

When the heart soars

By Helena Clare Pittman

[Author's note: The Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet—pianist and vocalist Kazzrie Jaxen; drummer Bill Chattin; double bass player, Don Messina; and tenor saxophone player, Charley Krachy—are performing at The Tusten Theater in Narrowsburg, NY on October 4. This article is dedicated to Lennie Tristano, whose mastery theirs descends from.]

Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano are mountain tops of jazz innovation. Tristano's name may come to you later than Bird's, after you've entered jazz for a while. Unless you live in Sullivan County. Then you will have been directly exposed to that great line of music, complex as Bach.

Because Kazzrie Jaxen lives here now, and her quartet performs in the area regularly.

Each of their voices is beautiful: drums, bass, piano beating with melody, Kazzrie's singing soaring, Krachy's saxophone notes lodging in the heart. Separately and together, so disciplined they become one pulsing, swinging sound that carries you into the dimension of the music's depth. Kazzrie is the strong leader of this group, and a virtuosic master. Her music feels located in the air somewhere, rising into explorations of heights, but adhering to masterfully controlled structure. Like the music of Lennie Tristano, whom she studied with. You take in this music note to note, ride, fly with it. Explo-



The Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet

Photo by Joseph Squillante



Photo by Tom Bosket

"Improvising is like leaping off cliffs, being so deep in the music you can fly." Kazzrie Jaxen



Don Messina



Photos by Ted Waddell

rations that are deep and accessible, and include the listener. Swing for body and soul. Virtuosity so exercised, that like all virtuosity, it seems effortless.

I first heard The Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet three summers ago, at the Houland Center, in Beacon, NY. Then I caught them whenever I could. I grew up listening to Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt. Rock and roll was playing on the radio. Jazz had gone behind the scene, but it echoed in the instrumental break in every rock and roll song, played by jazz musicians who were crossing over to get work. By 15, I was listening to Sonny Rollins, Kenny Clark, Monk, Miles, Bird, Blakey.

By the time I heard Lennie Tristano, I'd understood that jazz had interwoven with classical music, Stravinsky, Bartok, Bach, Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff and influenced Copeland and Bernstein. So did Art Tatum and Duke Ellington. And jazz greats, like Charlie Parker and Lennie Tristano were listening to them all.

I listened to Tristano's music as I commuted 150 miles to work, about the time those yellow magnets were appearing on cars. I saw them through tears. This music is the antithesis of war, I thought. It's our reach into love.

I asked Kazzrie where she goes when she plays. She answers, into an ecstasy. Bliss. The pleasure in her fingers, the notes, the intervals. She's opening to the joy of it. It's a kind of laughter, a cosmic humor. She's in the moment.

When you're improvising, she says, you can't be thinking. Improvising is like leaping off cliffs, being so deep in the music you can fly. The tune is the core. "You step into the entity of the tune when you play, entering its reality, its world, its parallel dimension," says Jaxen.

Kazzrie was musically gifted; it was in her family—there was chamber music at her house every Friday. Her father played violin and viola. She began studying early.

At 10, she was presented at Carnegie Recital Hall. But falling in love with practice came later when she worked with Tristano. "Even the scales can be played with your whole presence, with love, joy. You were cultivating all that in your practice," she says.

Lennie's work was awareness work. Note to note. Being there to hear the note's sound.

In 1978, she played Carnegie Recital Hall for the second time. Tristano presented her.

She and drummer Bill Chattin met in college. They became part of a rock band in Boston—making a living. She was studying jazz at The Berkeley School of Music and found Lennie's music through a teacher who'd studied with him. She called Tristano in Queens, and Bill began driving her down from Boston to study once a week.

"Lennie was a very strong presence," says Chattin, who, at four began playing percussion on his blocks. Chattin's father brought him to see Gene Krupa when he was nine. Bill knew that was it. He studied classical drums, played in bands early, in a jazz band in high school.

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Graduating two years ahead of Kazzrie, Bill went to New York. He auditioned for the band, Valhalla, put together by the road manager for The Lovin' Spoonful, along with 50 other drummers. Bill got the job. The band stayed together for a year. Then Bill began studying with Lennie.

"Forget everything you know," Lennie told him. They drilled, right hand, left hand, right foot, left foot. Then all the possibilities of hands, feet. Taking it apart, down to the building blocks, until you could rebuild using something authentic, your own voice instead of familiar phrases.

"I listen to the tune when we play," Bill tells me now. "I'm concentrating, listening to the solos, the way they fit together. I'm just trying to enhance it, bring my thing to it. I'm not thinking, I'm responding, letting myself go. Sometimes I solo with Kazzrie, come in on what she's doing—improvising together. Something that happens spontaneously, Bill says. A way the two interact musically.

Bill, Don and Kazzrie played as a trio, during a performance at Connie Crothers' loft in New York City in 2011. Crothers also worked closely with Tristano. "We connected," says Bill. "People were knocked out, and so were we. It was revolutionary, a bang thing." Something happened in Bill's playing he'd never heard before. Chattin's playing is spellbinding in its virtuosity. His flowing, interlocking rhythms, pillar to the music.

Charley Krachy began studying saxophone at 10. At a school performance, "A

high school kid on alto played a solo. It was the sound, it went right into me. That was it." He played in the school band, the varsity band, the marching band and at football games. He was invited by one of his teachers to join a dance band. "I was studying the straight and narrow," he says.

He played clubs, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs. The top 40 tunes. But it wasn't satisfying. The drummer in his group, Pete Scattaretico, had studied with Lennie Tristano and played with tenor saxophone player Lennie Popkin.

Popkin had studied with Tristano, too. Krachy went to hear him at a small performance space at Lincoln Center. "It was one of those moments, an epiphany," says Krachy. "It was his deeply personal sound." He went backstage to meet him, then studied with him for two and a half years. When Popkin stopped teaching, Krachy nearly stopped playing. But he kept in touch with the community of musicians who were Tristano's students. In 1983, he made his way to Connie Crothers and began to study.

"Forget everything you know," she told him, and brought him back to the practice of scales. He studied with her for six years, "Nothing but study," he tells me. Krachy started performing again in 1989. "That began my life," he says.

In 1979, he played a concert with Kazzrie. He'd never yet improvised. Kazzrie played a tune and kept going after it ended. He kept going, too. "That's where my improvising life had its beginning."

Bass player Don Mesina had a friend who studied guitar with Tristano. Don went along. Lennie asked him to play the bass line. After a few times, Tristano invited him to study. He couldn't accept the invitation until 1978. By then Lennie wasn't well. But he recommended Sal Mosca. Don studied improvisation with tenor saxophone player Fred Amend, who had studied with Mosca. He met Mosca at the Vanguard and they became friends. They hung out, listened to music—Tristano and Bird, and began playing together. "Nothing prepared me for the experience," says Messina. "It was intense, hard, explosive, unpredictable." They played every weekend for seven years. After Mosca's death in 2007, it took Messina years to

fully incorporate what he'd played with him. "Sal was pure. I learned integrity, learned to trust myself."

Messina's cat-gut strings are raised as high off the fingerboard as they can be. It's harder work, but he prefers it to the distortion of a microphone.

When he plays he's trying to hear the outline of the tune. "I'm thinking of the lyrics, the melody. I soak in all four lines, move with the sound of the time... the framework."

In Lennie Tristano's compositions I hear parallels with Bird's, cross fertilization. Parker and Tristano respected each other. They recognized each other as original. Both invented musical vocabularies that have a profound influence on jazz.

Unsung, Tristano's vision went into his immensely intelligent music. And he saw clearly the gifts in other musicians, and gave those who came to him the tools to find themselves. "Great art is not accidental or by chance," says Messina. "It comes from years and years of practice, studying, listening, playing and not being afraid to stretch out."

Tristano died in 1978. When I listen to the Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet play, I imagine him smiling.

Perhaps a life is a series of epiphanies.

And of road signs that determine its course. Taking their own routes, these players found each other. And we are the beneficiaries.

The Kazzrie Jaxen quartet's CD, "Quaternity," just released, will be available at the concert at Tusten. On that recording Kazzrie's fingers dance, playing music in the upper reaches. Don Messina's melodic intensity pulses. Bill Chattin's drums are an ocean. Charley Krachy's melody will steal your heart.

These four artists wear their greatness lightly. Come to hear them. Their voices will lift you. When I hear them play, the world, as I know it, falls away. It gives me hope that we are growing. I step into the certainty that everything's really okay.

[The Kazzrie Jaxen Quartet concert on October 4, 8 p.m. at Tusten Theater, 201 Bridge St., Narrowsburg is part of the Delaware Valley Arts Alliance fall series. Reservations are recommended; tickets cost \$20. For tickets and information call 845/252-7272. An artists' reception marking the launch of "Quaternity" will be held following the concert. A special price of \$10 will be offered for purchase of the CD.]

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