

## **Dayna Stephens, I'll Take My Chances**

You wouldn't know from his fiery saxophone playing, but 35-year-old **Dayna Stephens** is staring down a major kidney problem and needs a transplant. So the first thing to say about the title of this new release, **I'll Take My Chances**, is that it came about one afternoon while Stephens was sitting in a dialysis chair.

"The song **I'll Take My Chances** was written at a time when I was living in San Francisco," Stephens recalls. "The words 'I'll take my chances' were the last lines spoken on a [*Crime Scene Investigation*] show I was watching. The episode was about a woman on the transplant list who decided to give up her spot to a kid who needed it more. Someone asked her why she would do this, and she said, 'I'll take my chances,' and the episode was over. It kind of hit me, not only the compassion it takes to do that, but also the fact that I'm sitting in the chair watching a show about something I'm actually experiencing at the moment. As I've moved forward, those words have come to represent a lot of things: I'll take my chances in becoming a musician, especially knowing that musicians often don't have health care. Moving to New York after college was another big chance. It applies to so many different landmarks in your life."

Stephens' attitude has always been "to just power through all this stuff." And when he speaks of his struggle you realize all over again the life-altering capacities of music. Because Stephens' friendships and musical moments with the players on this and other recordings that have given him all the fuel he needs. That was certainly true of his 2012 Criss Cross debut **Today Is Tomorrow** [Criss 1345], which featured pianist Aaron Parks, guitarist Julian Lage and other major talents. (See my liner notes there for more of Stephens' biographical details.) On **I'll Take My Chances** he leads a different and still formidable team: guitarist **Charles Altura**, pianist **Gerald Clayton**, bassist **Joe Sanders** and drummer **Bill Stewart**.

Altura is a member of Chick Corea's latest band, The Vigil; he'll also appear alongside Stephens on an Aaron Parks album in the works. "I've known Charles since we were in high school," Stephens says, "and I've always known he was a badass. I met him and his brother Tom, who plays bass, at Stanford Jazz Workshop in a student ensemble. I was a year ahead of Charles in high school so we lost touch for quite a few years after I moved to Boston, but I kept up with his playing. He handles all these tunes like no one else."

Gerald Clayton, who has played on **Criss Cross** releases by Kendrick Scott and Michael Rodriguez, hired Stephens to play on his 2013 release *Life Forum*. And the bassist in Clayton's working trio is none other than Joe Sanders, so Stephens definitely had their telepathic connection in mind when planning this session. "Gerald I've known since he was 16," the leader says. "I met him when I first moved to Los Angeles for the Monk Institute. There was some random jam session and this guy walks in. I heard him sit down and play and was just like, 'Ok, this is not just some ordinary kid.' I love how he's got elements of the roots of blues feeling while playing some really advanced harmonic stuff."

Sanders, first runner-up in the 2009 Thelonious Monk Bass Competition, made his leader debut on Criss Cross in 2012 with **Introducing Joe Sanders** [Criss 1344]. "He's got one of the greatest feels as a bass player," Stephens continues. "He can walk with any drummer and I can't say that about all bass players. I like how he doesn't always

follow what's on the page. You never know what's going to happen and it brings a spontaneity into the music that I love." For those who don't know: in addition to saxophone, Stephens plays bass on a high level and has gigged extensively on it. "For me the bass player is always the one that's in control of what's happening in the band. I love the way Joe Sanders takes control."

Bill Stewart, a veteran of over 20 Criss Cross sessions and one of the great influential players of the last 20 years, was a "get" for Stephens: "I was listening to an old John Patitucci record with Bill on it, and the second I thought of that, he became the obvious choice. I've always wanted to play with Bill. I'm a huge fan of his sound and approach, his use of dynamics — he's a badass and everyone knows that. It's a sound I grew up listening to. I just took a chance and got Bill's number and *voilà*, it worked out. I sat in once with a band at Smoke that had Bill on drums, but that was my only experience ever playing with him before this recording."

***Good Tree, Good Fruit*** opens the album in a dark and laid-back mood, with surprising touches of delay on the tenor in the rubato sections and a brighter 6/8 tempo for the solos. "The title comes from a phrase in the bible," Stephens explains. "I grew up a Jehovah's Witness from the age of 12 until I was about 23 when I left. Now I'm a diehard atheist. But it was a phrase that stuck with me — a tree that produces good fruit, or good parents who produce good kids. Obviously that's not always the case, but we have a lot of influence on how we shape the future. The title also reminds me of being in a forest, so there are parts where I had delay on the saxophone, a sound you might associate with a forest full of trees."

***JFK International*** opens with staccato code-like patterns and tight contrapuntal lines that give way to a burning straightahead swing feel for the solos. Clayton and Altura lead off in such breathtaking fashion that you'd forgive anyone for having a hard time following them. Stephens is unfazed, however — if anything he's all the more inspired. That slight rasp in his sound, that relaxed feel even in the midst of technically jaw-dropping passages, is very much his own. "One chorus of this tune represents starting off down the runway, taking off and then you're up in the air," Stephens comments. "And in the last four measures you're kind of floating back down for the landing. Perhaps I wrote this to give myself a happier memory when I think of that place [JFK]."

***Adrift***, a lyrical piece in 6/4 by Aaron Parks, "is something we're recording on Aaron's album which still hasn't come out," Stephens says. "I wanted a chance to stretch out on it, give my own version. And also to hear Charles stretch out on it because on Aaron's recording he doesn't get a solo. It's an amazing harmonic journey, the melody is really singable, and the same line in the same rhythm just propels through the tune. It keeps me engaged the whole time." It's striking to hear Clayton play a composition by a fellow young pianist, something he might not do otherwise. His solo is a highlight of the track.

***Dirty*** sends the album in a swampy New Orleans direction with a second-line feel in 5/4. "It's actually a blues, believe it or not," Stephens remarks. There are two instrument switches as well: Stephens plays baritone sax and Clayton plays organ. "I heard a track or two on Gerald's last record where he overdubbed organ, and that gave me the idea. I also used to play this with an organist, Wil Blades, back in San Francisco."

The baritone, Stephens continues, "has always been my favorite saxophone, to be honest. I don't think I've ever recorded on it before this. I played it a little bit in college

with the big band, and a little bit in junior high school. But I had to sell my baritone to be able to move to New York, and it was a rough decision. I always planned on getting another one as soon as it was feasible. It took nine years [*laughs*]. Ever since I've been bringing it to every gig and trying to fit it in wherever I can."

**Unrequited**, by Brad Mehldau, shifts gears again back to churning and volatile swing, despite the fact that this was not at all a swing tune in Mehldau's various treatments. Stephens goes a step further by beginning right on the solos and saving the melody for last. The result was so compelling that he got two keeper takes and decided to include them both (the second one ends the album).

"The tune is just gorgeous," Stephens offers. "I got a chart of it at some point and for two years straight that was the tune I shed the most. I always carry it with me when I play a gig. I put a swing feel on it and it was interesting, the different way of expressing those changes. I also wanted to start with no melody — Joe Sanders' record starts off that way and I thought it was the hippest thing in the world. Our second take is a little slower, more relaxed in the beginning at least. I like the way we simmer before it boils."

Duke Ellington's **Prelude to a Kiss**, the one standard of the set, features a guest vocal by **Becca Stevens**, a gifted bandleader and singer-songwriter making her first **Criss Cross** appearance. "Three or four years ago," Stephens recounts, "I heard Becca sing this during a concert at Stanford and I had tears in my eyes. I knew I wanted to have her sing it on something of mine. Weirdly enough, we didn't get the key right. I just put it in the original key of C and didn't realize, so she's singing a fifth higher than she usually would. I think it sounds amazing — it brings out a different quality in her voice. It's got something of what was there at Stanford but it's also got something unique."

**Field of Landmines** "named itself one day in rehearsal," Stephens says. As the title suggests it's probably the date's biggest challenge. It was co-written by Stephens and rising-star drummer Marcus Gilmore and the backstory is of interest: "I was in Marcus's band when I first moved to New York. On the first gig I played bass, and we played this. It was the same changes that are here but there was no melody. I had a really difficult time holding onto the tune, keeping my place, without some kind of melody in my head. On the next gig I ended up playing saxophone and I wrote a melody — I pieced it together from an improvisation I did. That's how it came out. I wrote the melody and he wrote pretty much everything underneath it."

The tune has a daunting form that Stephens breaks down as follows: "It's a bar of five, then six, then seven and eight — it's five lines of that with different changes every time. Somewhere in the middle the changes start going backwards, back to the beginning." Right after the solos, by Altura and Stephens, comes the full band in impressive unison, restating the theme in the most uncommon way: "Instead of playing the melody from lines one through five, we decided to play line one, then line one and two, then line one and two and three and so on, until the whole band comes in again for lines one through five. Then Bill solos as we repeat the fifth line. Joe Sanders was originally supposed to lay out until that last chorus, but he decided to play the entire melody, which I thought was genius."

**I'll Take My Chances**, mentioned earlier, came about while Stephens was "thinking heavily of Charlie Haden and Pat Metheny. I got a chance to hang with Charlie about a month ago. I wanted to write something that perhaps he would like or want to play

someday.” With a subtle South American tinge and romantic minor cadences, the tune invites Stephens, Clayton and Altura into a more straightforwardly lyrical zone as soloists.

**Weezy**, a brisk and involved burner, dates from Stephens’ time at the Monk Institute: “It was for my special someone at that point in time. I love Gerald’s solo on this. To me the tune is a display of the rhythm section, the lushness of it. I love the way the melody floats along. The texture of Bill’s cymbals and the guitar. It’s more of a ‘piece’ than a vehicle for improvisation. I’m thinking of writing a big band version of this tune. I’m in the middle of writing a few big band charts for a gig at Berklee next year. This would be a great one to mess around with.”

Clearly the obstacles aren’t stopping Dayna Stephens. In addition to studio triumphs like **I’ll Take My Chances**, he’s pursuing new avenues and landing major sideman spots: he played the Village Vanguard as a member of drum legend Al Foster’s quartet in early August 2013, and his work with such inventive younger artists as Pascal Le Boeuf and Linda Oh has elevated those bands and heightened their impact. He might be “taking his chances” on many levels, but the people who hire him know they’re getting a sure thing.

David R. Adler  
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