

YEAR IN REVIEW: THE TOP 50 RELEASES OF 2018

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

# JazzTimes

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City to  
Colbert

By David Fricke

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**VIRTUOSO'S**  
**SNOWY EGRET**  
**RETURNS**

**CHRISTIAN SANDS**  
**A YOUNG PIANO**  
**PHENOM GETS**  
**AMBITIOUS**

**AARON**  
**GOLDBERG**

Postbop Meets  
Philosophy

+

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# Beyond Logic

AARON GOLDBERG

is one of a rare breed: a respected jazz pianist who's also a trained philosopher. In this wide-ranging interview, he discusses his recent work with rhythmic theorist Leon Parker and his quest to establish a personal identity in music.

By David R. Adler

Photography by Alejandra Barragán

For over 20 years, pianist Aaron Goldberg has set himself apart as one of the most scintillating performers in jazz, in a longstanding trio with bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Eric Harland and in a sideman stints with Joshua Redman, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Wynton Marsalis, and others. His new album, *At the Edge of the World* (Sunnyside), marks the debut of a new trio with bassist Matt Penman and drummer/percussionist Leon Parker.

Returning to the jazz scene after years of obscurity in France—he left the U.S. on September 10, 2001—Parker makes his presence felt not just on drums but with vocal percussion and a system of self-contained music-making with the pianist via phone from Toulouse, France, we spoke about the new album and reflected on the piano lineage and the process of finding one's own voice. We also probed Goldberg's multifaceted interests beyond music, as a student of philosophy and a political activist. The conversation has been edited for brevity.

**JT:** Tell us about the new trio and how it came into place.

**AARON GOLDBERG:** For the new album I thought it would be good to distinguish this trio from the last one—not just a different drummer but a different project. I've known Matt Penman since he first came to the U.S. in 1994. He was the new virtuoso bassist from this country that nobody knew had any jazz [New Zealand]. He played on *Bienestar* [2011] and he's subbed for Reuben in my other trio pretty often. I always wanted to have a more permanent playing opportunity with him. Leon didn't know Matt, and he's someone who really needs to trust anyone he's playing with. He's very picky about bass players. So he quickly realized how special Matt was and what a good connection the three of us could have. It came down to the fact that Matt really speaks his own language on the instrument.

**What was your history with Leon?** We all look up to Leon, we grew up listening to him. It was an interesting dynamic because he's one of my musical heroes and we were helping him get back in the groove of playing jazz and touring. Before my album we recorded Leon's album [title and release date undetermined—Ed.], and Reuben played bass on that.

I only got to play with Leon once before he left for France, with [saxophonist] Virginia Mayhew at the 55 Bar. I used to go hear him with Jacky Terrasson or Brad Mehldau at the Village Gate, or Kenny Barron at the Vanguard, or Dewey Redman at Mondo Perso. He had all the gigs, with all the piano players I loved. He kept whittling down his kit to just cymbal and snare, or just floor tom—or one famous

„I've been feeling ready to approach the music of my heroes and do it in a way that is profoundly me.”

gig, which I didn't see, with Kenny at the Vanguard where he just played ride cymbal. He sounds incredible just playing one cymbal. His setup with us is still sparse: snare, bass drum, floor tom, one rack tom, and one cymbal.

**Can you describe his EmbodiRhythm concept and how it functions?** He plays with two fists in two different parts of his chest, one around the chest cavity and one up around his breastbone or pectoral muscle. And he's got two mics, one is a higher sound and one is lower. On "Poinciana" he's keeping time on my solo with his body—he's not playing drums. And then he solos and does vocal percussion.

I was always a fan of the body rhythm, which he was doing live at the end of the '90s. He grew more and more devoted to it, getting involved in body rhythm conferences and teaching it to musicians in France. He stopped playing gigs around 2010 and his only musical outlet after that was teaching body rhythm, mostly to vocalists. He increasingly saw it as separate from jazz.

I still see him as a jazz musician, though he's not only that. I didn't see any kind of wall between the body rhythm and the drum kit. I was interested in the intersection of the two. It took a while to get comfortable conceptually, going back and forth between them onstage

in a seamless way, and also figuring out repertoire that it would work with. We knew what it could sound like, it was just a matter of pulling it off up to his standards. He'd been working on it for a long time but hadn't ever done it in the studio.

**For the album, you chose only two originals and focused mainly on other composers. What was your thought process?** Well, a lot of the reason for this repertoire is Leon. It's material I knew would be up our alley. There was that formative period when we were figuring ourselves together, and this repertoire was the glue.

About songs by other people: I'm proud of my influences, but you don't want to play things in a derivative way or sound like a pale imitation. Kenny Barron in *Sphere* never imitated Monk for a second, although he got very deep inside Monk's music. Same with Chick playing Bud Powell. So I didn't think about playing "Poinciana" until I had a clear vision of how to do it my own way. Ahmad Jamal stamped that tune for jazz musicians forever. Leon's body rhythm was a way to bring it even farther away from Ahmad's version. Now it's totally different.

**In that spirit, you also play McCoy Tyner's "Effendi" and two songs by Bobby Hutcherson.**

Yes. "Effendi" is something I've had fun playing with my friends for so long that I feel like now it's something I own. The Hutcherson tunes are of that era, recorded with Herbie or McCoy. I felt a big loss when Bobby passed. I never had a chance to play with him, although Matt did a lot with the 52Jazz Collective. Matt loved him and always tells stories about him—on "When You Are





Near" you can hear Matt expressing his love for Bobby.

I played in a Bobby Hutcherson tribute concert, and having dealt with some of that music I thought it was time to record it. I wouldn't have been ready 10 years ago. Given the time I've spent playing with that generation, from Betty Carter to Al Foster and others, I've been feeling ready to approach the music of my heroes and do it in a way that is profoundly me.

There are extraordinary improvised passages on some of these tunes—fast ascending triplet ideas, other feats that require keen reflexes and technical command. It leads me to ask if you have a daily practice regimen. I don't, but I'm often in a situation where I have to learn music for my own gig or somebody else's. Being a jazz musician is like being an athlete: You have to be in shape to perform at your peak. If I go on the road, we're playing a good three to five hours a night for a few nights in a row. I should get to my highest level within a couple days, and by the end of the tour certainly. If I haven't been playing every night, then I need to get to the piano to maintain my level, let alone

develop new stuff. Mostly it has to do with ear-to-finger connection, it's not just fingers alone.

**What piano do you have at home?**  
I have a Mason & Hamlin baby grand.

**And so part of your practice, as you say, is "developing new stuff" not just in terms of composing, but also opening up new avenues in improvisation?**  
Yes. It's a matter of taking all your influences and then forming your language, listening to yourself, recording yourself, doing piles and piles of gigs where you're not thinking about your influences at all. I've been gigging for 25 years with all kinds of people and not thinking about my influences even for a millisecond on the bandstand. I'm just speaking the language.

Those things that you hear me do, certain shapes, melodic phrases, rhythmic devices—those are the things I've discovered along the way, more on the bandstand than in the practice room. I don't necessarily practice specific things but when I find something and it's fresh, I'll develop it, push it, see what else I can come up with that's related. Those are the things that are

going to sound like me. But many students forget, if you don't go through that process of internalizing the masters, you're not going to set a high enough standard for the stuff that you discover. I'm discarding all kinds of stuff because it doesn't reach the high standard of Bud or Charlie Parker, or Mulgrew Miller, or whoever I love. And when I do find something that's my own and can stand up to scrutiny, I hold onto it.

**Your song "Luaty" is a good segue into your interest in politics.**  
Yes, Luaty Beirão is an extraordinary human being, a rapper who used rap as his vehicle for criticizing his government in Angola. He was severely punished and went on a hunger strike and came very close to dying. They'd been holding small nonviolent protests at these rap shows where he'd talk about the [former] president, José Eduardo dos Santos, as a criminal. The government got worried because he was telling the truth. He's an inspiration to me and I wanted to write something for him.

**And about your political organizing in the jazz world over the years, your fundraisers for Kerry, Obama, and Hillary Clinton—are there plans to keep those activities going?**

I haven't had a chance to do any jazz fundraisers lately but I've been going to fundraisers for candidates in purple states [Drummer] Derrek Phillips, who used to play with Liberty Ellman and Charlie Hunter, he's in Nashville now and his wife Mariah is running for Congress. She won the Democratic primary as a first-time candidate, a mom and a schoolteacher. I've been trying to help her, and Amy McGrath in Kentucky. [Both candidates lost in the November general election.—Ed.] My sister writes software for the Democratic Party, so I'm talking with her and trying to do what I can as a citizen.

**Finally, tell us more about your academic career. You went back to school and finished a master's degree in philosophy at Tufts in 2010.**  
When I got to Harvard as an undergrad, what happens is you kind of wake up to all the things you don't know. Fundamental things, like why are we

here? What is the self? What is truth? What is the relationship between my mind and my brain? I realized that in philosophy you can learn how to think better, evaluate arguments, recognize bullshit better. I pushed myself to be the clearest thinker and writer I could be. And similar to jazz, the hope was to discover some things of my own, things that maybe nobody had thought about, or problems in other people's theories that hadn't been pointed out. And make a little contribution.

After undergrad I hoped I'd have an opportunity to study philosophy more. But in 2005, right around the time I started playing with Wynton, I was 31, and I didn't want to go back to school at 50, so I thought, "Now's the time." I took my GRE, I applied for a couple of programs. My most major influence in philosophy, Daniel Dennett, was at Tufts, so it made sense to go there. They also understood I was a working musician and wouldn't be able to show up to class all the time. It should've taken two years but it took five. I had this amaz-

ing time pushing myself and engaging with my professors, and I thought that I could publish papers and make this a second career. I haven't done that, but I recently got an honorary degree from University of the Arts Helsinki—they gave me a funny blue hat. So now I have a Ph.D. [Laughs].

My first semester at Tufts was almost impossible because I was playing in Kurt's band, Wynton's band, and I was taking three classes. My brain was exploding and I wasn't doing either of those gigs as well as I could've been. I could have survived but I couldn't sustain that. Ultimately after I finished, I went back to playing full-time. But as I've done more teaching and workshops in music, at the New School and William Paterson, I've been motivated to try and teach a "philosophy for musician" class.

**Do you feel there are direct connections between music and philosophy?**  
Yes and no. Philosophy is useful for education. You can help students become their own teachers, help them discern

what's valuable. Things that I love in philosophy like clarity of ideas, logical development, clear exposition—I aspire to those standards in my own playing.

But jazz and philosophy are extremely different in their objectives. Jazz is all about the moment, interaction, channeling your emotion into what you're playing. Philosophy for most part is the opposite. It's dispassionate, you have to take emotion out of the picture to be as rational as possible, at least in the analytic philosophy that I studied. When you're playing, the last thing you want is to remove yourself emotionally. Also, jazz is super-physical, it's the opposite of sitting and pondering a problem for hours on end.

I want to resist the idea that because I studied philosophy my music is somehow analytical. I hope it's not. Granted, jazz musicians are all needs to a degree. It takes that to go so deep into these little technical subtleties of what we do. But we're also athletes, we're emotional, and the best music is the music that moves us. **JT**

