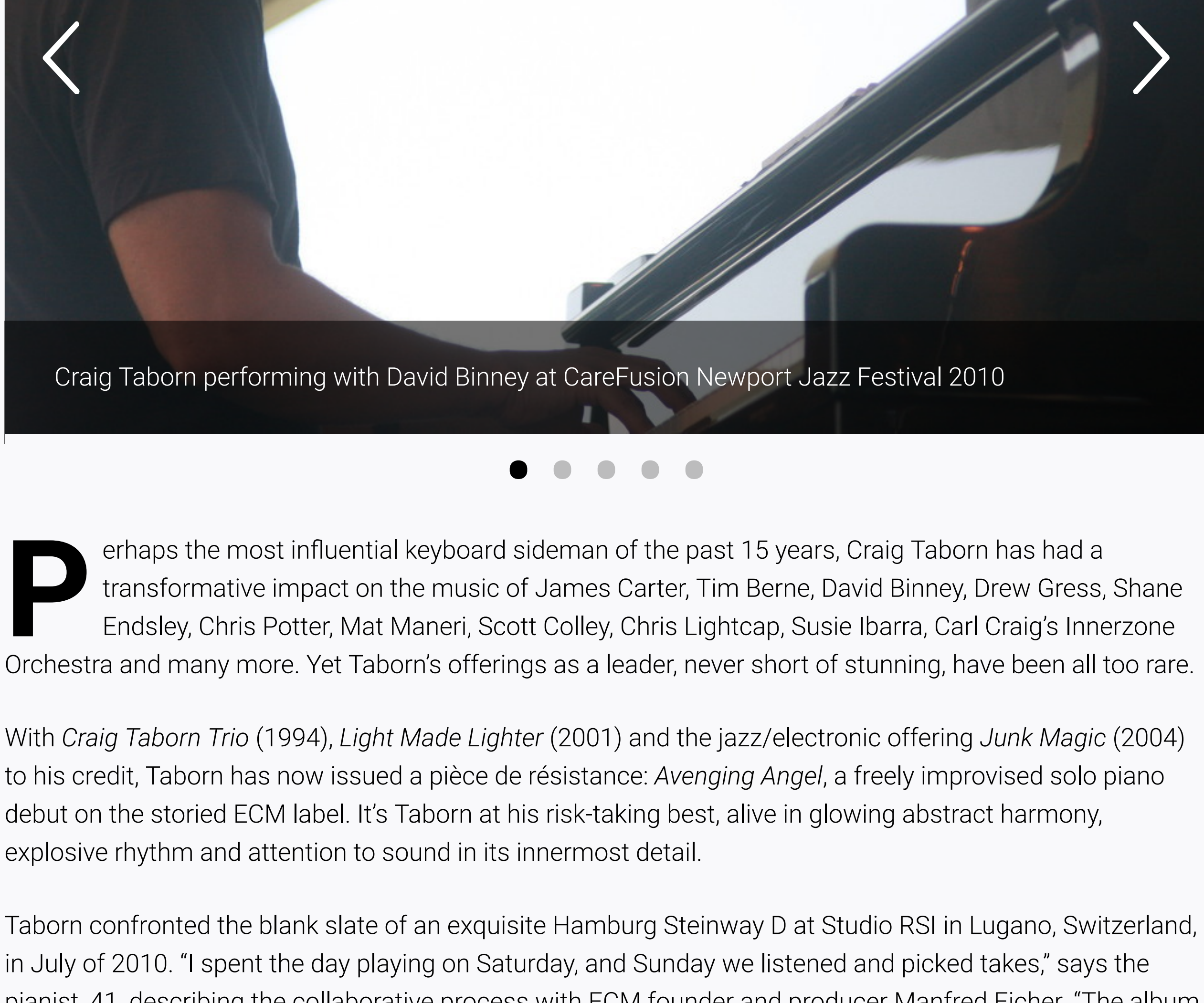


Home > Features > Craig Taborn: Alone, at Last

Craig Taborn: Alone, at Last

On *Avenging Angel*, acclaimed sideman Craig Taborn makes an imposing solo piano statement

UPDATED FEBRUARY 19, 2020 — DAVID R. ADLER



Craig Taborn performing with David Binney at CareFusion Newport Jazz Festival 2010

Perhaps the most influential keyboard sideman of the past 15 years, Craig Taborn has had a transformative impact on the music of James Carter, Tim Berne, David Binney, Drew Gress, Shane Endsley, Chris Potter, Mat Maneri, Scott Colley, Chris Lightcap, Susie Ibarra, Carl Craig's Innerzone Orchestra and many more. Yet Taborn's offerings as a leader, never short of stunning, have been all too rare.

With *Craig Taborn Trio* (1994), *Light Made Lighter* (2001) and the jazz/electronic offering *Junk Magic* (2004) to his credit, Taborn has now issued a pièce de résistance: *Avenging Angel*, a freely improvised solo piano debut on the storied ECM label. It's Taborn at his risk-taking best, alive in glowing abstract harmony, explosive rhythm and attention to sound in its innermost detail.

Taborn confronted the blank slate of an exquisite Hamburg Steinway D at Studio RSI in Lugano, Switzerland, in July of 2010. "I spent the day playing on Saturday, and Sunday we listened and picked takes," says the pianist, 41, describing the collaborative process with ECM founder and producer Manfred Eicher. "The album itself is maybe a third of what was played. I think there were 34 or 35 pieces in all. Most of them were cool." Although he didn't proceed with a particular album concept in mind, "I had certain places I knew I wanted to go, certain zones I wanted to explore," he says. "But not in a finished sense. I leave it more to the moment."

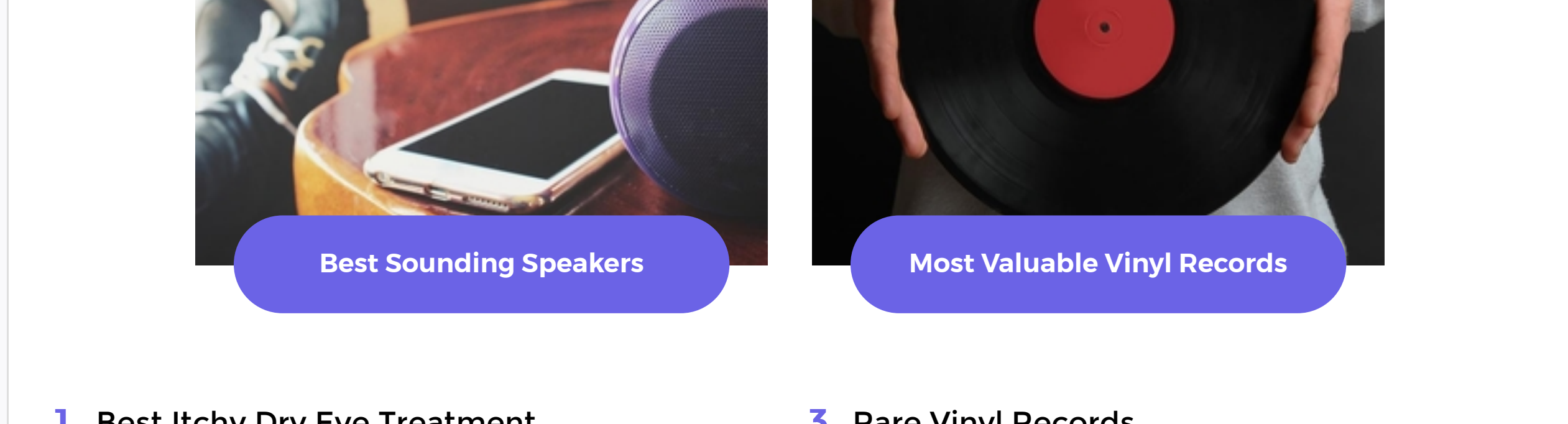
Taborn's ECM appearances date back to 1999, two years after his arrival in New York, with *Nine to Get Ready* by Roscoe Mitchell & the Note Factory. He has since been featured on two more Mitchell discs, as well as Evan Parker's *Boustrophedon*, David Torn's *Prezens* and Michael Formanek's *The Rub and Spare Change*. Thanks to the Note Factory's two-piano lineup, Taborn has also developed a rapport with bandmate Vijay Iyer, with whom he's been playing piano duo concerts over the past year. Iyer hadn't heard *Avenging Angel* at press time, but could readily vouch for Taborn's excellence in solo settings. "I've sat right beside him and watched him do it," he says. "I think he's one of the best pianists living today. He's got an amazing range of ideas and depth of execution—it's virtually unparalleled."

Bad Plus drummer Dave King, who grew up with Taborn, recalls the pianist turning him on to Henry Threadgill and other venturesome artists as early as age 14. King played on *Junk Magic* and has recruited Taborn and bassist Reid Anderson for a new trio called Golden Valley Is Now! (named for their Minnesota hometown). "There's something about the way Craig weaves rhythms," King says, "where everything is incredibly complex but it just feels so good. It's like a cloud or something, but the mechanisms inside it are just maniacal."

"Craig draws from the fundamentals," Iyer adds, "but also an awareness of a huge range of music that's out there. He's an authentic jazz pianist, but what that means to him is complete freedom." Freedom, that is, to create the grand, ominous counterpoint of "This Voice Says So," the fractured staccato motives of "Neither/Nor," the delicately voice-led rubato chords of "The Broad Day King" or the grinding pulse of "Gift Horse/Over the Water," among the new album's many highlights. ("Over the Water," from Taborn's 1994 debut, is the only preexisting composition of the date.)

And if one hears echoes of Taborn's rhythmically active work in Tim Berne's bands Hard Cell and Science Friction, Taborn hears them too: "It's interesting how much of that music is in the fingers. Having played with Tim all those years, there's almost a vernacular that has developed for me, and it's directly related to Tim's writing." But inspiration is never obvious in a music that demands what Iyer terms "the embrace of the ephemeral." Of his blazing title track, Taborn says, "I do not have one memory of that thing occurring. It emerged out of nowhere."

Along with his solo pursuits, Taborn has been touring with Farmers By Nature, a co-led trio with bassist William Parker and drummer Gerald Cleaver, on the strength of their latest disc, *Out of This World's Distortions*. Taborn also leads a trio with Cleaver and bassist Thomas Morgan, yet to be recorded. "I'm happy to let the concept develop, to have the writing grow to fit the group before it's documented," he says—his artistic temperament in a nutshell.



That's not to say that Taborn isn't driven, in his way. "He'll kill himself trying to play a part," says Cleaver, who has worked with the pianist since they attended the University of Michigan together in the late 1980s. "Craig will accept as possible anything that I put forward," Cleaver adds. "Anything is possible; nothing is improbable. He suspends judgment and does it. I mean, who thought Hard Cell would be possible before Craig actually did it? What that sets up is it makes people in the future realize, 'Oh man, if he did that, I can do this.' That's how the music keeps growing."

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