

Phantom in Paradise

Sasha Berliner is at the leading edge of a new wave of vibraphone virtuosos, matching forceful attack with a sophisticated sound as both solo artist and collaborator with the likes of Christian McBride and Cécile McLorin Salvant. **Jane Cornwell** caught up with the vibist as she releases her latest album, *Fantome*

The vibraphonist and composer Sasha Berliner is Zooming me from onboard a ship in a port in Mexico. There's an abstract painting on the wall behind her, and sunlight dancing along her arms, which are tattooed with filigree leaves and flowers.

"I've never done one of these before," says the LA-based artist, 26, of her locale, a Jazz Cruise hosted by trumpeter Chris Botti. "But we get to play in different configurations, which I love."

Adaptability is one of the traits that has marked the award-winning Berliner out for greatness. There's her playing skills and compositional smarts: *Fantome*, her new third album, is a sonic mood-board of light and shade, vivid geometrics and swirling patterns, a work that eschews labels and begs repeated listening. There's the way she leads an ensemble, allowing colleagues to shine while maintaining her perspective. There's the calibre of her collaborators. Heavy hitters including Christian McBride, Cecile McLorin Salvant and fellow vibes player Warren Wolf, a member of the SF Jazz Collective, have featured Berliner in their line-ups.

Oh, and then there's her take-no-prisoners pushback against the challenges faced by women in the biz; a writer as well as a musician, Berliner's open letter on her experiences and observations of sexism within the jazz community went viral back in 2017 and remains essential reading today.

But more on that later. In what way is *Fantome* a departure or a development from previous albums, *Azalea* (2019) and *Onyx* (2022)?

"They're all different iterations and evolutions," she answers. "I was 20 when I released my first album" – the San Francisco-born Berliner wrote *Azalea* while studying at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in NYC, and most of the more mature *Onyx* during the pandemic – "so it framed different points in time. Now I have a better sense of who I am musically."

And more confidence, passion and fire, she says. Despite honing her talents at the 2017 Banff International Workshop in Jazz and Creative Music under pianist Vijay Iyer and multi-instrumentalist Tyshawn Sorey, and because of the presence on *Onyx* of feted keytarist James Francies and elder statesman drummer Marcus Gilmore ("I was nervous and wanted to make sure I showed up"), this time around she felt less intimidated,

more free. It helped, too, that sound engineer Ben Kane (D'Angelo) was involved in the recording session at his Electric Garden studio in Brooklyn: "Sometimes mixing engineers for jazz records can be a little timid. I love a stronger, fuller bass sound."

A tween rock drummer who grew up in a musical household (her older brother Cole Berliner is currently guitarist with rising singer-songwriter Zsela), Berliner's influences ranging from rock and electronic music to hip hop and R&B to classical music and, well, jazz, which she says she came to last: "All of those influences can be present in my music at various times. I like to combine the acoustic and electric sound, but not always in the way we normally think. I take more from the wheelhouse of Radiohead or James Blake [another Electric Garden patron]; just the way I use electronics or synth is more of a textural backdrop."

Berliner's work on MalletKAT, the MIDI percussion mallet controller/electric vibraphone, finds her changing delays and adding effects and reverb and filters in ways that further pattern a sound distinguished for its haunting angles and dark, spooky mysteries. "*Fantome* is about creating moods, making new interpretations of familiar songs

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or phrases and presenting instrumental configurations that have rarely been done or explored before," she states on the album's press release. "I like to see several ways to present a single melody or contextualise a rhythm."

So we have tracks such as 'Construction', an original that presents a series of varied melodic and harmonic takes - spacious here, dense and complex there - on the same bass line and chordal rhythm. Or Billy Strayhorn's 'Upper Manhattan Medical Group', a jazz education standard that Berliner has reharmonised and reconfigured, in an approach that echoes the two different versions of Rodgers and Hart's 'My Funny Valentine' on *Onyx*.

"Focusing on setting the mood and manipulating the pedals, rather than on the traditional structure of the song, allows for increased improvisational freedom without losing the basics of the composition," she says. "I love Billy Strayhorn's use of jazz harmony; he was a master at controlling emotions to be

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deeper than just 'minor is sad and major is happy' but getting to chords that are really heart-wrenching or bizarre, or even just having very specific chord choice and colours and stuff. I played [Upper Mahattan] a couple of times with my band and was like, "This is cool, let's record this."

She says her current band line-up feels like a group of peers: bassist Harish Raghavan (Ambrose Akinmusire); garlanded drummer Jongkuk Kim; Grammy-winning pianist Taylor Eigsti, who "has a really signature point of view when it comes to his own compositions and a great way of integrating acoustic and electric sounds, very mathematical but also emotionally fraught. I started out by studying with him, and knew his piano playing from the Bay Area, and he'd already given me feedback on some of the songs." A smile. "Then I was like, 'Would you be down to record with me?' And he was."

All these musicians share an aesthetic that eschews categorisation in favour of exploration, liberation, accepting what is. In a lineage of improvising vibraphonists such as Roy Ayers, Lionel Hampton, Bobby Hutcherson and Milt Jackson, and new generation players including Joel Ross and Patricia Brennan (who also uses pedals and effects in her performances), Berliner is on her own path, creating her own world. The vibraphonist/educator Stefon Harris, with whom she's also studied, was crucial in encouraging her to flex her musical gifts on vibraphone, an instrument with which she says she's sometimes in sync, sometimes fighting, sometimes meeting in the middle.

"It's a relationship," says Berliner, who stays match fit regardless. "The vibraphone is so physical; you definitely need a good core. Warren Wolf, who's super-ripped, told me that when I was 17 and doing the high school program with the SF Jazz Collective. I'm definitely up on exercising."

She's up, too, on attitudes to women in jazz. Always has been. It was the high proportion of female-identifying musicians at BANFF in 2017, and the ensuing sharing of gender-based mistreatment, that prompted her to publish an open letter on sexism within the jazz community (Robert Glasper, you said *what?*) a few weeks before #MeToo went viral. Erudite, fact-based, robustly argued; Berliner is also a literary writer, and currently happens to be reading Dostoyevsky's *Demons* - the piece made her one of the most talked-about jazz musicians associated with the movement.

"People have long had a hard time accepting women as an integral part of modern jazz," she says now. "Traditional jazz singers, sure; that's how women in jazz are usually presented. The vibraphone, too, is often associated with a specific era in jazz.

But so many of us are involved in modern jazz that avoids categorisation, that maybe isn't even jazz, isn't even something you can label."

Fantome - the French word for phantom - is an album aimed not just at thinking outside the box, but in dissolving the box and the categories, altogether.

"The boxing-in of the music is phantom - it doesn't exist, and it doesn't need to in order to give the music validity," says Berliner.

With that, she's back to her jazz cruise, to reconfiguring the different configurations. **D**

Fantome is reviewed on page 36, Sasha Berliner plays Ronnie Scott's, London on 17 July

