avis' tours with Taborn and Revis (with whom, in the spring, she will play duo for 10 days in Japan) augur future encounters outside the nurturing circle of musicians she bonded with — and with whom she continues to play — during her 14 years in Brooklyn. Her January itinerary, for example, included a duo with Ambrose Akinmusire at The Stone and tributes to the late pianist Geri Allen, with drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, at New York's Winter Jazz Festival and Harvard. In

July she's booked to tour with Carrington and tenor saxophonist David Murray, assuming the role Allen played with those two musicians on the 2016 CD *Power Trio*.

"I never knew Geri, but she did have an influence on my music — feeling it was OK to be a woman in jazz and continue on this path," Davis says. "When I was in my teens, I looked to Geri and Renee Rosnes in particular to know that it would be possible to have a career as a female jazz musician. Often at workshops or in schools, musicians approach me and ask for advice. I tell them: Just focus on the music, and making good music, and finding good people you feel you can have a musical relationship with. Some people who made a big deal about being a woman in jazz got penned into a certain corner in the way that people think about them, and I think it limited what they could access. I never wanted to be part of that scene. I wanted to be free to make music with the people I liked making music with, so that's the direction I took."

She notes that all her students at Princeton and The New School, even at recent workshops, are male. "More women need to be teaching jazz in these academic institutions, so people know women are out there doing this," she says. "I think I surprised some of my students who thought I was a guy

because my name is Kris. They tried to talk to me about some of the woman musicians they know, and they could name one person — Geri Allen."

Our conversation occurred at the peak of #MeToo, a moment when female musicians were publicly testifying about the trauma of absorbing various levels and degrees of misogynistic remarks, inappropriate and offensive workplace behavior, and sexual assault from their male peer group. "I didn't have those experiences," Davis says, distinguishing herself from other unnamed friends. "I never felt excluded. I didn't experience cutting sessions either. Maybe at one point I thought I might have to do the school of hard knocks, but I navigated away from those situations and ended up playing with certain people. I know it doesn't have to be that way to make great music and find a community. Now it never comes up. Maybe it's because I'm further along in my career."

Davis' husband, guitarist Nate Radley, was about to return from Sunday morning shopping with their son. "It's hard," she responds when asked about balancing motherhood and a career that has always involved late nights and demands increasing travel. "Last year, [my son] and my mom came with me on a solo tour in Europe. We didn't make it to the end. We all got sick." ■



## THE BEST OF FRIENDS

One of the many dimensions of Kris Davis' longstanding friendship with fellow pianist Angelica Sanchez is their mutual obsession with finding new composers and musical ideas to draw upon and experiment with in developing their own musical productions.

"Many times a year Kris will call and say, 'Give me something to listen to that I've never heard,'" Sanchez relates. As a recent example, she mentions having recommended several works by the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmermann, who "writes things that sound very romantic, and then the next piece will be super avant garde and in the stratosphere."

Sanchez continues: "We compare notes. It's about the search. There's never an end to it. It's never 'Oh, I couldn't find anything this week.'"

Davis elaborates on their mutual listening. "I want to be inspired," she says. "Sometimes I get stuck. I don't have a ton of time to go deep and search. I just want to find things I resonate with, not necessarily for focused listening. I rely on a few people for help with that, and Angie's one of them. She always gives me a great list. Lots of piano music." As two examples, Davis mentions Thomas Larcher and Alexander Scriabin, the turn-of-the-20th-century Russian composer who, she says, "totally changed my life when I first moved to New York."

Trombonist Ben Gerstein is another of Davis' helpful friends. "He's so pure about the music," Davis says. "He just sent me all this Scarlatti that I've been playing at home. He's into slowing things down to half-speed and checking out how things sound at different tempos, different rates. He sends me bird calls, nature sounds. Receiving those things in my in-box in the middle of trying to get through all the work and day-to-day stuff makes me so happy. It completely clears my mind, and I'm in that zone, listening to the music, especially through Ben's ears or through Angie's. It's the best." —TP