

Michael Rodriguez Julian Lage Aaron Parks Kiyoshi
Kitagawa Donald Edwards Raffi Garabedian

Dayna Stephens today is tomorrow



Criss Cross Jazz 1345

Criss 1345 CD

TODAY IS TOMORROW DAYNA STEPHENS

1. **SKYLARK**
(H. Carmichael) 6.44
2. **KWOOKED STWEET**
(D. Stephens) 6.37
3. **RADIO-ACTIVE EARWORM**
(D. Stephens) 5.55
4. **DE POIS DO AMOR, O VAZIO**
(R.C. Thomas) 8.19
5. **LOOSY GOOSY**
(D. Stephens) 4.46
6. **BLACK NARCISSUS**
(J. Henderson) 7.34
7. **HADEN'S LARGO**
(D. Stephens) 6.27
8. **HARD-BOILED WONDERLAND**
(A. Parks) 6.02
9. **THE ELITE**
(D. Stephens) 8.27
10. **CARTOON ELEMENT**
(A. Parks) 7.34

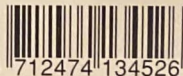
TOTAL TIME: 69.06

DAYNA STEPHENS tenor sax
MICHAEL RODRIGUEZ trumpet,
fluegelhorn (2, 6)

JULIAN LAGE guitar (4, 6, 7)
RAFFI GARABEDIAN tenor sax (3)
AARON PARKS piano
KIYOSHI KITAGAWA bass
DONALD EDWARDS drums

Produced by Gerry Teekens
Recording Engineer: Michael Marciano
Mixing: Max Bolleman
Mastering: The Masters
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Today Is Tomorrow

Cryptic as it might seem, the album title Today Is Tomorrow is about living in the moment. And that's a logical step for tenor saxophonist **Dayna Stephens**, whose acclaimed 2007 debut recording was called The Timeless Now. "When you really look at it, there's no such thing as time," Stephens remarks, citing the spiritual thought of J. Krishnamurti and Eckhard Tolle. "Today Is Tomorrow is another reminder for me that we still live in the same moment that created this universe. It puts me in a state of awe. Obviously music is another thing that puts you in that state."

A native of the Bay Area, Stephens moved to New York in 2004, but he's been shuttling between California and the East Coast for a number of years. After graduating from the famed Berkeley High he attended Boston's Berklee College of Music on scholarship. He typically devotes summers to teaching at the Stanford Jazz Workshop. From 2001-2003 he attended the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute, at the time based in Los Angeles. The names of his Monk Institute teachers speak for themselves: John Scofield, Dave Holland, Christian McBride, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, program director Terence Blanchard. These artists continue to shape Dayna's musical worldview and career path, above all by setting examples of consummate individuality.

Stephens's tenor voice is nothing if not unique: it's warm, wooly, unhurried, but also agile and intensely engaged. "I really love Lester Young and Ben Webster," he declares. "I love Charlie Rouse. My dad used to play that Monk album called *Monk*, a version of *Just You, Just Me*. He made this mixtape and that was the first song. Before I even started playing, that was the sound I heard on the saxophone. And then Sonny Rollins, specifically on The Bridge — his sound on that album is golden for me. Joe Lovano I remember hearing years ago as a kid at the Stanford Jazz Workshop. I sat in the front row just listening to that sound, with the bell in

front of my face. That sound knocked me over. But the first saxophonist I heard live was my grandfather, [the late] Elbert Lee Bullock. He was from Texas, played professionally in college, and he was a huge jazz fan, had a huge collection with a lot of blues players — Hank Crawford, Gene Ammons, the organists, the whole gamut."

Apart from saxophone influences, Stephens has also developed superb taste in band mates. He knew he'd have winning combinations on Today Is Tomorrow, even if the sidemen on this session had little to no previous contact. "Whenever I hear [pianist] **Aaron Parks**, I feel I always want to hear more," Dayna says. "He has a very unique way of playing eighth notes, his own swagger. He's not afraid to leave a lot of space and create anticipation. His approach strikes me as extremely mature. And his touch, his willingness to just go for it. You can tell he's going to his limits." Parks has appeared on **Criss Cross** dates with Will Vinson (Stockholm Syndrome, Criss 1330) and Mike Moreno (First In Mind, Criss 1338).

Bassist **Kiyoshi Kitagawa** makes his first-ever **Criss Cross** appearance here. "I've been playing with Kiyoshi since 2005 in Kenny Barron's group," Dayna continues, "and I remember him very well from my college days, listening to Kenny Garrett's Triology, which still blows me away." Stephens knows what he wants from bass players, for he too is a gigging bassist, with considerable finesse on his second instrument. "Initially you've just got to be the foundation, the rock of the band," Dayna maintains. "The color of what is played on top is completely dependent on what the bassist plays. Kiyoshi is not afraid to be that rock and also interact harmonically, to change what's happening. He's just right on, and everything he experiments with, I'm in love with."

Of the sought-after drummer **Donald Edwards**, Stephens says: "Aaron had played a gig or

two with Donald, but for me it had been years. I did a tour with him around 2007 with guitarist Rale Micic, also featuring Tom Harrell. I love Donald's playing and I can tell he's from the South, from Baton Rouge originally. I can feel that in his swing. I've done some playing with Idris Muhammad as well, and I can feel it. There's something about the South and the drums, and when I checked out Donald again, everything I heard was reaffirmed." Edwards returns to **Criss Cross** after appearances on Conrad Herwig's **A Jones for Bones Tones** (Criss 1297) and **Introducing Opus 5** (Criss 1339), the debut of a new supergroup with Seamus Blake, Alex Sipiagin and others.

Guitarist **Julian Lage** and trumpeter **Michael Rodriguez**, both newcomers to **Criss Cross** as well, play smaller but just as crucial roles. Lage, only in his early 20s, is a genuine rising star, a Grammy-nominated bandleader and a member of groups led by Gary Burton, Mark O'Connor, Taylor Eigsti and more. "Julian's tone is extremely unique, it's just gorgeous, and that was the number-one reason I wanted him on this record," says Stephens. "He's brilliant — I've learned a lot from this kid. He hipped me to Krishnamurti when he was just 17. He's hipped me to a lot of amazing perspectives on this music."

Rodriguez, one of the best trumpeters to emerge in the last 10 years, has racked up credits with Charlie Haden, Gonzalo Rubalcaba and many others. "Most recently we played together in Kenny Barron's quintet," Stephens comments. "I remember hearing Benny Golson talk about playing with Lee Morgan, and how they connected from the very first note. I felt that with Mike, so it wasn't a question."

The set begins with Hoagy Carmichael's **Skylark**. Stephens's flowing, modern-minded treatment dates back to his Monk Institute days (a vocal variant of it can be heard on the

self-titled 2005 debut of his friend and former classmate Gretchen Parlato). The tempo is a bit more upbeat than the usual ballad interpretations, and the straight-eighth bossa feel highlights Stephens and Parks to great advantage. "You hear what key the song is in, but it never goes to the 'one' chord," Dayna says of his arrangement. "It's always hinting at it, but it stays up in the sky."

Kwooked Sweet, a Stephens original, takes its progression (and its titular inspiration) from John Coltrane's demanding 1957 piece *Straight Street*, although the tempo here is far brighter. Rodriguez, in the first of his two appearances on the date, plays the theme in unison and follows Stephens in the solo rotation, right before Parks. "It's a burner, a tough one," Dayna offers. "It's one of those progressions that I try to keep in my memory. When I first started playing bass, I played *Straight Street* a lot with a saxophonist friend in the Bay Area. We used to start it off with this particular bass line, so I decided to take that line, expand it and write a completely different head." The bass line in question occurs at the very start, and again underneath Edwards's drum solo before the final melody.

Radio-Active Earworm, also by Stephens, creeps along with an indie-rock edge and a moody atmosphere. **Raffi Garabedian**, a former student of Dayna's, plays the second tenor sax line. "This is the last tune I wrote before the session," Dayna reveals. "I played it once with Walter Smith, and I just don't hear it without two tenors. Also, I always hear it featuring the piano, so there's no saxophone solo, just a piano solo. The way the chords move, the classical triadic nature of the tune, lends itself more to piano. I love Aaron's solo on this."

With **De Pois Do Amor, O Vazio**, Julian Lage makes his entrance. This obscure ballad ("After love, emptiness" in Portuguese) appears on Wayne Shorter's equally obscure 1971 album

Odyssey of Iska, one of Stephens's favorites. "Wayne's sound has had a big influence on me, but that influence didn't really come until later. He was one of the [admissions] judges at the Monk Institute, and then when he came for a week and I experienced his sound live, I was just haunted by it." The luxurious tempo, Lage's uncommonly pure guitar, the seamless and captivating harmony: all of it adds up to a standout performance. "It's really simple — the melody is just long notes," Stephens observes, "but you feel it's still a journey. It's like a long and beautiful walk, where you take your time and sit on each chord and really feel the movement."

Loosy Goosy, over *I Got Rhythm* changes, has a way of highlighting Stephens's key virtues as a tenor player. His unflappable calm on the torturous head is just a taste of what's to come. Parks seems to elaborate and comment on the theme during his two frequently ingenious choruses, setting up the dead-on tenor solo that follows. Kitagawa plays a walking solo as well. "I wrote this tune my first year in college," Stephens recalls, "as a technical exercise to learn a certain harmonic approach to resolving chords. It was originally played much slower than this." About his cool, restrained delivery on fast tempos, he says: "Andrew Speight, a fellow saxophonist, once told me that first of all you have to play soft. And you have to be calm and effortless, not think too much about what you're going to do. I'm a huge fan of Brad Mehldau, another guy who can really do that. At any tempo, he's completely at peace."

Lage and Rodriguez return for *Black Narcissus*, a masterpiece waltz by the late Joe Henderson. Stephens alters the harmony but only up to a point. "When I reharmonize a tune I don't want to change the essence, and if possible I don't change a note of the melody. We're really just dressing the melody, and I don't want it to take away from that beauty. But I always felt the beginning part of this could be interesting with a little more movement harmonically,

doing something with the sustained note." After a brief guitar intro, trumpet states the initial theme, and on the repeat Stephens lays down a counterline, propelled by Edwards's sudden entrance on drums. Rodriguez soars with the first solo; Stephens and Lage respond with unpredictable lyricism and intensity before Edwards takes charge on the outro.

Haden's Largo is Stephens's way of affirming a simple and direct statement: "Charlie Haden is my hero." In fact, it was Haden who inspired Stephens to buy a bass of his own, after a visit to Haden's class at the California Institute of the Arts (Cal Arts). "[Charlie] always plays the most meaningful stuff that you can imagine," Dayna says. "He's not afraid to repeat notes, or pedal — it's a way of interacting without getting in the way, and really transforming the music. It's so unique, and his beat is as wide as this room. I can hear him now, saying, 'Man, just make it beautiful.'" Sitting at the piano one day, Stephens came up with this stirring homage, another showcase for Lage. "It probably wrote itself in 20 minutes," Dayna recalls. "It's 11 bars, really short, so it's just about the beauty of the tune and the interaction of the guys."

Hard-Boiled Wonderland, by Aaron Parks, gets its title from Haruki Murakami's 1985 novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*. "I heard it on a bootleg of a gig Aaron did at the Jazz Gallery, maybe in 2004 or 2005, with Rodney Green and Walter Smith. It kind of reminds me of a Chick Corea tune — I love those short-format, difficult-changes kind of tunes. This is really dense with harmony, and the harmonies move in unorthodox ways. So I told Aaron I wanted to do it." Stephens achieves that characteristic calm on the melody going in, navigating complex rhythmic hits with the band before turning in a fierce and swinging solo, followed by excellent Parks.

The Elite harks back to the 2008 Democratic primary, and now-President Obama's widely

lambasted “clinging to guns and religion” remarks. “They jumped on him for being an elitist,” Stephens says. “In any other context, ‘elite’ is a positive thing, like ‘elite fighters.’ When we’re looking for someone to lead us out of complete darkness, why is it bad for someone to be at the top of their game? I had never really heard that term being thrown around in such a negative way. I wrote this tune in anger about it. The guy can’t win — still can’t win, actually.” Stephens describes Edwards’s march-like snare as establishing a “patriotic vibe,” but the tune evolves into more of a ballad, with assertive solos by Stephens, Parks and Kitagawa.

Cartoon Element, another Parks composition, is an anagram of “Ornette Coleman,” and the snaky, tuneful, wildly modulating melody certainly does that great figure justice. “For the solos, it just goes where it goes,” says Stephens. “It starts off in time. Aaron’s solo breaks down and morphs into me coming in, then that morphs into the bass solo.” In the flow from swing to rubato and back again, the group is at its most experimental. And yet this natural give-and-take is at the heart of every track on the record.

“I’m someone who likes mistakes,” Stephens says in conclusion, detailing the guiding spirit that brought him to **Today Is Tomorrow**. “I like unintended things that take you in a direction you don’t know. What is improvisation with no mistakes?” And what, moreover, is technical prowess without the spontaneity that drives music-making on the highest level? To his ongoing credit, Stephens makes “mistakes,” but they’re hardly the fumbling kind. They’re opportunities, ways of deepening connection, and they’re part of what makes this tenor player one of the most compelling musicians of his generation.

David R. Adler

New York, December 2011