

Citizen Caine



GOOD LUCK CATCHING PIANIST URI CAINE AT HIS home in New York. It's early November, and while sitting down to brunch not far from his Upper West Side neighborhood, Caine speaks of his recent itinerary: solo piano arrangements of Mahler in Beijing, duo gigs in France and Italy with trumpeter Paolo Fresu, treatments of Brahms in Berlin with the Konzerthausorchester. Soon he'd be heading to Helsinki to revisit his Goldberg Variations project, collaborating with the new music group Avanti; then to Madrid to perform his biblically inspired "Lamentations of Jeremiah"; then to Wroclaw, Poland, to unveil a string quartet with piano and drums (featuring his trio mate Ben Perowsky). In Rome he was slated to undertake "Nasdaq Match 0.2" by Fabio Cifariello Ciardi.

"[Fabio] takes the stock market and programs different stocks into different instrumental groups," Caine marvels, "and as the soloist I have to try to influence the market to go up or down. The guy's crazy. I keep asking him, 'Give me some stock tips!'"

Caine isn't angling to enter the ranks of the "one percent," but he's found ways to sustain one of the busiest and most distinctive careers in music. He's not too busy, however, to play one-nighters as a sideman in small grassroots Manhattan venues like the Jazz Gallery or the 55 Bar. "Sometimes I'm traveling a lot and not playing much in New York, so as much as I can I want to keep on doing that," he says, the day after a rewarding gig with trumpeter Shane Endsley and the Music Band. "You learn a lot of stuff that way, meeting different players."

The list of Caine's accomplishments is long. With his unorthodox—some would say sacrilegious—adaptations of Mahler, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Verdi, Bach and others, he's gone beyond simply melding jazz and classical vocabularies to create a new type of post-genre catalogue. "Eclectic" doesn't describe such Caine discs as *Urlicht/Primal Light*, *Dark Flame*, *The Othello Syndrome*, *The Goldberg Variations*, *The Diabelli Variations* and *Love Fugue*.

His trio albums—*Blue Wail*, *Live at the Village Vanguard* and the latest outing, *Siren*, with Perowsky and bassist John Hébert—are fierce and unapologetically swinging, a testament to Caine's Philadelphia hard-bop roots and apprenticeships with the likes of Bootsie Barnes, Johnny Coles and Philly Joe Jones. Another working trio, Bedrock, with bassist Tim Lefebvre and drummer Zach Danziger, deals in improvisatory funk, electronica and straight-up songcraft, documented most recently on the 2009 release *Plastic Temptation* (with Philly vocalist Barbara Walker).

"I've done pretty much all of Uri's gigs at some point or other," says Lefebvre, "and you can totally hear him in every one of them. I always think he's playing the right thing, no matter what genre." It's a view echoed by trumpeter Dave Douglas, who has featured Caine in his quintet for the last decade on such albums as *The Infinite*, *Strange Liberation*, *Meaning and Mystery* and *Live at the Jazz Standard*.

"It's Uri's flexibility that makes him so special," says Douglas, e-mailing from the road in Europe. "He can adapt and change in any environment and always bring something strong of his own. His priority is always to make music on the most supportive and collaborative level. He feeds the fire."

Another key to Caine's temperament is his aversion to factional

thinking, his refusal to make snap judgments about music, whether "in" or "out." Recalling the days before his move to New York in 1985, he mentions a Philadelphia avant-garde series called Geno's Empty Foxhole, held at St. Mary's Church. For a kid immersed in the mainstream jazz of Philly's populist neighborhood bars, this was a window on another world. "It was the first time I heard Cecil Taylor, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Anthony Braxton. Even by a lot of the musicians there, that was considered some New York shit. I would say, 'But I like that.' And they would be like [dismissively], 'Yeah, you know.' I wanted to participate in a lot of these different things."

Caine also cut his teeth playing more commercial, groove-oriented music with Grover Washington Jr. "It was a learning experience," he maintains. "It wasn't about taking long solos, it was about being a good accompanist, staying within a role. You'd try to do that as well as you could. A lot of people who were more hardcore jazz heads would disdain that and say it's not really adventurous. But no, actually, it's a skill to play that way." This is a theme with Caine: When people shut themselves off from music of whatever type, he pushes back, he questions. It's admirable in itself, but it also comes in handy in a career premised on opening every door.

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CAINE'S PARENTS, STILL BASED IN PHILLY, ARE WHOLLY

American, but they gave their son a Hebrew name and spoke only Hebrew to him and his two younger siblings. A staunch Labor Zionist, his father could have moved the family to Israel, but he "got caught up in the politics of Philadelphia in the '60s and '70s," Caine explains. "He became a lawyer, became the head of the ACLU, got involved with the Philadelphia Resistance, all the antiwar groups and a lot of conscientious objectors. We did go to Israel as kids, and I remember our friends and relatives there laughing at the way we spoke, this Shakespearean Hebrew. I knew the Hebrew word for every instrument in the orchestra, but in Israel people would just use the English word. I was on the road this summer with [trumpeter] Avishai Cohen, and when we spoke Hebrew he was like, 'Man, incredible, some of the words you use.' When I Skyped my parents, I'd bring Avishai into the room to talk to them—what a trip. It's this strange thing."

Jewish music surfaces from time to time in Caine's work, but early on he was "more of a jazz snob," he says. "Miles, Coltrane. It wasn't until I started playing with [clarinetist] Don Byron, who introduced me to a lot of the really heavy music, that I got into it." Caine appears on the 1993 release *Don Byron Plays the Music of Mickey Katz*, alongside Dave Douglas, who would soon hire Caine for his own sextet. "[Uri] always had a deeply personal way of getting inside the music, beyond the notes," Douglas offers. "On my sextet records I was trying to get at some new and unusual ways of organizing the harmony in the rhythm section and playing through forms. Uri did a lot of homework on his own. It wasn't something I asked him to do, or would have asked anyone to do. Over the years I've seen him do that in many different ways."

Caine got into jazz around age 11 or 12, and for a period he studied with French pianist Bernard Peiffer, "an inspiring, very underrated guy." Peiffer, upon hearing some of Caine's early writing, suggested that he study composition. So at 14 or 15 Caine began

WITH THE MIND OF A MAESTRO AND THE HEART OF A SIDEMAN, URI CAINE PLAYS, COMPOSES AND INTERPRETS IT ALL

working with the renowned George Rochberg, and continued to do so later while enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania.

According to Caine, “Rochberg wrote very harsh music, but his son died of a brain tumor and it fucked him up, and he started to write tonal music after that. Students who had supported him saw it as a betrayal. That’s when I started studying with him. So he told me, ‘You’re going to start from the beginning: Bach chorales, the harmony in Mozart and Beethoven—can you deal with that?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I’ll do it.’ One of the first exercises was to take Mahler’s fifth symphony and reduce it for piano. Monumental task, because you have to learn about all the instruments and the transposition. That was the purpose. I struggled, but I had that music in my ear when I was 15 or 16. I didn’t think that I would use it later, but I had it.”

Also at Penn was the great George Crumb, who was “very gentle and shy, the type of guy who’d talk to you and get red out of embarrassment,” Caine recalls. “What Crumb liked to do was sight-read four-hand piano music. So that’s what we would do, a lot. He’d be sitting there with a cigarette, playing anything, Mozart symphonies, piano scores. We’d divide them up. You see, a lot of the composers at Penn couldn’t play. They were very pretentious but they couldn’t really sit down and play. That was one of Rochberg’s things: He would say, ‘I don’t want to hear about your piece. I want you to play.’ They’d say, ‘It’s a symphony, I can’t play it.’ He’d say, ‘Get up there and play it.’ I could sort of play it.”

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EASILY, CAINE COULD HAVE HAD A CAREER AS AN ACADEMIC composer, but jazz had other plans for him. “I used to go out to [Uri’s] apartment, and we’d rehearse and I’d take him out on gigs,” says tenor sax veteran Bootsie Barnes, a pillar of Philly’s jazz community. “I had him all on the circuit: Philadelphia, South Jersey, we worked everywhere there was to work. All over North Philly, all the rough little corner bars where I knew the owners, guys I went to school with. It was like there was nothing [Uri] couldn’t do, he caught on so quick.”

Caine was roughly 18 at the time. “I played a lot with the drummers: Bobby Durham, Mickey Roker, Edgar Bateman, Al Jackson,” he says. “We got gigs that would start at 2 in the afternoon, and you’d just play all day. I was lucky, man. I was essentially supporting myself as a musician when I was in college. I thought that was normal.” The lion’s share of the gigs, not incidentally, required Caine to play Fender Rhodes, the instrument he’s gone on to use with Bedrock, the Dave Douglas Quintet and others.

The circuit Caine worked was mainly African-American, but Philly had seen its share of high-level white players for years—Barnes mentions Buddy Savitt, John Bonnie, Billy Root, Al Steele and others dating back to the ’40s. “With [Uri] it wasn’t no thing,” Barnes continues. “He fit right in. Everybody loved him. Everywhere we went, when he started playing that piano, man, the people just went crazy. He put them chords underneath me, I mean he could comp his behind off, you know? That was a great experience for him, in college, playing on a whole different circuit. I don’t think he foresaw that when he first started learning how to play.”

Through Barnes, Caine met and began working with the likes of Philly Joe Jones and Hank Mobley, world-renowned figures who’d remained local. According to Barnes, “When me and Philly Joe and Uri played—I don’t know who we had on bass, maybe Wayne Dockery—it was a very strong unit. Philly Joe did mostly quartet stuff,

so it was a lot of weight left on me, but Uri took up all the slack. I’d do what I had to do and just sit down, because he and Philly Joe would kill it. Joe loved him.”

The most memorable Philly Joe encounter might have been at a “transcription” gig in the early ’80s. “These were the jobs that the musicians union gave out,” says Caine, “and if you were low on the totem pole you’d get the housing project in North Philly. So we had

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a gig there. It was with a bass player named Ed Crockett—I played with him a lot—and with [drummer] J.R. Mitchell, who was living in New York. Well, we were talking outside and all of a sudden this big Cadillac pulls up and it’s Philly Joe ... and Jaco Pastorius. Whoa. Philly heard we were playing and he wanted to play. So we played. I’m not sure that the people at that place knew who Jaco was. Philly Joe sort of knew who he was. He was a younger guy to them.”

Unbelievably, Caine wound up playing trio that day with Pastorius and Jones (he might well be the only pianist in the world who can say this). “We played ‘Stella by Starlight,’” he says, matter-of-factly. Was it happening? “Oh, totally! I have to say, it was about Jaco completely respecting Philly Joe.”

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ALL THE WHILE, NEW YORK WAS BECKONING. CAINE HAD accompanied legends like Joe Henderson and Freddie Hubbard whenever they came through Philly. He felt ready. In 1985 he moved north and landed the apartment he still lives in today with his wife, Jan. “I had to go through a big transition, because I was working a lot in Philly and I had to start all over. Luckily I saved some money. But it was sort of scary. I was doing gigs in New York I never had to do in Philly, never. Dressing up as a clown and playing in some salad bar, looking in the mirror and going, ‘Oh, man.’”

He got through the rough patches and began building a musical profile that was part “downtown,” part straight-ahead, many parts unclassifiable—something much like the chameleonic voice we hear today. His earliest recordings as a leader, *Sphere Music* (1993) and *Toys* (1995), are full of jet-propelled swing, thanks in no small part to the drumming of Ralph Peterson. *Toys* features Dave Douglas, with percussionist Don Alias adding a pronounced Latin tinge. The albums came out on Stefan Winter’s JMT label, predecessor to Winter & Winter, Caine’s longtime home base.

▼ Caine (center) with John Hébert (left) and Ben Perowsky



Ben Perowsky remembers Caine frequenting Mikell's on 97th Street and Columbus Avenue, an important club that folded in 1991. (The location is now a Whole Foods.) "I was playing trio up there with Joey Calderazzo and Dave Kikoski," Perowsky says, "and Uri was hanging out." Caine recalls gigging with fusion and blues guitarist Robben Ford at the time.

"When we started playing together, probably in the late '90s," Perowsky adds, "it just fell into the pocket instantly." Judging from the sound of *Siren*—which was recorded to analog tape—that initial promise hasn't dimmed. "It's a jazz trio," Perowsky says, "so we touch a lot of different bases within that. But once in a while we just swing one, you know? It's nice to have that as the groundwork and go into the stratosphere from there."

At the Tap Bar in the old Knitting Factory, Caine also soaked in the sounds of Liminal, a project that involved Perowsky with cohorts Danny Blume and DJ Olive—both key players on *Urlicht/Primal Light*, Caine's first Mahler CD in 1997. (Thanks to Caine, Olive was the first turntablist ever to appear at the Village Vanguard, in 2004.) And at Izzy Bar on First Avenue in the East Village, Caine came into contact with Tim Lefebvre and Zach Danziger of Boomish, who did a number of electronic tracks for Caine's *Goldberg Variations*. Caine also recruited Lefebvre and Danziger for Bedrock.

"The [sound of Bedrock] had to do with people I was playing with in Philly," says Caine, "like Jamaaladeen Tacuma, Cornell Rochester, Gerald Veasley. It was coming out of the free-funk thing. Back then I was into synthesizers, a long time ago, before MIDI." *The Philadelphia*

Experiment, Caine's 2001 collaboration with Christian McBride and Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson of the Roots, grew from a related impulse. On *Shelf-Life* (2005), Bedrock's sophomore release, Caine deepened the homage to Philly by featuring none other than Bootsie Barnes.

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AT PRESS TIME, CAINE HADN'T YET HEARD PIANIST DAN

Tepfer's new album *Goldberg Variations/Variations*, but his eyes lit up at the mention of it. Their approaches are nothing alike: Caine's Goldbergs are a succession of radical jump-cuts, with a different band on practically every track, whereas Tepfer's reading is wholly pianistic. But both musicians agree on the fitness of Western art music as a template for improvisation. "The whole bag of harmony that's become jazz harmony, what's taught in schools, it's essentially Wagner harmony, late-19th-century harmony," Tepfer argues.

The rhythm and phrasing of jazz, Tepfer is well aware, is not European. And yet classical "crossover" practices stretch back to the pre-jazz era, well before the more frequently cited Third Stream movement of the late '50s. It's especially vivid in the work of Scott Joplin, whose aspirations as an opera composer went largely unfulfilled in his lifetime. Comparing Joplin's syncopated rhythms to Béla Bartók's use of Hungarian folkloric music, Tepfer observes, "The difference is that there's a huge racist question as to how Joplin was treated in society. Imagine if from day one he'd had real encouragement from the establishment?" It's worth noting that Anthony Braxton, George Lewis and others associated with the AACM have been chipping



▲ GOOD LITTLE PIANO PLAYER: Clockwise from top left: Caine, Tim Lefebvre and Zach Danziger (from left) are Bedrock, 2008; Caine, Steve Beskrone, Mickey Roker, Robin Eubanks and Bootsie Barnes (from left) at Trey's in Philadelphia, circa 1978; the Uri Caine Ensemble performs Mozart and Mahler in Macau, China, 2007; Caine, Hébert and Perowsky (from left) in Toronto in June



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PETER GANNUSHKIN/DOWNTOWNMUSIC.NET; COURTESY OF BOOTSIE BARNES; JAN CAINE; JAN CAINE



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away at these artificial, racially coded boundaries for years.

As for Caine, merging jazz improvisation, poetry, DJ culture and electronica with the Western classical canon flowed naturally from his early training, his playing career, his loves as a listener and even to some degree his living situation. Mahler, for a time, lived on West 72nd Street, Caine's block. In early 20th-century New York, the maestro could have easily rubbed elbows with the early Tin Pan Alley songwriters, as Caine has pointed out.

Spotlighting some of New York's forgotten musical histories—this, too, is one of Caine's interests and motivations. He describes his 1999 disc *The Sidewalks of New York: Tin Pan Alley*, featuring the music of James Reese Europe, Bert Williams and others, as “a fictional walk around New York in 1905.” There's even an “audience” providing sounds of conversation, drinks being spilled and so forth. “The music wasn't being performed in these prim environments,” Caine says. “People were reacting to it. It really is the beginning of pop music.” There's a similar quality to the ambient audience noise of *Wagner E Venezia* (1997), in which Caine plays Wagner's landmark operatic themes in arrangements for a small “café orchestra”—along the lines of what Wagner actually heard in cafés while living in Venice.

There have been plenty of other classically inspired efforts in recent jazz: Jason Moran playing Conlon Nancarrow; the Bad Plus arranging Stravinsky, Ligeti and Babbitt for piano trio; Joel Harrison interpreting Paul Motian's music with string quartet and two guitars; and Michael Bates and Fabian Almazan tackling Shostakovich on their respective new releases *Acrobat* and *Personalities*. John Hébert, of Caine's trio, teamed up with pianist Lucian Ban in 2010 to create the marvelous *Enesco Re-imagined*, a portrait of the late Romanian composer. “Uri was an inspiration behind that for me,” Hébert says. “My arrangements are very minimal, and I knew that the musicians playing them were open enough, so I didn't want to put too much on the page that would hinder them. I think Uri is mostly the same way.”

With an ever-growing list of original pieces to his credit, Caine seems to be moving away from the dead composer model. “I don't know if I'm done with that,” he says, “but I definitely seek opportunities to write my own music. I've had many people say to me, ‘Can you do this?’ and sometimes it's like there must be other people who can do it. A flamenco version of De Falla? I'm more into my own thing now.” The latest specimen is *Twelve Caprices*, a thoroughly post-tonal work for the Arditti String Quartet and improvising pianist.

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THERE'S NO DIVISION BETWEEN CAINE THE FREQUENT flyer, the denizen of top concert halls and the eager hard-bop kid, trained on the bandstand not only by master players but also expectant bar patrons who know what they like. Sadly, some of the old Philly cohorts have passed on, including organ great Trudy Pitts, bassists Ed Crockett and Charles Fambrough, drummers Bobby Durham and Hakim Emmanuel Thompson, and the inimitable pianist Sid Simmons, Caine's predecessor with Grover Washington. Soon after the deaths of Pitts and Simmons in late 2010, he told me wistfully, “I saw them both at the memorial for [Hakim], who was a really fiery drummer, one of the first guys I played with. Then I went on the road for three weeks and all this shit happened. These are all people from that generation and they're passing away.”

Philly still greets Caine as a member of the community, and this might be the role he values most. Leaving aside all the high-profile commissions, critical accolades and international attention, he couldn't receive a higher compliment than the one paid by drummer and elder statesman Mickey Roker, who summed up his first impressions via phone: “Good little piano player.” **JT**