

# MULTIVERSE *Mindset*

Alto saxophonist, bandleader, musical thinker, composer... **Cassie Kinoshi** is a multi-talented, multi-faceted artist whose work with outfits such as her Mercury Prize nominated band *seed.*, and collaborative groups KOKOROKO and Nérija, has marked her out as one of the most important figures in the current UK jazz scene. **Jane Cornwell** meets an expansive artist who refuses to be boxed in

**C**assie Kinoshi was just eight years old when she wrote a fictional sci-fi series about a boy who would disappear through hidden portals – clandestine doors, backs of cupboards, a space in the woods – into parallel worlds populated by robots. ‘The Adventurous One’, she called it, a title that seems all the more portentous now.

“I like learning, exploring, experimenting and improvising,” says Kinoshi, 29, of her questing, multi-hyphenated career. “I don’t want to be stuck in a box.”

Best known to most as an alto-saxophonist and leader of *seed.* (formerly SEED Ensemble), her 10-piece band with its six horns and a four-piece rhythm section – whose 2019 debut album *Driftglass* was nominated for the Hyundai Mercury Prize – Kinoshi is involved in a veritable multiverse of side-projects. She is a performer and co-writer in Sheila Maurice-Grey’s mighty Afrobeat ensemble KOKOROKO (Maurice-Grey is also member of *seed.*), and in the septet Nérija, which features Maurice-Grey and the tenor saxophonist Nubya Garcia.

Various a 2018 Ivors Academy Award winner (more specifically, jazz composition for large ensemble, for the *Driftglass* track ‘Afronaut’ feat. XANA); the 2019 JAZZ FM Awards Breakthrough Act of the Year; a participant in the 2018-19 London Symphony Orchestra Panufnik Scheme; and also in 2019, the Cameron Mackintosh Resident Composer at Scotland’s Dundee Rep Theatre, Kinoshi is forging a reputation as one of the UK’s most exciting composers – regardless of age, ethnicity, gender or genre.

She has been writing music for contemporary dance and theatre – at Battersea Arts Centre, Stratford Circus Arts Centre and The Old Vic – ever since graduating from Trinity Laban with a BMus (Hons) in Composition in 2015. Recent production credits include the soundtrack for ‘Bradley: 4.18’, a piece inspired by the writings of poet Kate Tempest and featuring as part of *Deluxe*, the new show by internationally-acclaimed dance troupe BalletBoyz – which opened at Sadler’s Wells in London in March 2022 and is currently touring nationally.

But it was Kinoshi’s autumn 2021 stint as artist-in-residence at respected London venue Kings Place that really got the uninitiated double-taking. Staged within and outside the EFG London Jazz Festival, her wide-ranging suite of curations highlighted her fecund imagination and boundaries-down aesthetic, touching on influences that range from Alexander Scriabin and Sergei

Prokofiev to Fela Kuti, Maria Schneider and Ludwig Gorenson, soundtrack composer for *Black Panther*.

Here were installations (echo, an immersive exploration of London in collaboration with her long-time friend, visual artist Anne Verehij); the world premiere of ‘Three Suns Suite’, a new commission for the British chamber orchestra Aurora featuring members of *seed.*; and *Synthesis*, an evening of forward-reaching London acts including Lunch Money Life and un.procedure, a free jazz trio boasting the lower-case-loving likes of Kinoshi, piano/synth player Piera Onacko and electronic artist Nathan England-Jones.

“Improvisation is a big part of my compositional process,” says Kinoshi, sitting at home in southeast London, a spiritual

basecamp for many of the young London jazz acts that attended nearby higher education institutions Goldsmiths and Trinity, and jammed at nights such as that run by Deptford collective Steam Down.

“Ideas will pop up and I’ll follow them, whether they’re a bassline, a drum beat or a melody. I might walk around the flat hearing each part in my head and singing, clapping or tapping them individually into my phone.

Or maybe while I’m sitting at my piano.”

A smile. “It all starts from a very human place,” she says.

It’s how she kick-started ‘Solaristic Precepts’, a new piece inspired by the space-is-the-place philosophies of Sun Ra and commissioned by the London Sinfonietta. And which premiered as part of jazz-meets-contemporary-classical London Third Stream project for the EFG London Jazz Festival – on a bill that included new pieces by Kinoshi’s fellow jazz mover shakers: Shabaka Hutchings, Elliot Galvin and Laura Jurd.

Her alto sax, she says, is an extension of herself, the vehicle with which she sets up structures, tells stories, weaponises truth. Social consciousness – particularly, an awareness of race and history – is vital to Kinoshi’s oeuvre. *Driftglass* opener ‘The Darkies’, for example, addresses Debussy’s 1908 tune ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ while reclaiming black, political roots of jazz. ‘Wake (For Grenfell)’ includes a group chant of words by Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes (‘Tell all my mourners to mourn in red/cause there ain’t no sense in me being dead’).

Lately, she’s been writing from need to celebrate her heritage. Raised in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, by supportive academic parents who encouraged her way into jazz training crew

/// **There is more than one way to uplift the black community – there’s bringing politics to light, but there’s also beauty and joy and different musical textures that need highlighting** ///