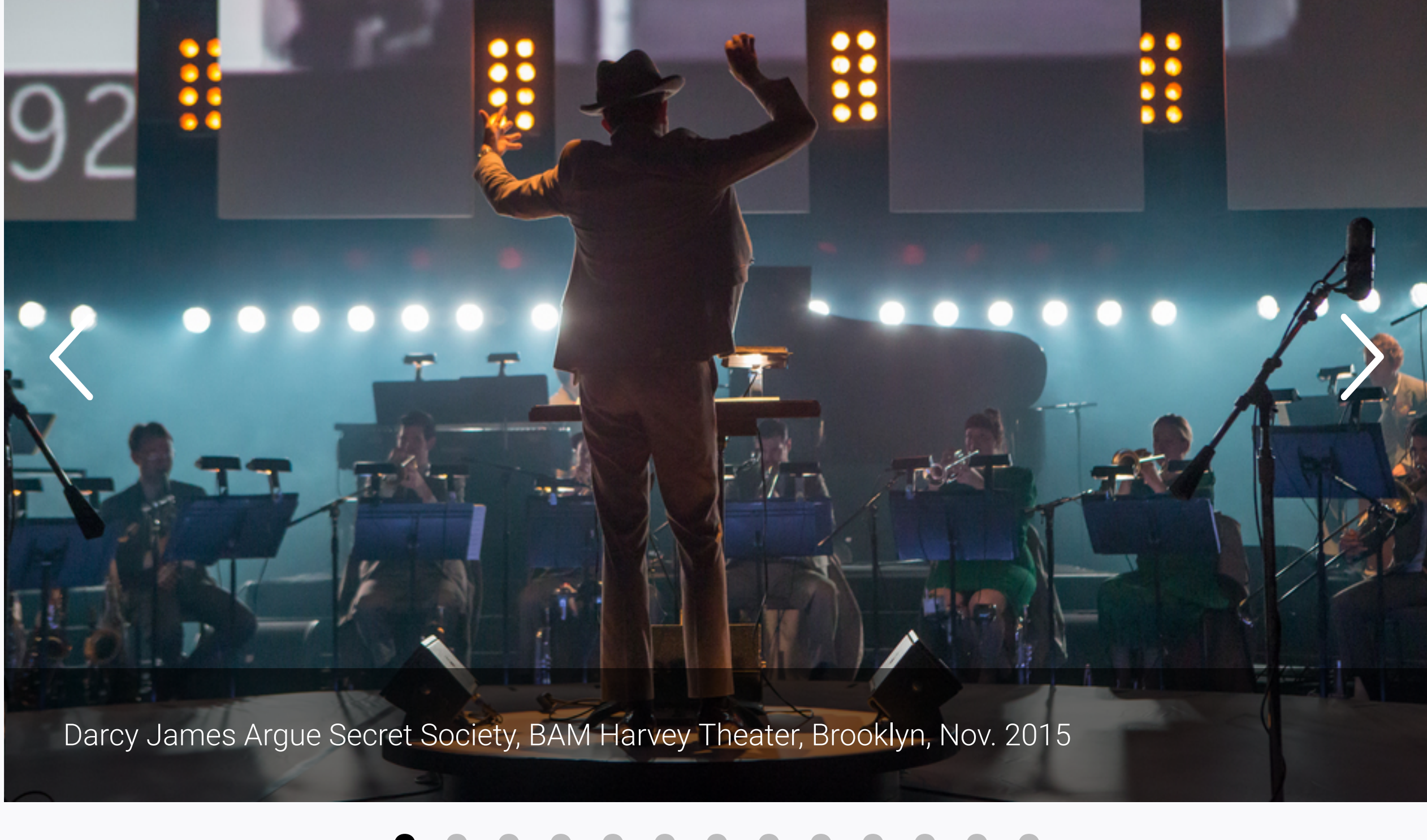


Home > Reviews > Darcy James Argue, Darcy James Argue's Secret Society, Real Enemies > Review: Darcy James Argue's Secret Society's "Real Enemies"

# Review: Darcy James Argue's Secret Society's "Real Enemies"

Brooklyn premiere of multimedia work inspired by conspiracy theories

UPDATED APRIL 25, 2019 — DAVID R. ADLER



Darcy James Argue Secret Society, BAM Harvey Theater, Brooklyn, Nov. 2015

In promo blasts, composer Darcy James Argue has always referred to his bandmates in Secret Society as “co-conspirators.” It was perhaps inevitable that this tongue-in-cheek motif would blossom into an elaborately staged multimedia work inspired by conspiracy theories, “Real Enemies,” which runs Nov. 18-22 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater.

Taking its title from Kathryn S. Olmsted’s 2009 book *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, Argue’s piece was co-conceived with writer and director Isaac Butler and film designer Peter Nigrini. The execution was impeccable: Argue’s 18-piece band roared and whispered through 12 brutally dissonant yet often beautiful movements, with the leader standing in the middle of a large doomsday clock and the band arrayed around him in a semicircle. The funky, swinging, sometimes Latin-tinged music, the minimal choreography, the lighting and scenery (by Maruti Evans), even the band’s old-school suits, trench coats, fedoras and aqua-tinted dresses (costumes by Sydney Maresca): All of it was unrelentingly creepy.

Soloists Tim Ries (alto saxophone), John Ellis (tenor saxophone), Nadjie Noordhuis and Matt Holman (flugelhorns), Ingrid Jensen (trumpet), Adam Birnbaum (piano) and many more took their virtuosic turns in the spotlight at roughly 4 o’clock and 8 o’clock. Argue, working idiosyncratically with 12-tone methods in his eeriest and most multifaceted piece to date, expanded yet again the textural and emotional vocabulary of the modern big band.

The political thrust of the piece was highly ambiguous for the first three-quarters of the show, and this was perhaps a flaw. Above the band as a backdrop were 15 small square-shaped video screens flickering with images drawn from conspiracist lore: the ‘80s crack epidemic and Iran-Contra, the JFK and MLK assassinations, UFOs, chemtrails, the moon landing and so forth. It’s all catnip, of course, for the conspiracy theorist, who could well be fooled into thinking this is itself a conspiracist show. But Argue and Butler do not endorse the theories; they are pursuing, in Butler’s words, “an inquiry into belief itself.” There’s an air of impartiality as the show explores irrationalism bred of rational distrust toward government (spurred by anticommunist dirty tricks, CIA experiments, campaign finance bribery, surveillance and the like).

Then as the piece winds down, we hear a long voiceover in a sinister sci-fi monotone, quoting from Olmsted’s *Real Enemies* as well as Richard Hofstadter’s landmark 1964 study *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Here at last is a withering critique of “the paranoid,” a person inflicted with a “dread disease,” an unhinged belief that “history is a conspiracy.”

On the surface these beliefs are amusing, but “Real Enemies” doesn’t fully address their toxicity. In part this is deliberate. Butler has spoken about his omission of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a founding tract of modern Jew-hatred: “I thought indulging in something that openly racist would derail the piece.” That’s probably true, though as a result the political context envisioned by “Real Enemies” seems incomplete.

Anti-Semitism has proved an integral part of the 9/11 Truth movement, for instance, and by now “truthers” attach themselves to every terrorist event as it occurs (most recently asserting, without evidence, that the Paris attacks were conducted by Israel, or that Israel is funding ISIS). “Real Enemies” does touch on government’s use of conspiracy theories for disinformation; this is nakedly true today in the case of the Russian and Iranian regimes, whose English-language broadcast outlets (RT and Press TV, respectively) are sometimes foolishly cited and legitimized by people on the left. These may be matters beyond the scope of a big-band concert, not to mention a review of one. But they’re deeply disturbing and thus vitally important.

Originally Published November 19, 2015

2020 Best Headphones

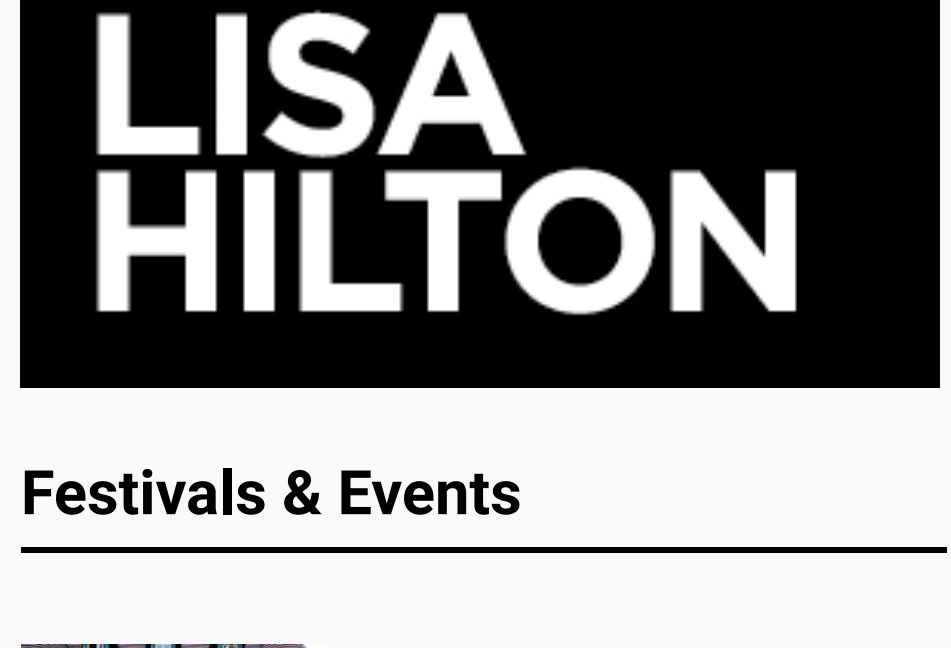
Best Quality Headphones

1. Best Sounding Speakers

2. Best Stereo Speakers

3. Top 10 Earbud Headphones

4. Rare Vinyl Records



## Festivals & Events

**Dec 31**  
From 9:00 PM to 11:00 PM EST  
Pink Martini: Good Riddance 2020!

**Dec 18 - Feb 21**  
From 12:00 AM to 11:59 PM EST  
Marcus Roberts, the Modern Jazz Generation, and American Symphony Orchestra: *United We Play*

**Jan 6**  
From 6:30 PM to 8:00 PM EST  
[INSIDE] THE JAZZ NOTE Guest Artist Series: “50 Years of Weather Report” Hosted by Christian McBride  
Montclair, New Jersey

SEE MORE

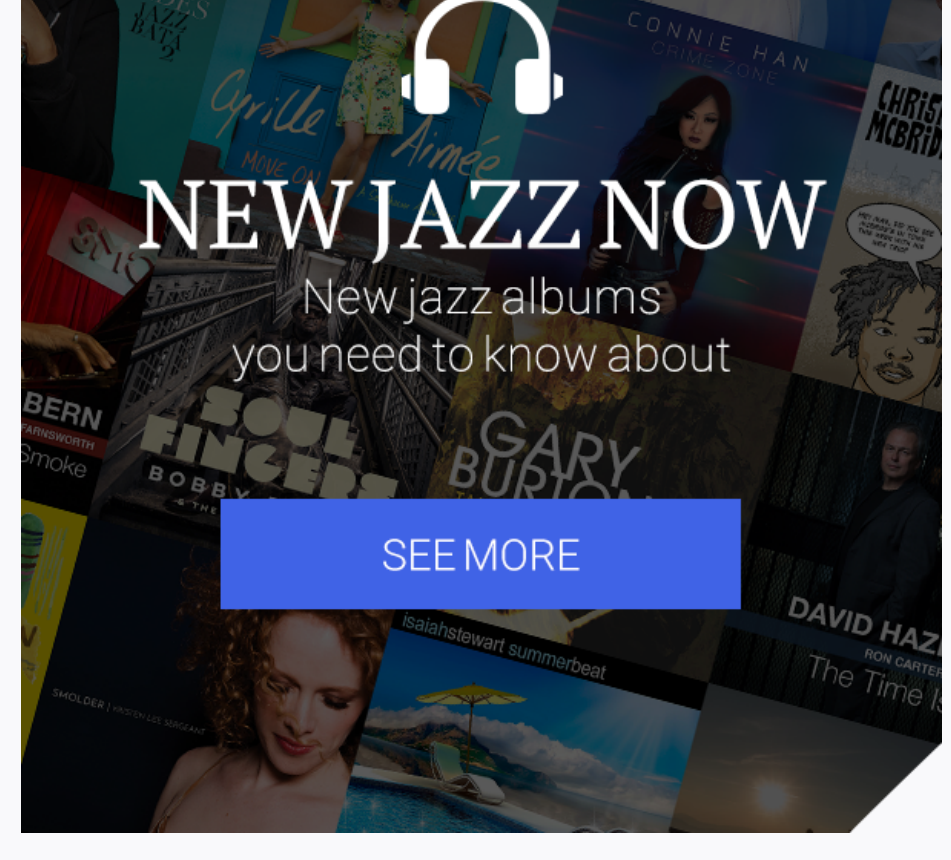
## Editor's Picks

**LISTS**  
**10 Best Jazz Albums of the 1970s: Critics' Picks**  
What better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary...

**ASHLEY HOMESTORE**  
**Holiday Whimsical Christmas Embroidered...**  
\$43.99 ~~\$103.99~~ It's all about having fun at the holidays and nothing expresses this better than...

**SPEAKIN' MY PIECE WITH DEKEL BOR**  
**Speakin' My Piece with Dekel Bor**  
JazzTimes, in association with Ropeadope Records,...

**PROFILES**  
**The Changing Nature of Protest in Jazz**  
What we went to offer is a positive notion, a...



## Related Posts

**The Port-au-Prince Jazz Festival: A Triumph in Haiti**  
On January 10, 2010, an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale struck Haiti, destroying much of its capital city, Port-au-Prince. Ten years later, with two ... [Read More](#)

**Winter Jazzfest 2020 in 30 Snapshots**  
There’s no way to cover Winter Jazzfest in its entirety—11 days of performances, talks, and other events at 21 venues in two New York City ... [Read More](#)

**Jazztopad Festival: From Poland, with Swing**  
The Polish city of Wrocław—population 640,000—doesn’t have a very robust jazz scene, but for 10 days this past November it was transformed into one of ... [Read More](#)

**Live Review: Umbria Jazz Winter #27**  
Orvieto, in the dead center of the Italian peninsula, is a perfect oval hill town right out of central casting, perched majestically 1,000 feet above ... [Read More](#)

## JazzTimes Newsletter

America's jazz resource, delivered to your inbox

SIGN UP FOR OUR FREE NEWSLETTER