

Boys

Three years after they helped to realise David Bowie's final album **Donny McCaslin, Jason Lindner & Tim Lefebvre** form part of a thriving network of jazz players fusing songwriting and improvisation. By **Phil Freeman**. Photography by **Dawit NM**

1 June 2014 is a permanent part of David Bowie lore. That was the night he showed up at 55 Bar in New York to see Donny McCaslin's band play. The saxophonist expected him. He and his drummer Mark Guiliana were soon to commence work with Bowie and The Maria Schneider Orchestra on the single "Sue (Or In A Season Of Crime)". And in early 2015, the entire quartet – McCaslin, Guiliana, keyboardist Jason Lindner and bassist Tim Lefebvre – alongside guitarist Ben Monder, a longtime associate, would become the ensemble that recorded Bowie's final album *Blackstar*

in secret sessions at New York's Magic Shop studio.

McCaslin and company had been slowly coming together as an ensemble since 2010. Lefebvre and Guiliana played on 2011's *Perpetual Motion*, and by 2012's *Casting For Gravity*, Lindner came on board and the line-up was solid. The saxophonist's compositions had an extrovert feel, driven by Guiliana's stuttering, almost drum 'n' bass rhythms and Lindner's zapping keyboards. Alongside aptly titled originals like "Stadium Jazz" and "Tension", the four – alongside producer David Binney – interpreted Boards Of Canada's "Alpha And Omega". On 2015's *Fast Future*, recorded immediately after the 55 Bar gig and before *Blackstar*, they put their own spin on Aphex Twin's "54 Cymru Beats" and "No Eyes" by Anticon's Baths.

"54 Cymru Beats", a six minute drill 'n' bass eruption from *Drukqs*, became a two minute saxophone exercise in McCaslin's hands, closer to John Coltrane's "Countdown" than any kind of electronica jazz fusion, despite the synths in the background. The group's treatment of "No Eyes" is a little closer to the original, comparable to what Miles Davis did with Cyndi Lauper's "Time After Time" and Michael Jackson's "Human Nature" in the 1980s. McCaslin takes the vocal melody as his own, as Lindner, Lefebvre and Guiliana strongly echo the original arrangement, keeping the beat steady and extrapolations minimal. What both tracks had in common was that McCaslin heard something in them that he could make his own.

On *Blackstar* – an album named by the design on its wordless cover – Bowie and producer Tony Visconti gave McCaslin and his bandmates, especially Lindner, a lot of leeway to reshape the leader's sketches. Before the album's release in 2016, Visconti told *Rolling Stone*, "Jason was a godsend. We gave him some pretty far-out chords, but he brought a jazz sensibility to revoice them." The songs were still art rock of the type Bowie had been making since the late 1970s, but they moved and shifted in ways his previous music hadn't. McCaslin was mostly there to provide atmosphere rather than screaming solos. But the band got to stretch out on the title track, which was two songs blended into a ten minute medley that almost had the flavour of D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*.

But the element of jazz that the McCaslin quartet injected most strongly into *Blackstar* was felt in its cohesion. Pop records are typically meant to be heard as collections of discrete tracks, while jazz artists often use the album as a vehicle to explore a theory or concept for 40 minutes or more. *Blackstar* was a single musical statement spread across seven tracks.

The McCaslin quartet made one more album after Bowie's death. *Beyond Now*, released in October

2016, featured versions of the late singer's "A Small Plot Of Land" (from *1. Outside*) and "Warszawa" (from *Low*), as well as interpretations of dance megastar Deadmau5's "Coelacanth 1" and "Remain" by indie rock band MuteMath. But its five originals lit the path down which the saxophonist was travelling by 2018. His blowing on "Shake Loose" is fierce but dependent on a relentless, staccato synths and drums backing track, while "Faceplant" is a blaring punk jazz attack driven by Lefebvre's massive distorted bass.

McCaslin's latest album, 2018's *Blow*, represents a headlong leap forward. Four of its 11 songs were co-written with Ryan Dahle of Canadian alt rock act Limblifter. Dahle's high, nasal but clean vocals and introspective lyrics are slotted into energetic verses and soaring choruses, with McCaslin ready to leap in as a co-lead voice or deliver a roaring solo before stepping back again. "I was introduced to Ryan as someone I should consider collaborating with," McCaslin explains to me by phone. "I went and listened to some of his stuff and loved it right away. We were in email contact, I sent him "Club Kidd", and the first thing that came back was the chorus and I just loved... how fearless he is with his lyrics and that really set the tone for the whole record."

"Club Kidd" begins with a mournful, almost Bowie-esque saxophone melody. When the horn drops away, leaving only bass and drums, Dahle's voice comes in lightly distorted. Other instruments – guitar, keyboards – gradually fill in, until a song has emerged.

The album's opening track "What About The Body" started out with an idea from bassist Tim Lefebvre, whose massive low-end churn, reminiscent of Radiohead's "The National Anthem", is the foundation of the piece. "He sent me a demo that he made and I immediately just fell in love with it," continues McCaslin. "I added a couple of sections and ultimately we sent it over to Ryan and he added the vocal melody and the lyrics." The saxophonist's solo on the track is bizarre and fascinating: it begins with howling phrases that sound like someone sobbing into an overdriven microphone, before heading into Pharoah Sanders territory.

"I had all these tracks sitting around on my computer, so I sent him a bunch and he loved them," Lefebvre concurs. "He wrote other parts to "What About The Body", and there's a guy from Vancouver writing lyrics, so it's a fun scene. It's the first time, as far as I know, that anybody else has written with Donny on his records."

Lefebvre and Dahle are not the only songwriting voices contributing to this album. Two songs feature Jeff Taylor, who sang "A Small Plot Of Land" on *Beyond Now*. The saxophonist describes one of these, "Tempest", as "an improvised, aggressive freestyle piece, and he's just freestyling over what we're playing, this little groove that I wrote." Another, "Eye Of The Beholder", is a collaboration with Bowie's longtime bassist Gail Ann Dorsey. Perhaps the most surprising track, though, is "The Opener". Over a looping beat, drifting keyboards, and smooth jazz sax, Mark Kozelek aka Sun Kil Moon, formerly of Red House Painters, delivers a sleepy monologue about a bad night on tour in Florida. "We recorded it and I sent it to Mark and he cut it up and added his spoken word thing," says McCaslin.

The saxophonist says he had a "gradual epiphany" about how to put *Blow* together. "I've been on the

road a lot the last couple of years and was starting to hear a newish direction," he explains, "and as it started to take shape I realised I had spent years working a certain way, and this was really new for me. Collaborating with songwriters, turning things over to them, having a back and forth, having writing sessions – it was really different and I loved it."

He hasn't completely abandoned jazz or improvisation, of course. One track on *Blow*, bears the title "Exactlyfourminutesofimprovisedmusic" and lives up to it. "It's like nonverbal communication in its deepest form," declares McCaslin. "We basically jammed for like 20 minutes in the studio, and Steve Wall picked those four minutes out and said, 'Hey, this is compelling'... that's still an essential part of what we do."

Keyboardist Jason Lindner was as important to the sound of *Blackstar* as McCaslin. He's continued to work with the saxophonist, but has also led his own trio, *NowVsNow*, for over a decade. Their third album *The Buffering Cocoon* features bassist Panagiotis Andreou and new drummer Justin Tyson replacing Mark Guiliana, who left in 2013. It was recorded in May 2016 with Steve Wall – the same producer McCaslin used when *Blow* was recorded.

"Our goal was to write new material together as a trio," explains Lindner. "And we found the best way to do this was literally go in the studio and just press record and play a lot." Those improvisations, which took place in a loft space in Brooklyn, were once again edited after the fact. "There were many post-production sessions with me and Steve chiselling away at the songs and trying to make them into cohesive compositions, but trying to keep them as organic to the session as we could."

The resulting pieces feel like live jams, starting with a core riff and expanding on it (sometimes through solos, other times through variations on the theme), then shifting direction through judicious editing. For the most part Lindner's and Wall's edits are deft and smooth, but they occasionally allow moments of ambient sound to pop up, as on "Silkworm Society", and they're as surprising as the appearance of a human voice on an Autechre track. *NowVsNow*'s music, in its minimalist focus on the groove, is kin to the guerrilla krautrock of Camera, but there's a surprising sophistication to their journeys.

Lindner's contributions to *Blow*, are different in kind from his work on the three previous McCaslin albums. "All of Donny's albums that I've been part of, he's always welcomed ideas from everybody," he reflects. "But the vocal compositions on *Blow*... there was more improvisation on the previous records, more spontaneous interaction, and *Blow* is going more in the direction of streamlining the parts, getting really clear parts down."

Lindner, Tim Lefebvre and Mark Guiliana reunited in April 2018 to perform a live score for a re-edited version of Nicolas Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, which starred Bowie as the visiting alien, at the Brooklyn Museum. It was put together by Little Cinema, run by Jay Rinsky. "Donny wasn't available, but Tim and Mark were, so I was sort of acting as musical director with the Little Cinema company for this piece," recalls Lindner. The film was edited down from its original 140 minutes into chapters to be accompanied by the musicians. Lindner pressed



Donny McCaslin



Jason Lindner

for improvisation and Rinsky agreed, with some mild trepidation. "Mark and Tim and I have a great time improvising music and our ideas come really fast; we're able to come up with ideas, grooves and different things sort of on the fly," Lindner says. "We played [Bowie's] 'Art Decade' at one moment, and we played one of Mark's compositions, and one of mine, but the rest was improvised. We watched the film while we were playing and got experimental and weird and tried to fit the nature of it."

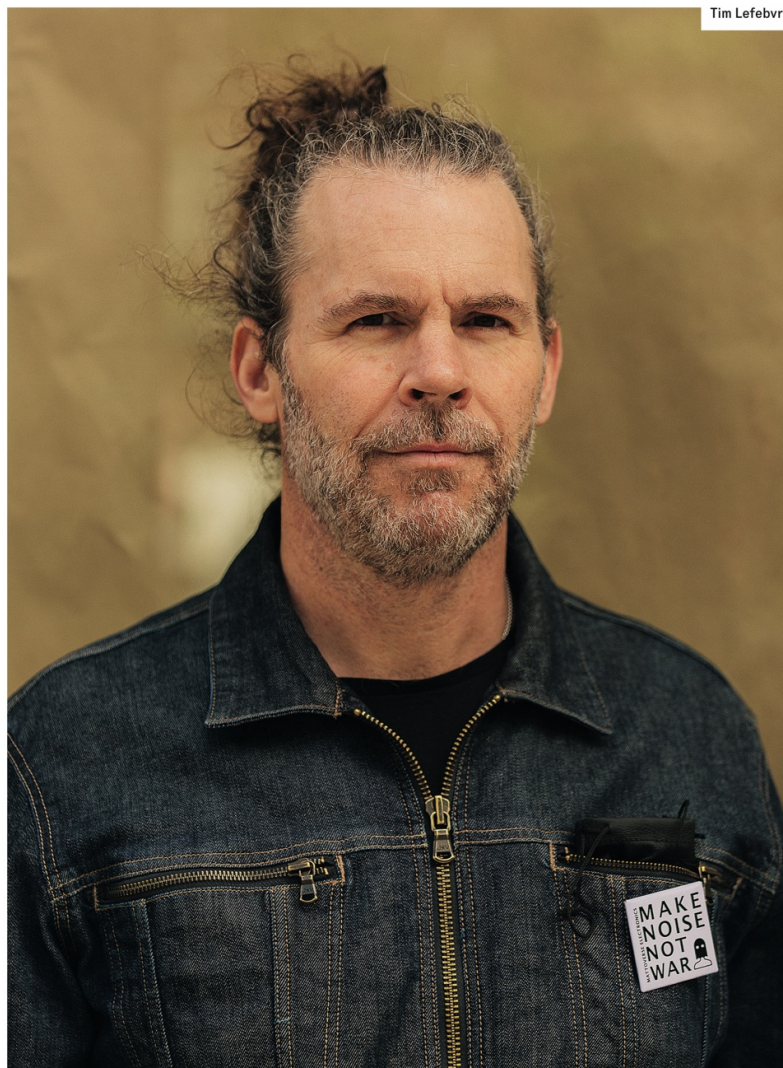
When not touring with McCaslin, Tim Lefebvre was the bassist for The Tedeschi Trucks Band from 2013–18; he recently announced his departure from the group. Susan Tedeschi is a singer and guitarist from Boston; Derek Trucks is her husband and a well-regarded blues rock guitarist who became a member of The Allman Brothers Band in 1999. While their music has room for improvisation, "it's very song based", as Lefebvre admits. "There are some moments where we do get totally wild, but for the most part the improvisations are built into the song structures."

But Lefebvre and other members of that group have formed a side project that allows them to stretch their improvising muscles further. *Whose Hat Is This?* features Lefebvre, tenor saxophonist Kebbi Williams, and drummers JJ Johnson and Tyler Greenwell. Their first performance, at the A-Trane club in Berlin in 2015, was also their self-released debut album. It's far from the sprawling but locked-in blues grooves of their parent ensemble. Johnson and Greenwell engage in a soft, thoughtful conversation, keeping the rhythm steady but allowing plenty of air between them and swinging hard when the mood strikes. Lefebvre's bass is occasionally distorted, but more often clean and powerful, forming a solid but flexible foundation. Williams's voice on the tenor is raspy and tentative; he feels his way like someone walking, arms outstretched, through a pitch-black room full of potential hazards.

On this group's recent second album *Everything's OK*, they're joined by Kokayi, an MC who's also a member of Steve Coleman's Five Elements. "He's an MC from DC who I met through Jason Lindner, actually," Lefebvre says. "He's a genius, to say the least, and we all kind of improvise at the same time."

Like other players of the *Blackstar* band, Lefebvre is now deeply enmeshed in the posthumous legacy of Bowie's music. Producer Mario McNulty recently asked Lefebvre to record new parts for a reimagining of David Bowie's 1987 album *Never Let Me Down*. "Before Bowie died, he said he hated that record and he wanted to redo it," reports the bassist. "So it fell onto the shoulders of Mario McNulty and basically, he was given the Pro Tools files, transferred from the tapes or whatever. I think he just muted what he didn't want to hear and we retracked the bass and drums. I think most of it was sort of a thickening, because the sounds in the 80s were sort of thin and kinda trebly, and they wanted some more meat. So Sterling Campbell and I went in and retracked the bass and drums on a lot of the tracks. And then Reeves Gabrels and David Torn recorded [guitars] on it, so that was really awesome, because those guys are original Bowie guys." The rerecorded *Never Let Me Down* is included in the 2018 box set *Loving The Alien (1983–1988)*.

Guitarist Ben Monder and LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy were the only musicians on *Blackstar* not



Tim Lefebvre

part of McCaslin's quartet. But Monder opens up yet another set of connections into the group of musicians around McCaslin. He had played with the saxophonist on David Binney's *The Luxury Of Guessing* in 1995, and later appeared on four of McCaslin's albums between 2000–09. Monder's biting tone and fondness for unexpected chords has made him a valuable addition to many bands; other saxophonists, including Bill McHenry and Jerome Sabbagh, have made their best music with him by their side. A week after Bowie's album release, Monder's *Amorphae* came out on ECM, featuring solo pieces, duets with Paul Motian, and trio pieces featuring Andrew Cyrille and synth player Pete Rende.

More recently, Monder is being recognised for his work in drummer Dan Weiss's Starebaby. Their intricate compositions blend the aesthetics of modern chamber jazz and horror film scores with doom and death metal. Their music is, as he sees it, the sound of "five jazz guys who are super into metal getting

together and saying, 'Let's explore this, because we all have this mutual interest'."

Clearly, working on Bowie's final album was a life-changing experience for a whole strata of New York musicians. McCaslin would likely have continued making jazz records had the Bowie sessions not opened his eyes to new working methods and the power of songwriting. Lindner too seems to have reconnected with the joys of studio experimentation; the new *NowVsNow* material is simultaneously thoughtful and unfettered, with its seams showing in a way that recalls Bowie and Eno's Berlin-era instrumentals. "I think it's all coming off our experiences with *Blackstar*," confirms Lefebvre. "He just wanted to do something different for himself. That's one of the things Bowie taught us, is to sort of... well, let's make a cool record. Nobody cares any more about how many records are being sold, so just make a record you want to make." □ Donny McCaslin's *Blow* is released by Motéma