

Garcia, 26, sitting in her local cafe in New Cross, southeast London, a vibrant creative hub that includes Peckham and Deptford and happening DIY club/jam nights with names such as Steez and Steam Down, at which acclaimed Californian saxophonist and band leader Kamasi Washington was spotted during his recent visit to the capital.

"The press are calling it new but we've been doing this for a while," she continues, her headphones around her neck, her laptop on the table in front of her. "A lot of us grew up playing music together. But I'm thankful that people are interested, and also that people who don't normally come to jazz are seeing musicians smashing it out and doing incredible things. It's great for us, for the generation above us, and for those who are coming up."

By the time that up-and-coming generation arrives, it's hoped female band leaders and instrumentalists no longer will be mistaken for singers. This assumption is made of Garcia and her female peers — among them trumpet player Yazz Ahmed, saxophonist Camilla George and pianist Sarah Tandy — with monotonous regularity. A graduate of the Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Garcia has plans for a project that "will get people to look at themselves and check their patriarchal bullshit", but she isn't elaborating just yet.

"I wanted to stop moaning and take some action to positively change the future," says this poised, likeable talent, a hipster vision with long plaits and edgy gold jewellery, her knuckles inked with minimalist shapes. "A friend of mine asked me which female sax player I looked up to when I was a kid, and I didn't have anyone! That's crazy! Gender-wise, ethnicity-wise, there's still so much to do."

There's also so much to talk about, from her solo EP *Nubya's 5ive* (pronounced Noob-I-ah, by the way) and its follow-up this year, *When We Are*, to guest performances on celebrated solo projects by band mates including pianist Joe Armon-Jones and drummer Moses Boyd; from her work with all-female Afrobeat collective Nerija to playing at clubs as DJ Nyasha (Nyasha is her middle name, and the name of her forthcoming range of hoodies and T-shirts) to gigs at festivals including South by Southwest in Austin, Texas, where post-show demand for *When We Are* way outstripped supply: "This huge queue of people followed me outside to buy my vinyl," she has said, "and I thought 'F. k, I've only got 11."

During the past few weeks, Garcia has been all over London. Scooping the breakthrough act of the year gong at Jazz FM awards. Performing with Sons of Kemet, the tuba-sax-twin kit drums quartet led by saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings, another of the scene's prodigious multi-taskers, at east London stomping ground Total Refreshment Centre. Featuring in the orchestra accompanying Breakin' Convention, a hip-hop dance festival held at Sadler's Wells Theatre. At the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Garcia was part of a female quartet exploring the power of the protest song; her interpretation of Coltrane's prayer-like *Alabama* was delivered with grace, soul and technical rigour.

There was her debut headline slot at the famous Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho, an establishment newly hip due to the pulling power of London's young jazz Turks, and one that assumed near mythical status to the young Nubya Nyasha Garcia.

"I've been seeing incredible music at Ronnie's since I was 16, so to be playing my own music there was great," she says of the club. Its tourist-oriented, cruise-ship vibe is a world away from fourth-wall-smashing venues such as Steam Down, Total Refreshment Centre or the pop-up clubs hosted by contemporary music movement Jazz Refreshed, where active listening — cheering an improvised solo, dancing like no one is watching, rubbing elbows with the musicians — is the norm.

All this, and Garcia has yet to release an album (in the works, but not to be jinxed with discussion). Her busyness is a choice: next week she makes her Australian debut at the Melbourne Jazz Festival before playing dates in Castlemaine and Sydney. It's her first visit to Australia: "It's like an entire day away from here," she says, laughing. "That's just mad."

I THINK WE'RE ALL WRITING VERY POLITICALLY CHARGED MUSIC, WHETHER WE LIKE TO TALK ABOUT IT OR NOT

NUBYA GARCIA

The youngest of four children born to a British Trinidadian father, a documentary filmmaker, and a mother who arrived in Britain as a teen from Guyana, the most "Caribbean" country in South America, Garcia grew up in Camden, northwest London, in a creative household where extra-curricular activities were the norm. Her two elder sisters painted, made clothes and studied classical music; her brother played trumpet in the Camden Youth Jazz Band and was heavily into drum 'n' bass. Her mother, a big jazz fan, took her along to gigs; she remembers sitting in a corner of a second tier at the Barbican, agog at Herbie Hancock.

"I used to listen to him so much," she says of the jazz-funk pioneer. "I had these two Herbie Hancock CDs that I'd taken from the communal CD pile in the lounge and kept upstairs in my room. I played them over and over."

She was already learning violin, piano and recorder when, aged 10, she was given her first saxophone. "My mum and I were driving somewhere when she said: 'There's a present for you in the boot.' It was this shiny alto sax, which blew my mind! I started learning classical saxophone, which is often transposed flute and oboe music, and it was too much hard work for me. I switched to jazz, and that was it."

Garcia joined a series of weekend bands, studying under teachers including award-winning jazz pianist Nikki Yeoh, who taught her how to improvise. ("I'd be so nervous; improvising is like public speaking! But now I'm comfortable being uncomfortable.")

At 17, attending junior music academy, she saw a notice for a free workshop run by Tomorrow's Warriors, a jazz music and artist development organisation founded by bass player Gary Crosby (formerly of influential black British collective the Jazz Warriors) and committed to nurturing new talent, especially girls and musicians from the African diaspora. "It was packed!" Garcia flashes a grin. "And it was more diverse than anything I'd experienced up until that age; there were people who looked like me. Gary said I should come back next week, and that was really what set me off."

While there's a tendency for those heralding this "new" London jazz scene to imagine that it sprang, fully formed, out of nowhere, a confluence of factors — development initiatives, social-media savvy, cross-genre literacy, affordable spaces and a sense of purpose fostered by the political climate — are responsible for its evolution. Check out the musicians on *We Out Here*, the nine-track compilation issued this year on Brownswood Recordings, the label owned by BBC Radio 1 DJ and tastemaker Gilles Peterson, and held up as a who's who of the scene's main players. Most are Tomorrow's Warriors alumni.

Tuba virtuoso Theon Cross, a member of Sons of Kemet, headlines a track informed by garage and grime. Drummer Boyd, who works across everything from house and hip-hop to free jazz and swing, leads a fusion jam. Afrobeat outfit Kokoroko (whose frontline features alto saxophonist Cassie Kinoshi, who with Garcia is also a member of all-female jazz septet Nerija) bring inner-London hues to their

horn-fuelled West African sound. There's the hip-hop and Afrobeat influenced Ezra Collective, which picked up the British jazz act of the year award at the recent Jazz FM Awards. And the Maisha ensemble, with Garcia on sax and flute alongside guitarist Shirley Tetteh, blending free jazz over West African rhythms and serving it up with raw spiritual intensity. This isn't jazz as we know it, if jazz as we know it is doo-wop and black tie and the Great American Songbook, but then the album's musical director, Shabaka Hutchings, a reed player who works across electronica and grime and is certainly no jazz purist, doesn't call it jazz either.

Crucially, this is music made by a post-rave generation that understands dance culture, appealing to a younger audience on the basis of jazz as a new energetic form, one that retains the elements of rebellion and freedom inherent in jazz's American origins but has an urban sound — an urban London sound — of its own.

"As young adults a lot of us [musicians] would go to clubs together," says Garcia. "So that world mixing with our world had an effect, as did mixing with friends who were putting on nights that combined both, not for money but to get people coming together."

"So now it's like combining that attitude you have in a club where the beat drops and you lose your shit. That attitude, with live music."

That attitude, combined with a mystical, Afro-futuristic dimension that harks back to famed spiritual jazz musicians such as Roland Kirk, Alice and John Coltrane, and the redoubtable, astral-travelling Sun Ra (whose Sun Ra Arkestra, led by saxophonist Marshall Allen, is playing the Melbourne Jazz Festival). This new crop of British-based jazz players has benefited from the spiritual jazz renaissance taking place in the US, with big-selling 2015 albums *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar and *The Epic* by Kamasi Washington reclaiming jazz as a black

American art form. (For his sold-out gig at London's Roundhouse, Washington brought Hutchings onstage to improvise fierce sax squalls alongside him).

London is one of the world's most culturally integrated cities; little wonder, then, that sounds from Britain's former colonies are being embraced — reclaimed — by the scene.

Perhaps inevitably, with the spectre of Brexit, wildly unpopular among British youth, looming large, and the effects of the Windrush immigration scandal rippling on, this young London jazz scene is also highly politicised, creating music intended to provoke and galvanise: Sons of Kemet's acclaimed new album, *Your Queen is a Reptile*, fires a shot at the British monarchy as it celebrates a series of "queens" from the African diaspora.

"I think we're all writing very politically charged music, whether we like to talk about it or not," says Garcia. "Shabaka also has lyricists and rappers that come onstage, but when you don't have lyrics people have to work it out or not, you know? With all this craziness we live in, when you're in the room with us it's a chance to immerse yourself in feelings shared by everyone there, and also to be present. To be in the now."

Hence the title of her EP *When We Are*: "I love to be present in the knowledge of what it means to be present. Each improvisation I do is about that. So *When We Are* is about being fully engaged with what is going on, not texting or filming on your phone, but looking after the now. It is also a celebration of 'we'. The 'we' of community. Musicians don't give a shit about scenes. But being among people I've known a long time, who support and nurture you, have the same sort of background as you," Garcia says, flashing a smile: "Now, that is everything."

Nubya Garcia performs at Jazzlab on Thursday for Melbourne International Jazz Festival.

QUEENSLAND THEATRE

Queensland Theatre, debase productions and JUTE Theatre Company co-production

Written by Robert Kronk and Nadine McDonald-Dowd
Directed by Bridget Boyle

One club, One family

One NRL grand final




Production sponsor




Part of the Energy Queensland Group

THE

★★★★★

- Artshub

LONGEST

MINUTE



Until 23 June

Cremorne Theatre, QPAC

Tickets 1800 355 528 queenslandtheatre.com.au