Billy Hart Allen Toussaint Steven Bernstein

DOWNBEAT®

Jazz, Blues & Beyond

AMBROSE AKINMUSIRE

LIFE BEYOND EGO

Eric Harland
BLINDFOLD TEST

BRASS SCHOOL

Roy Hargrove
TRANSCRIPTION

Mike Williams
ON LEAD TRUMPET PLAYING

David Taylor
MASTER CLASS

APRIL 2014 U.K. £3.50

$4.99

0 09281 01493 5 04

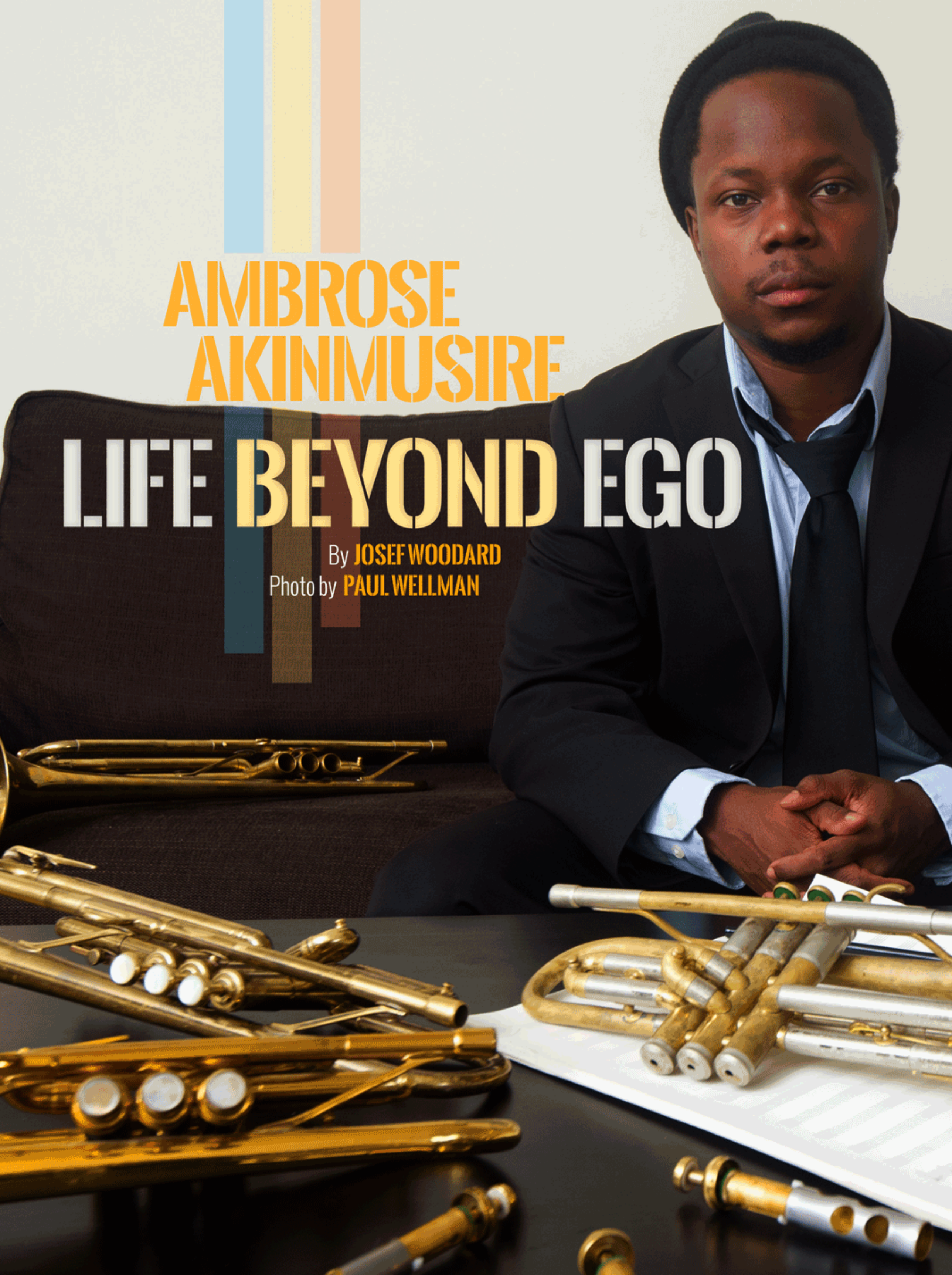
DOWNBEAT.COM

AMBROSE AKINMUSIRE

LIFE BEYOND EGO

By JOSEF WOODARD

Photo by PAUL WELLMAN



Historical precedent and conventional wisdom hold that major players on the jazz chessboard tend to hail from New York City. Acclaimed young trumpeter and deep musical thinker Ambrose Akinmusire is a notable exception. Raised in Oakland, Calif., and previously based in New York for about a decade, the 32-year-old musician can now be found, when at home and not traveling the world, on Ambrose Avenue (it's true) in Los Angeles.

From this West Coast outpost, Akinmusire (pronounced ah-kin-MOO-sir-ee)—widely considered one of the prime and powerful fresh voices in 21st century jazz—has been zeroing in on the next phase of his development as an artist, more about exploring and expanding his work as a composer, while also deplaning around the globe with his band.

The Akinmusire story has plenty of laurels and twists. In his Oakland days, he wended his way through the famed jazz program at Berkeley High School, a stint with saxophonist Steve Coleman, studies at Manhattan School of Music and then back out West to the University of Southern California. Opportunities afforded themselves when, in 2007, he won both the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition and the Carmine Caruso International Jazz Trumpet Solo Competition, and recorded his first album, *Prelude: To Cora* (Fresh Sound).

He has been a sideman, on the concert stage and in the studio, to a long list of musicians, including Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer, David Binney, Aaron Parks, Jack DeJohnette, Esperanza Spalding and Gerald Clayton (who has also played in Akinmusire's own band). But his higher profile and more deeply personal work

Ambrose Akinmusire, photographed in his Los Angeles home on Dec. 19

came with a signing to Blue Note Records, and his distinctive pair of poetically titled albums—2011's *When The Heart Emerges Glistening* and the new, even more ambitious *The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier To Paint*.

The new album dodges easy alliance with standard definitions of what a jazz album should be. He's after new paradigms. Guest vocalists Becca Stevens and Theo Bleckmann and Canadian singer-songwriter Cold Specks weigh in, as does the Osso String Quartet, in a musical context that folds in aspects of classical music, subtle hip-hop vibes and, for old-school jazz-quintet-in-action substance, the extended closer "Richard (Conduit)," recorded live, and sounding very alive and interactive.

He is a democratically minded bandleader and has a great appreciation for his band—featuring tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III, pianist Sam Harris, bassist Harish Raghavan and drummer Justin Brown. "Everybody says this," he asserts, "but it's really true: I'm so lucky to have the band I get to play with every night. It's never the same. Even if we've traveled 10 or 11 hours and we haven't slept, and even if the gig doesn't feel the best to us, every night, everybody is trying to adhere to this thing that is higher than themselves. It's amazing. And when it's on, it's super powerful.

"We've known each other for so long. That's really important, for communication on and off the bandstand, musically and non-musically. You know when somebody is not giving 100 percent, and you can give them a look [*laughs*]. We don't get into arguments, but we speak frankly and bluntly to each other when needed. I think that's not something you can do if you don't have that relationship with people.

"I guess you can say that's something about growing up and being in the black community. You say what's on your mind and you go about your business. If somebody is receiving it in a certain way, that's on them. That's the way I grew up. People who have that going on—that's who I try to surround myself with.

"It just feels great, being onstage and having that trust. As a bandleader, I don't think there's any better feeling. Some people enjoy telling people what to do. I just bring in a chart and sometimes we sight-read the chart on the gig."

Akinmusire has the technical ferocity and chops-a-blazing intensity to impress on impact. More importantly, though, there is a seeking, probing musical mind at work—with just as many question marks as smugly declamatory statements—in his roles as player, composer and conceptualist.

On a late-December day in Los Angeles, the affable, soft-spoken trumpeter comes to the door with a smile and a handshake. "Yes, I know it's strange that I live on Ambrose Avenue," he says. He has lived in this particular locale, close to Griffith Park, since moving from New York a year-and-a-half ago, and he has no immediate plans to move back East. "I got what I needed from New York."

First, I have to ask about the evocative title of your new album, *The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier To Paint*. Can you explain what it means to you?

It doesn't mean one specific thing, and that's what I was trying to do with that title. Usually, with composition or album names, I have an idea of what it's going to be. Sometimes, it's just a photo that I can usually put into words. But this one was really hard. I came up with 40 or 50 different titles. I realized that each title was barely hitting on part of the sphere of the emotional range or process that I went through or was trying to put out. It took me a while to sum things up into one title, and I think I achieved that with that one. The process of the album begins with the title, and that's why I spent so much time on it.

The title seems to concern the idea of the artist dealing with abstract notions and elements, versus more concrete or known entities.

That's part of it. I will give away part of it: There is this idea that any problem we have is external, and a lot of times, it's internal. There is this idea of a savior, a superman—"come save me … help me." A lot of times, it's *you*, and you need to be able to go inside yourself and be honest with yourself.

What you said is also on point. And then there is the process of painting, which is something I'm hugely influenced by lately, the idea of completing each layer—layer on top of layer—as opposed to the way I assume most musicians compose, which is left to right. I'm a horrible painter [*laughs*], but I do like to go to museums and to talk to people who paint, or to musicians who paint.

You don't write in standard head-solo-head structures. Things often change in your music, or pieces are asymmetrical. It sounds like you're reconceiving in your process of composition. Is that fair to say?

Yeah, that's definitely fair to say. I talked to Wayne [Shorter] one time, and it struck me as profound when he told me that a composition is never done. It's living. That meant, to me, that you have to allow it to live. There can't be an ending anymore. A tune can have a cadence—you bring it to people, and that's part of the process. The performance is part of the process, taking leave of it is part of the process and coming back to it is part of the process.

There is a chamber music-like quality to this album. Was that a conscious goal for you, something you wanted to explore?

Not specifically. I just love everybody on the album. Separately and independently, I love the Osso Quartet. Actually, the album before [*When The Heart Emerges Glistening*], I imagined to sound more like this album. Because of budgetary reasons and other reasons which happen when you're on a major label—when people think you're *here* but you're really *here* [*laughs*]—things didn't really work out. I wanted Becca and Theo on the album, but that didn't work out. When the string quartet thing dropped, I just gave up on the Becca thing. I was going to ask her to do something in post-production for the last album.

So I have had this sound in my head, but not because I wanted to make a chamber album—even though some of my favorite records are chamber-esque types of things, like both of Billy Childs' records, and a lot of the stuff that Vince Mendoza does. I studied with both of those guys at USC.

We didn't study chamber music, per se, but we studied forms and string quartet stuff.

Vince is so bad. He balances the intuitive side with the math, which is really great. It's the same thing with Billy. From the first note, you're in the sphere and you just know that they're connected to something higher. That's what it's all about, this connection or this expression of something higher, and being a conduit for that.

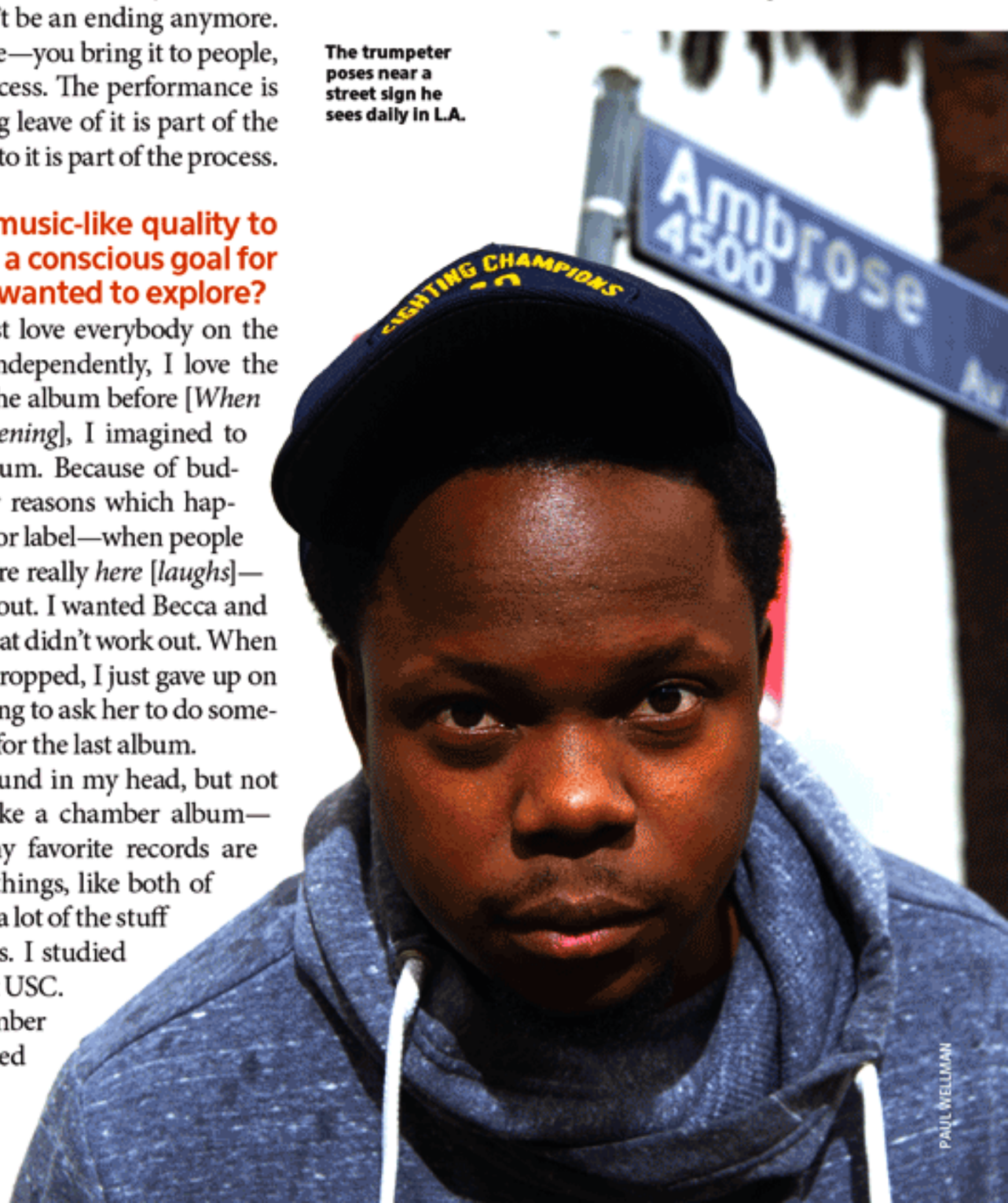
There is something natural about the way you weave the vocal tracks into the album's sequence. Becca's tune, "Our Basement (Ed)," is touching and lyrical, different from what Theo does on his more conceptual track, "Asiam (Joan)."

Becca's song is about this homeless guy named Ed across the street. Ed is an amazing man. He saved $250 and donated it back to the church, which feeds him every Sunday. That act was so moving to me. I see him literally every time I leave my driveway, and it's sort of a reminder. If you see him, he's really dirty and pushing a shopping cart. But I'm thinking, "Man, this guy is more in touch with humanity than a lot of these millionaires who live in the hills."

You have other characters in this set of 13 songs. There are a lot of names in parentheses linked to songs.

Maybe 90 percent of the tunes I compose have a story along with them. Some are two paragraphs, some are five pages long. Some are character analyses. They're written from different perspectives.

For this round, I wrote a lot of the tunes on specific characters in the stories. And then some of them are actual people that I know. "Asiam (Joan)" is actually written for Joni Mitchell. I wrote that for a commission I got for the Asia Society Museum in New York. At the time, I was reading Michelle



The trumpeter poses near a street sign he sees daily in L.A.

PAUL WELLMAN

Mercer's book *Will You Take Me As I Am*, the Joni Mitchell biography. I was also checking out an exhibition at the museum, where I played.

I wrote a paragraph about how that specific book had affected me. I think I may have sent links to some of the pictures that affected me, and sent all of that to Theo, with a piano sketch of me playing the tune. He wrote the lyrics based on that.

On the new album, you have a nice balance of performance qualities and structural ideas. You're obviously a technically gifted player, a dazzling trumpeter. But there must be part of you that is also wary of that role. There is the virtuoso player within, but also the composer who wants to fit things into a larger context. Is that about right?

That's spot-on [*laughs*]. The whole killing, jazz power trumpet thing is just not for me. I love so many other aspects of the music that to just focus on one—especially that, which comes from the ego—is not my way of doing it. I could stand up there and play killing jazz solos—you know how you do it, start very quiet and then build into these things with smart notes and high notes. But that's just not interesting to me.

I really am trying to just be a conduit. I'm trying to remove my ego and remove the "me, me, me" thing you find in a lot of art, or that a lot of people present. I just want to be a conduit and let things go out there. That's the power of art, that it can actually change people. That's my role—not to be some killing jazz trumpet player who takes amazing solos. That does nothing for the world.

But it's a nice aspect of the music, and you have that power to tap into.

That's well-put: It's just an aspect. It's very small. A lot of people pretend like it's a big thing.

Maybe this will be to my fault, but I'm not too concerned about what people think of me. I am concerned with changing people or making people feel things. I don't want people to be indifferent to me. I want them to either say, "I hate this," or, "I've never heard anything like this before. This is amazing." I don't want the in-between stuff. I want to erase the middle ground, the indifference.

Was there a point in your life when you were focused on the technical bravado, becoming a killing soloist? Did you go through that phase of development?

No. I didn't come to the music in that way.

My mom is from Mississippi. When I was growing up, my family was hardcore Baptist. That means you go to the church and people are getting the Holy Ghost, there's shout music and people are running around the church. You never even thought about the technical aspect of things. It was always the spiritual aspect—how things were making people *feel*. When someone in the choir would step out to sing a solo, you would never say, "Oh, she's a little out of tune," or question whether or not she was a great vocalist. It would be about, How does it make you feel?

I got into jazz when I went to a jazz camp in Oakland. All of the old-school jazz musicians from the area were teaching there. They would teach the music through records. They would take me and my friend to the flea market and we would get records—Art Blakey and Lee Morgan records. Lee Morgan was the first trumpet player I ever really heard, and it was his solo on "Moanin'." So that's my introduction, not like some hyper-technical thing. The first jazz concert I went to was the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

So I went from gospel music to Lee Morgan to the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and I felt that that was the purpose, music about feeling. The technical thing didn't really come to me until I got to college.

Do you have a particular path you follow, in terms of a faith?

No, I don't. I've gone through periods of checking out a lot of different religions. I was raised Baptist and went through a long period of checking out Buddhism, certain writings and teachings. Those are the two I've investigated the most.

To give a clearer answer, I could say that I believe in something higher than myself. I don't know that I can say that I believe in a singular person or deity. I believe in energies and something being higher than myself. I also believe in the great mind, the one thought that we are all trying to tap into. I think that the arts are a gateway into that, and so are sports. You hear somebody talk about the "flow."

Music can have religious, or spiritual, alliances, by its nature. It takes you to a place that nothing else does in life.

Right. That's one of the things I love about Wayne. He stays there. Most of us go into that world and think, "Oh, that was fun." He's just there, 100 percent of the time. That's what I'm trying to get to, what we're all trying to get to. Some of us know it, most of us don't know it. Joni Mitchell got there, and Trane. He was there.

John Coltrane has influenced jazz musicians for decades. Is Trane one of your heroes?

Oh, my God. Talk about commitment to craft. It's amazing. It's hard to even articulate. You say "Trane," and I just melt. There are other people, too, like Booker Little. Unfortunately, his story was so short. Clifford [Brown], Bud Powell, Tatum, Armstrong …

There is a whole slew of people who I love, who are great artists who never got the credit, but they still stuck with it. To me, that typifies their commitment to craft, with someone like Marcus Belgrave or Charles Tolliver or Joe Wilder—one of the baddest trumpet players. They were never the big names that everyone checks out, but they just stayed with it.

That's something that really inspired me and that I think about a lot. I feel like if I wasn't getting the attention that I'm getting, I would still be in there practicing five, six, seven hours a day.

Was Miles Davis an important figure and inspiration for you, through all the twists and turns in his musical history?

Yeah, I love Miles. He was just ballsy and courageous. I don't want to say he contradicted himself, but I think to grow, you kind of have to be willing to contradict yourself. There is a great Maya Angelou quote, where they asked her what's the

A BOLD VOICE

AMBROSE AKINMUSIRE HAS DONE HIS SHARE OF SIDEMAN WORK, including interactions with Steve Coleman, Jason Moran, Vijay Iyer and Esperanza Spalding. But he has also steadily honed his personal work in leader mode, sculpting his unique group concept—within the classic jazz quintet format—while refining his approach to composition.

His collaborators are deeply impressed by his distinct musical voice. "Ambrose is a very conscientious person," says Moran, a Blue Note labelmate. "He aims to please, but he also aims to disrupt. Whether thinking about how he has technically mastered his way around intervallic leaps, or the tenacity to have a working band, or his ability to be 'the one' that Joni Mitchell wants to go to dinner with, he's clearly not your 'Average Joe' lead trumpeter. He isn't choosing the easy route."

Tenor saxophonist Walter Smith III, a member of Akinmusire's quintet, is a kindred spirit. The two met when both were in college—Smith at Berklee College of Music and Akinmusire at Manhattan School of Music.

"The very first time I heard him play, I remember being instantly drawn to his sound and ideas and being blown away in a way that I hadn't felt since I was first starting to get into records in high school," Smith recalls. "In that few minutes of hearing him play, it kind of changed my mind-set and path to this day."

For vocalist Becca Stevens, the process of working on Akinmusire's new album, *The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier To Paint* (Blue Note), involved much more than a casual cameo appearance on the song she wrote and sang on, "Our Basement (Ed)." Woven into the song's elaborate creative workings, Akinmusire had her compose within a set of parameters—including that the narrative be from a homeless person's perspective. He didn't tell her until later that he had in mind a real person who lives on the same Los Angeles street where Akinmusire resides.

She says the creative process "was like being given a pile of clay and a character assignment rather than a blank canvas with no paints or brushes."

Stevens is a longtime admirer of Akinmusire as a new generational jazz voice. "The emotional quality in Ambrose's playing and writing I find refreshing on a heart level," she says. "I'm on the edge of my seat during his solos, which isn't something I can say I feel very often."

On a general artistic level, Moran asserts that "Ambrose has really found his tone, his voice, his rhythm and more. It's like the artist who finds the correct medium for their work, whether film, marble, canvas, wood. Ambrose has the right band, the right repertoire and the right attitude. He clearly has ideas about texture, instrumentation and language. I look forward to more."

—Josef Woodard

most important virtue or quality that someone can have. She said, "Courage, because courage gives you the ability to grow, because it gives you the ability to say, 'What I believed in yesterday, I don't necessarily believe today.'"

To me, that's what Miles did. He said, "OK, yeah, that bebop stuff?" It's not that he didn't ever believe in it, but he said, "This is where I'm at now." Suddenly, years later, he would say, "Yeah, that was cool, but this is where I am now." I respect that.

On the list of players you've worked with, Steve Coleman and Jason Moran are both progressive-minded musicians who, I assume, made an impact on you. Is that so? What did you glean from them?

When I talk about how I was introduced to music, it's kind of crazy. I went to Berkeley High School and right when that was about to end, I met Steve Coleman. It was like a higher power was putting me on a certain path. So I met him and that changed my life. He is so dedicated to the music and to the craft. The next summer, we [Akinmusire and trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson] went on tour with him, with the Five Elements, a five- or six-week tour, and it was like being thrown into the deep end.

That was your first big exposure in the grander jazz world?

That was my first tour. I had done some things that I found later were sort of big deals. I played a little bit with Joe Henderson. I knew Donald Bailey. I knew Billy Higgins and had played with him. I played a little bit with Sonny Simmons, very random stuff. I'd been doing gigs around the Bay Area since I was 15 or 16, with local artists and people who lived locally but were pretty well-known.

But, yeah, Steve Coleman's band was my first major tour. It was kind of crazy. It was so overwhelming, I felt like I needed to work on so much. I took some time off from touring and playing gigs and just practiced. There was just so much to digest during that tour.

With Jason Moran, I was a huge fan of his coming out of high school, at the time of his debut, *Soundtrack To Human Motion*. I found his email address and wrote him. He responded with a long email, and that was our introduction. We developed a relationship. I did his Monk project [Moran's multimedia project *In My Mind: Monk At Town Hall, 1957*] with him. There have been times when I called him for my gigs and he has been able to do them.

Since Jason is closer to my age, he's someone I really look up to. Again, he's someone who is committed to craft, and his integrity is something else. To look at the beginning of his career up to where he is now, he's been like an arrow. Even with all the attention given to him, he's just like, "Boom, this is my mission." With him, you can see that he has a really fast trajectory, but he's grabbing all these things as he's going forward. There may be horse blinders on, but somehow, they're invisible horse blinders. He can see around them. He's being super-focused, while still being influenced by other things. That's something I want to do, expanding while still having a trajectory, or expanding and not ignoring aspects of yourself.

There are other people, too. Vijay [Iyer] is a huge influence, and also other trumpet players—Nicholas [Payton], Roy [Hargrove] and Wynton [Marsalis]. Those guys helped me out a lot when I was in high school. Anytime they came to Yoshi's [in the Bay Area], or wherever they were playing, I would get in contact with them and they would give me lessons, in their hotel rooms. I would go and play, and they would play and they would give me feedback or tell me, "You need to check out this book, and this book." I've been influenced just from the generosity level, so if anybody asks me for a lesson, I give it to them, because people gave me lessons.

Akinmusire at the 2012 Litchfield Jazz Festival in Litchfield, Conn.

STEVEN SUSSMAN

Your Blue Note albums include pieces that address the racial situation in America: "My Name Is Oscar" and "Rollcall For Those Absent." Is it important for you to find ways to include on your albums these real-world reality checks plugged into present-day situations, such as the film *Fruitvale Station* and the Trayvon Martin case?

Yes, it's very important for me. If I'm really stamping time with each of these albums, then that has to go in there, you know? These are real concerns that I have. I read a great interview with Maya Angelou conducted by Bell Hooks, and in it she says, "Art is not a luxury. … The artist explains to us, or at least asks the questions which must be asked. And when there's a question asked, there's an answer somewhere. I don't believe a question can be asked which doesn't have an answer somewhere in the universe. That's what the artist is supposed to do, to liberate us from our ignorance."

I've had so many conversations about Oscar Grant around the world. And many times it was the first time these people had even heard of him. So, while many people have now become familiar with Trayvon Martin, I assume I will be having more conversations around the world about the other names that are also on this track. Also, it's boring to just shout, "Me, me, me, me,"—I don't know how people can sleep at night doing that.

You cross over lines and artistic attitudes. Is that a goal?

It is a goal. I can't say that I love everything, but I do enjoy most things related to music. I just love music, as an expression. I know that my goal is to create a style or an expression that can be used in any arena. I was going to say "genre," but I don't even know if I believe in that.

I had a really nice little moment in the first half of [2013]. I went on tour with the Monterey Jazz All-Stars, with Lewis Nash and Christian [McBride]. And then that ended the night before my birthday, the last day of April. Then I played the Atlanta Jazz Festival with my band, just a one-off, and then the next gig I did was in Banff, with Vijay, Linda Oh, Dafnis Prieto, Ben Monder, Theo Bleckmann and Greg Osby. Then the next week, I did a Joni Mitchell tribute with Rufus Wainwright, Brian Blade and others.

That was great. I thought, "This is what I want to do. I want to swing and then be able to do something else and be able to do this and do that." Yeah, it is a conscious thing. If you really are a great artist, you can sort of fit in anywhere. That's a definition for me. That definitely proves that it works, or that it's honest.

Are you contemplating your next album or project, or is it still too soon?

Yes and no. I have a lot of things that I want to do. I don't know if I'm thinking in terms of "next." I'm just looking at all these things I want to do. As for a "next," I don't know. Just forward …

Forward and sideways?

Forward and sideways, with honesty and submission to this thing that's higher than us. That's all I really care about. That's my definition of success: How much can you submit to this higher thing, and how much can you express through that? How many people are you getting to acknowledge this higher thing who weren't aware of it before? That's a sign of success, not how many gigs you get or how many awards you get. I think that will always be my definition, or at least part of my definition, of success. **DB**