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# Jonathan Finlayson: The Chess Player

Trumpeter takes on his highly anticipated debut

UPDATED APRIL 26, 2019 – DAVID R. ADLER

Anyone who's heard Steve Coleman and Five Elements in the past dozen years has come to grips with trumpeter Jonathan Finlayson, a player with studious poise and formidable chops. From *Alternate Dimension Series I* and *Resistance Is Futile*, his earliest Five Elements dates, to the sustained brilliance of Coleman's 2013 Pi release, *Functional Arrhythmias*, Finlayson has proved indispensable to one of music's most rhythmically demanding ensembles. In recent years he's also been called upon for Steve Lehman's quintet and octet, Tomas Fujiwara's the Hook Up, Mary Halvorson's quintet (now septet as well) and other influential units.

But with *Moment and the Message* (Pi), Finlayson, 31, has at last debuted as a leader. Sicilian Defense, his quintet, takes its name from a maneuver in chess. The track "Ruy Lopez," also named for a chess opening, assigns rhythmic values to the game pieces and translates their movements into music. "It's kind of a prototype," Finlayson says. "The improvisation shows the conversation of the black and white pieces. So when [guitarist] Miles [Okazaki] starts and then I play, I'm playing the black pieces and he's playing the white pieces. At the very end of the form we switch. Same thing for the piano and bass."

Okazaki, a colleague in Five Elements who shares Finlayson's passion for chess, remarks, "Jonathan's chess game has the same balance as his musical personality, in my opinion. When I play him I think everything is going well until I realize he has a subtle strategy that is ultimately crushing. When I hear playbacks from recordings and gigs with him, it's kind of similar-things he did in the moment went through under the radar, but upon closer listening you realize he made some very slick moves."

Tweaking instrumentation over the years, Finlayson arrived at his current lineup with

Okazaki on guitar, David Virelles on piano, Keith Witty on upright bass and Damion Reid on drums. The music is tightly composed, grooving and supple, with intersecting themes and solos supported by counterpoint more often than by comping in the ordinary sense. "I think about counterpoint all the time because I hate things that move together," Finlayson declares. "I like variation, I like things to be independent. I'm a huge fan of Bach. I remember the first time I recognized 'imitation' in a piece. I thought, 'That's how I want my music to move.' The spirit of that is there at least, if not in such a strict format."

A native of Oakland, Calif., Finlayson arrived at a new school in fifth grade and showed zero interest in his required music classes. "A class or two went by and they were like, 'Mr. Finlayson, you need to choose an instrument or we're going to have to call your parents.' I was like, 'Oh my goodness. Music. Ugh.' What was presented to me was the trumpet or the choir. Well, that's a no-brainer. This instrument has three keys. I thought, 'This is going to be easy. Look at this thing!'"

Needless to say he was wrong, and yet Finlayson found himself drawn in. He performed in a district-wide concert and met Ambrose Akinmusire, now a famed fellow trumpeter, who'd also go on to work with Steve Coleman. During a youth workshop with saxophonist Jessica Jones, the 13-year-old trumpet pals had a chance to observe a Coleman rehearsal up close. "We were sitting there, not having a clue what was going on," Finlayson says. "No clue. None at all."

At least one more youthful encounter with Coleman didn't light a spark, but trumpet lessons with local veteran Robert Porter began to make all the difference. "Ambrose and I really got into acquiring vinyl through him," Finlayson remembers. "Part of the education was looking for the vinyl, seeking it out, appreciating it and then learning about the music, the history." Finlayson still shops for vinyl in thrift stores on the Upper West Side, near his home in Harlem. He arrived at our interview with a stack of Pierre Boulez LPs, a lucky haul.

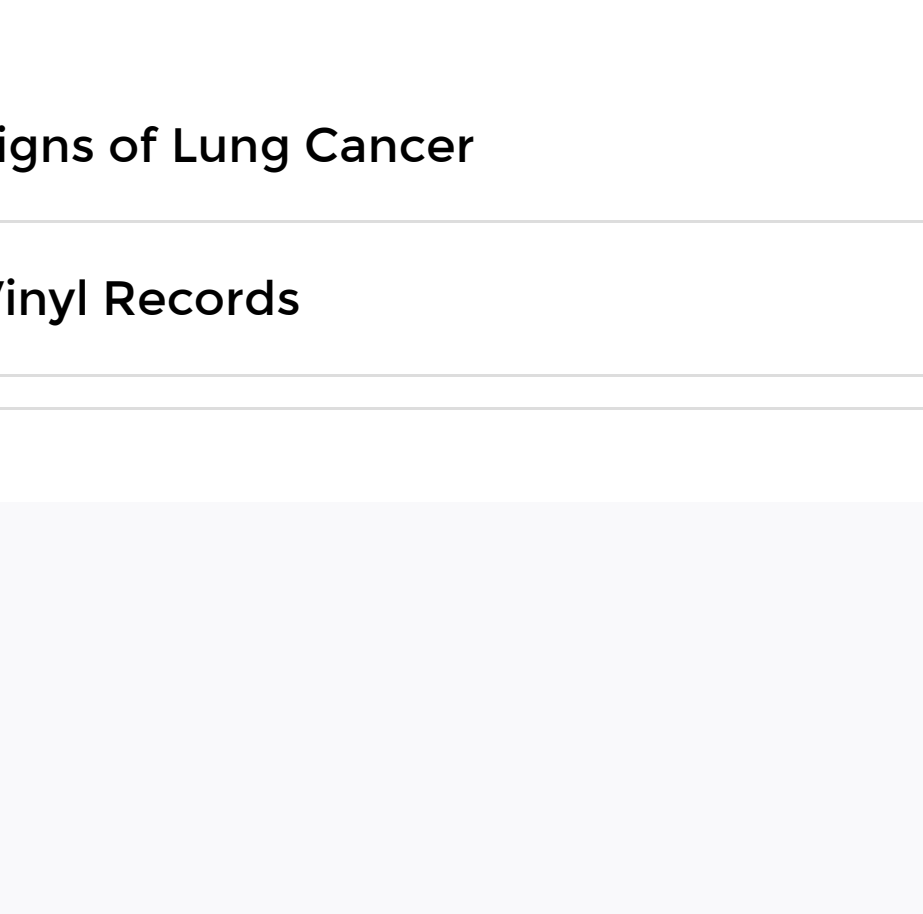
By the time Coleman held a clinic at Berkeley High School in 2000, Finlayson and Akinmusire were ready. Coleman writes via e-mail: "I had gone there with [bassist] Anthony Tidd and [drummer] Dafnis Prieto. We asked if any students wanted to sit in, and Jonathan and Ambrose jumped up. I was impressed with their playing, considering their ages [17], and so I invited them over to my house to talk about music.... I'm looking for people who are serious and have the potential to make a contribution to this music. I'm also looking to learn from these people."

These experiences have pushed Finlayson to seek a personal voice, informed by deep and wide-ranging interests. While "Ruy Lopez" is the only chess-related work on *Moment and the Message*, there's a Phoenician theme running through "Tyre" and "Carthage," a debt to Nabokov in "Lo Haze" (short for Dolores Haze in *Lolita*), an *Iliad* reference with "Scaean Gates" and even a Buckminster Fuller neologism (via Carlos Castaneda), "Tensegrity," the beautiful acoustic guitar track.

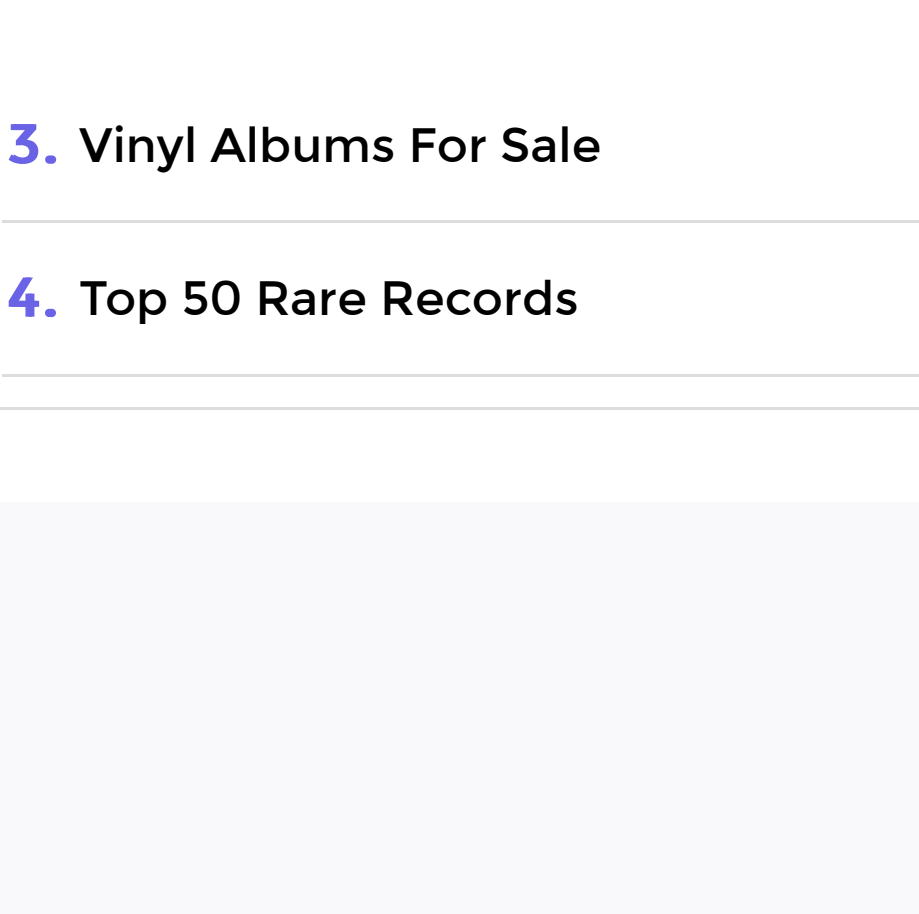
For all its heated competitive lore, Okazaki describes chess as "a creative construction between two people," and that ethos prevails in Finlayson's band without doubt. But there's also a whiff of battle: "It's going to be a fight if you see [the Sicilian Defense] played," Finlayson remarks. "I like that, because as black you are at a disadvantage when you play the game. You're a tempo behind white, so you're defending. The Sicilian is almost like, 'I'm fighting right out the block. Instead of passively waiting to equalize, I'm fighting right now.' I really like that attitude."

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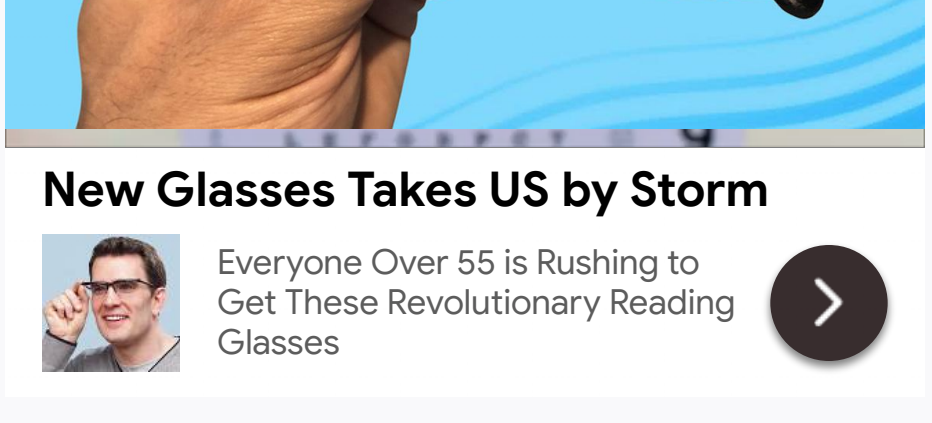
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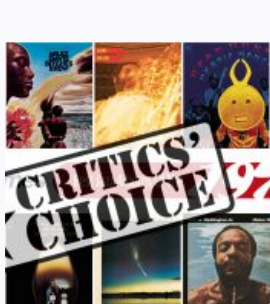


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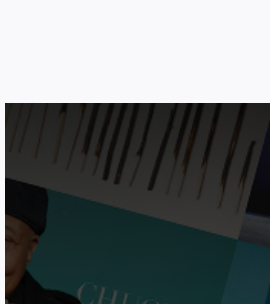
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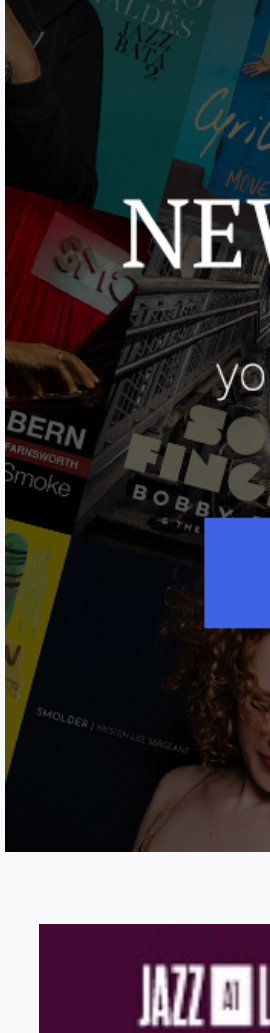
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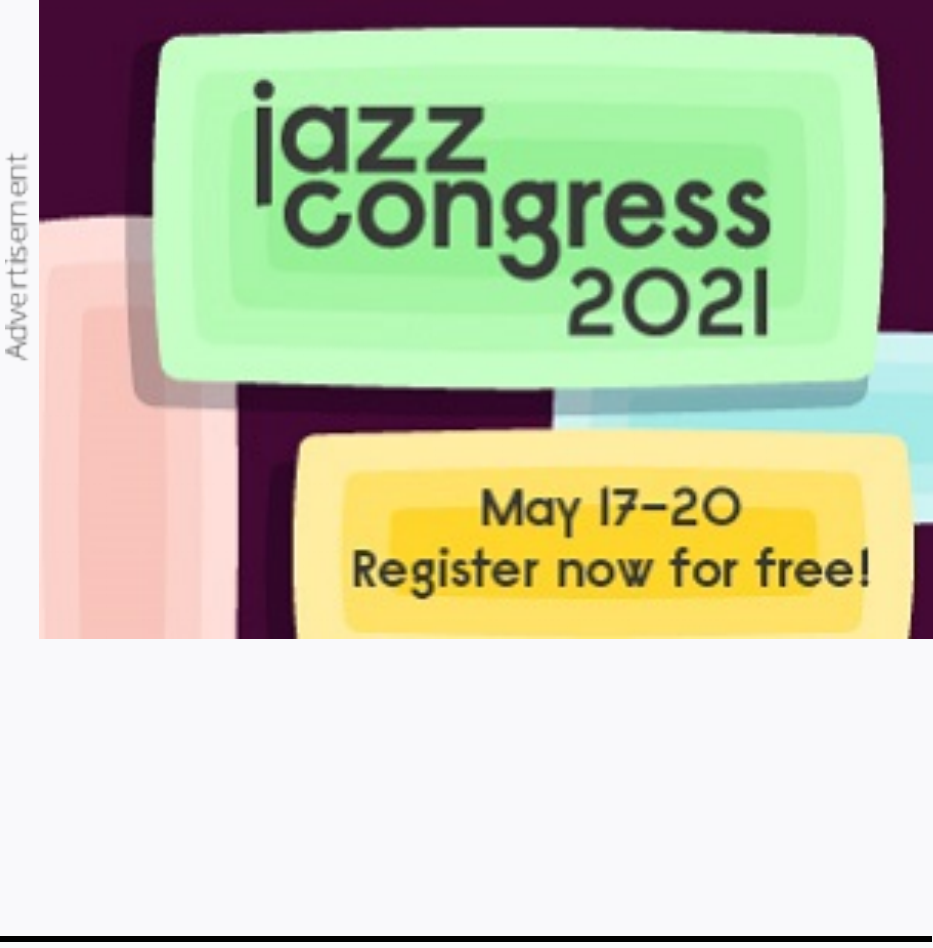


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