

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, smiling and looking towards the right. She is seated at a piano, with her right hand resting on the keys and her left hand near the base of the keyboard. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top. The background is a textured brick wall. The lighting is soft, creating a warm atmosphere. The text "KRIS DAVIS TAKES STOCK OF HER JOURNEY AS" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

KRIS DAVIS TAKES STOCK OF HER JOURNEY AS

By David R. Adler

Good Citizen

PIANIST, COMPOSER, IMPROVISER, BANDBLEADER, CO-LEADER AND COLLABORATOR, NOT TO MENTION NEW PARENT

It's no small honor to land a six-night residency at the Stone, a dark and cramped room in Lower Manhattan that nonetheless remains one of the world's leading avant-garde music venues. Recent invitees have included Bill Laswell, Joe Lovano, Steve Coleman, Tim Berne and Uri Caine. When we met up with pianist Kris Davis, she was preparing for her own six nights in residence, from June 24-29. To look over the lineups was to think anew about her prolific output and steady ascent as one of the most distinctive musicians of her time.

Davis was planning a solo piano set along the lines of her CDs *Aerial Piano* and *Massive Threads*. She would lead the quintet heard on her 2013 Clean Feed release *Capricorn Climber*. She'd also play in bands led by drummer Tom Rainey, bassist Kermit Driscoll and saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock. "On Friday I'm doing a pared-down version of *Infrasound*," Davis said, referring to the band with four bass clarinets that premiered early this year at Brooklyn's Roulette. "On Sunday, Ingrid, [guitarist] Mary Halvorson and I are playing trio. I call that *Death Rattle* because I wanted something so unfeminine. We have a really cool connection between the three of us, though it ended up being kind of tonal and pretty. Perfect, *Death Rattle*!"

We're at a coffee shop in Brooklyn's Kensington neighborhood, where Davis moved only a month ago with her husband, guitarist Nate Radley, and their 10-month-old son, Benjamin. She and Radley, a member of *Infrasound*, tied the knot almost two years ago. It's a new life chapter for Davis, and what better way to welcome it than her 2014 trio effort, *Waiting for You to Grow*. Dedicated to "this little man," as Davis calls Benjamin in the notes, the album features her with Rainey and bassist John Hébert in a turbulent, contemplative follow-up to their 2010 release, *Good Citizen*. "On the first trio CD I had this concept to make it almost like a pop record, where the tunes are really short," Davis says. "On the new record the tunes are much longer and explore multiple areas. I just wanted to write and not have any preconceived ideas."

BORN IN VANCOUVER in 1980 and raised in the suburbs of Calgary, Davis began classical piano studies at age 6. Her classical background continues to inform her work in fundamental ways. But in junior high and high school she noticed that “all the popular kids played in the jazz band,” so she joined too, and her teacher introduced her to *My Funny Valentine* and *‘Four’ & More* by the Miles Davis Quintet. “That’s where it started,” Davis says. “By the eighth grade I knew I wanted to be a jazz musician.”

Davis moved east after high school to attend the University of Toronto, majoring in jazz piano. “I always knew I wanted to move to New York, so it was kind of a stepping stone,” she says. “But it was four years of bliss, just playing all the time.” Studying with Brian Dickinson and Gary Williamson, Davis began to improve her technique by leaps and bounds. “I’d been learning the repertoire but not really learning how to play the piano,” she recalls. “[Gary] had exercises where you’d drop your hands on the piano, trying to get the bounce right. A lot of students had pain, so he dealt with that as well. It was really funny: I’d come back after a week and drop my hands on the piano and he’d say, ‘Nope, that’s not it.’ Same thing a week later, for a year. And then one day he said, ‘Yep, that’s it.’ As soon as I did it, I knew. And it totally changed the way I play and approach the piano. I still use all those exercises to warm up.” She’s currently planning two books of original etudes—one for kids, the other more advanced.

Davis’ two biggest piano influences early on were Herbie Hancock and Keith Jarrett. “For a long time I just transcribed like crazy,” she says. “With Keith, it was his melodic approach to playing standards. I transcribed a lot of the trio stuff. It felt like his solos were one long melody. That was always a big influence for me, even if it veered off into other things.”

Despite her focus on sounds outside the jazz mainstream, Davis insists on the importance of learning standard repertoire and playing on changes. “When I first was looking at colleges,” she recalls, “people would say, ‘Avoid schools that teach the tradition. That music is dying; there’s no point.’ Now I believe more than ever it’s super-important to experience that. Learning how to play time in a certain way, learning how to improvise with certain tools, being able to connect with someone over a tune and relate to a tune: Harmonically and linearly it all affects the way that you play improvised music. You want to check out as much music as possible. It will widen what you can draw from.”

JUST BEFORE COLLEGE in 1997 Davis attended the Banff summer jazz workshop for the first time. She returned three years later to study with then program director Kenny Werner and others. “That’s where I met [saxophonist] Tony Malaby, [trumpeter] Dave Ballou, [drummer] Owen Howard, [pianist] Angelica Sanchez...,” Davis remembers. “It was hard—I’d only really played standards and worked on traditional repertoire and language. At Banff everyone was playing improvised music, so I felt like a fish out of water. But I definitely knew I wanted to explore this more.”



▲ Davis debuts *Infrasound* at Roulette in Brooklyn on Jan. 6

Her 2003 debut recording, *Lifespan*, involved six musicians in all, but it established the sound of what would become a working quartet with Malaby, bassist Eivind Opsvik and drummer Jeff Davis (Davis' husband at the time). That band put out two more recordings, each more exploratory and sonically extreme than the last. "I'm really glad I documented that time because it's not the direction I went afterwards," Davis says of the lyrical *Lifespan*. "It's a starting point, and you can begin to hear these things, where they might go. *The Slightest Shift* [2006] was a big change in my writing and improvising: less chordal or from the tradition, more exploring the entire piano, more of a linear approach among the quartet. And *Rye Eclipse* [2008] is an extension of that."

"The outcome of all that [with the quartet] was so incredibly important for my development," Tony Malaby says. "And I was the older one. I get nostalgic thinking about that little bump in time there with Kris. It was a very powerful opening that we found each other in, at the right moment. We were dealing with free improvisation but still being very compositional—that was the beginning of that for all of us. Kris did some amazing things within that, things that jarred me: how she would use repetition, not just space. The majority of the people I was playing with were moving through ideas in a much quicker way, and all of a sudden she puts the brakes on that; she's going for these long arcs. So where we were developing 10 or 20 ideas, Kris was developing one long one. She developed a unique way of framing stuff within that pocket of people."

Davis' association with Malaby took a fresh turn in 2011 when she wrote all the arrangements for his *Novela*, a vicious-sounding

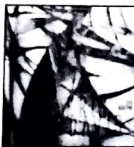


LISTEN TO KRIS

A BRIEF GUIDE TO HER BEST RECORDINGS

BY SHAUN BRADY

KRIS DAVIS



Rye Eclipse (Fresh Sound New Talent, 2008)

Davis seemed to hone her personal voice with this, her third release. She's at once more focused and more adventurous on this session with saxophonist Tony Malaby, bassist Eivind Opsvik and drummer Jeff Davis, all of whom had been on both of Davis' prior CDs. The album sets the pianist's pattern of building delicate structures and then destroying them with explosive improvisations.

PARADOXICAL FROG



Paradoxical Frog (Clean Feed, 2010)

Even on its debut, this collective trio is already able to communicate across a wide range of dynamic terrain. Davis, saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock and drummer Tyshawn Sorey are gifted improvisers whose ability to articulate complex inventions at a blistering pace is matched only by their willingness to indulge in silence and serenity.

KERMIT DRISCOLL



Reveille (19/8, 2011)

Davis shows off her startling versatility on the long-awaited debut by bassist Driscoll. Playing on half of the album's 10 tracks, she meshes surprisingly well with a band of his old friends (guitarist Bill Frisell and drummer Vinnie Colaiuta) while never losing her singular voice in the process. Davis' chamber abstractions provide an alluring tension to the album's expansive folksiness.

KRIS DAVIS



Massive Threads (Thirsty Ear, 2013)

A solo outing is typically an opportunity for a pianist to pare back, to show off an intimate and introspective side. Not so for Davis' enthralling *Massive Threads*. That solemn side is certainly present, as on the harrowing "Desolation and Despair." But Davis can be as intense when unaccompanied as when parrying with fellow improvisers, whether evoking electronic loops on "Ten Exorcists" or a player piano run amok on the title track, or deconstructing Monk's "Evidence."

KRIS DAVIS TRIO



Waiting for You to Grow
(Clean Feed, 2014)

The title of Davis' latest is addressed to her newborn son, who shared a common gestation period with the album. If young Benjamin could hear this music being created from the womb, then he'll certainly grow up with an acutely developed ear. Davis' trio with bassist John Hébert and drummer Tom Rainey explores intricate architecture with dramatic and gratifying tonal shifts.

but achingly beautiful Clean Feed session for seven horns plus piano and drums. But recently another saxophone ally has loomed the largest: Ingrid Laubrock, slated to appear in no fewer than eight of Davis' 12 upcoming sets at the Stone. One of their shared projects is Paradoxical Frog, a trio with drummer Tyshawn Sorey, with two releases to its credit. ("We shortened it to P-Frog," Laubrock says.) Another is the LARK quartet, co-led with Rainey and trumpeter Ralph Alessi, with an eponymous 2013 release on Chris Speed's Skirl label. And another is Laubrock's quintet Anti-House, which plans to record again this year (Hébert and Rainey, Davis' trio-mates, play in the group).

"I've felt a kindred spirit with Kris from the first moment," Laubrock says. "She's super quick-minded and she has a real arranging-on-the-spot kind of skill. She's such an accomplished musician that she has a lot of skills, but she would never make it about her and her skills in a playing situation." Bassist Eric Revis, who recruited Davis for his stunning 2013 trio release, *City of Asylum*, with the great Andrew Cyrille on drums, agrees: "Musicians, we get into this ego shit, like, 'I know this, let me do this.' Kris has tremendous facility and knowledge but they're tools to express this innate love of music and making the bandstand happen. Her knowledge, it feeds her in the best way. We all should aspire to that, where all of the shit that you know is feeding rather than dictating what you do."

Davis met Revis and Cyrille at the *City of Asylum* session. They'd never played together before. "We just went into it," Revis says. "Everybody's path was converging. To call it a hunch is too frivolous—I knew it was going to happen. It was rolling the dice but it was pretty much a sure thing. Later we did a gig at the Jazz Gallery and Branford [Marsalis] showed up with his horn. He said, 'Hey, man, what are we playing?' I said, 'Just come up!' And he was blown away [by Davis]."

IN 2012 Davis completed a master's degree in classical composition at the City College of New York. "There were a lot of changes going on in my life and I needed a focus, something new," she says. "I had post-tonal theory classes that were really great. A big part of that is analyzing intervals based on numbers. I use that a lot now when I'm writing."

Already in the *Novela* arrangements there's evidence of Davis' increasingly confident pen and her cultivation of a broader palette. Years earlier her studies with pianist Jim McNeely led her to the BMI Jazz Composers Workshop, but she still felt unsure of her large-ensemble chops after the experience. With *Novela*, Davis explains, "Finally I had the chance to work with a group and do it a few times, and I thought, 'Oh, this can actually work.' I learned a ton just from concentrating on one group and having them play the music regularly."

Through a grant from the Utah-based Shifting Foundation, Davis launched *Infrasound*, her project with Ben Goldberg, Oscar Noriega, Andrew Bishop and Joachim Badenhorst on bass clarinets (and various doubles), Gary Versace on accordion and organ, Radley on guitar and Jim Black on drums. Their album *Save Your Breath* is anticipated in spring of 2015. Produced by Shifting's David Breskin, this music combines low-register thickness from the clarinets with



▲ Davis (left) and Ingrid Laubrock at the Stone in Manhattan in June

Black's rocking strength and an organ-guitar pairing almost reminiscent of Jan Hammer with John Abercrombie. "Whirly Swirly," *Infrasound*'s reworking of the leadoff track from *Waiting for You to Grow*, is a standout: Versace turns the loosely interpreted bassline of the trio version into something firmly grooving and in-the-pocket, even if wildly abstract in the end.

Davis' solo playing reveals just as much brilliance and sonic imagination. *Massive Threads* finds her working with complex rhythmic cycles and prepared-piano timbres, drawing on classical influences from Liszt to Morton Feldman, Ligeti, Berio and Nan-carrow. In her way, she's internalizing lessons from McNeely—who once urged her, "What about the rest of the piano?"—and Benoit Delbecq, a prepared-piano mastermind, who taught her briefly about his methods during a Paris stay in 2005.

Davis composed "Massive Threads," the title track, for a six-piano event at the Bang on a Can Marathon. "So if you think of all the strings and everything, it was massive," she says. "I wanted to do it as a solo piece, and overdub one other version on top of it in some of the sections so it has that kind of flailing piano effect."

Another major composer rears his head on *Massive Threads*, and aesthetically he very much belongs: Thelonious Monk. Davis' "Evidence" starts out Feldman-esque, slowly hovering—"more intervallic in the harmonic approach," she says, "so even though the root movement is still there it almost sounds like it isn't." She also brings a relaxed and spikey eloquence to "Gallop's Gallop" on *City of Asylum*, as well as "Reflections" on Tom Rainey's engrossing new standards album, *Obbligato*.

"Reflections" resurfaced on a gig at Cornelia Street Café in mid-June, the debut of bassist Michael Formanek's Elusion Trio with Davis and drummer Ches Smith. With her Stone residency less than two weeks away, Davis found time to grapple impressively with Formanek's challenging original music. The Monk tune was a detour, assuringly familiar, though no less an occasion for spontaneous discovery. Watching her go to work, it was easy to see what Andrew Cyrille meant when he said via phone two days later (leaning on the word "excellent"): "I can tell you this, that Kris has a very clear sense of direction, with excellent technique, to articulate whatever she wants to say." **JT**