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# Bria Skonberg

BY PHILLIP LUTZ

PHOTO BY DARIO ACOSTA

# DIGGING INTO TENSION



**PEERING OUT THE WINDOW OF HER PRACTICE ROOM HIGH ABOVE THE EAST RIVER IN NEW YORK, BRIA SKONBERG FELT THE SPIRIT MOVE HER.**

Raising her trumpet, she let loose her trademark clarion call—seeming, in the process, to blow away the cares of a decade that saw her alternately feted as the hope of hot-jazz and faulted for not being shackled to it.

“Playing trumpet is the greatest stress reliever in the world,” she said with a half-smile, exhaling generously.

Generosity has been a defining trait of Skonberg’s decade—from the gastronomic delicacies she laid out for a visitor in the waning days of 2019 to the cornucopia of musical offerings that flowed from her horn since she arrived in New York in 2010, armed with an encyclopedic knowledge of traditional jazz built largely on bandstands throughout the West.

Then 26 years old, the native of Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada, quickly became a fixture on the

stages of the Big Apple’s trad-jazz scene—catching the eye and ear of the scene’s stalwarts, like fellow trumpeter Warren Vaché. A onetime teacher and longtime colleague of Skonberg’s, Vaché remains impressed with her sound and savvy.

“She’s a very conscientious young lady with a strong conception,” he said. “And, like most young people these days, she’s very aware of the public, of social media and promotion.”

Within two years of arriving in New York, Skonberg had parlayed those assets into contracts for albums that, like her live shows, attracted audiences intrigued by the spectacle of a young Canadian woman who tapped into the soul of Louis Armstrong. Skonberg had found her comfort zone and, by all indications, could have prospered there in perpetuity.





Bria Skonberg adventures beyond her trad-jazz roots on *Nothing Never Happens*.

“That’s not why I came to New York,” she said. “I keep doing a lot of things, but all the time still reaching, learning.”

With *Nothing Never Happens*, her latest release, Skonberg does just that. Like her most recent albums—2016’s *Bria* and 2017’s *With A Twist*, which featured urbane partners like accordionist and arranger Gil Goldstein, pianist Sullivan Fortner, bassist Scott Colley and drummer Matt Wilson—the disc explores new stylistic territory even as it keeps faith with the old.

At the same time, the new album provides a measure of social content—an element she said was necessary in the post-2016 world but was lacking on her previous recordings. Given the marketplace demands of big-label production—her last two albums were on Sony Masterworks and OKeh—she self-released the new album.

“My last album was about love and adventure, not without its own depth,” she said. “But to put out another album at this time that doesn’t at least acknowledge what’s going on—that you’re working through it and giving other people a chance to also process it through listening—is a waste of time.”

The process of getting *Nothing Never Happens* released involved some speed bumps. An attempt at crowd-funding was hindered when the platform through which the album was being financed went bankrupt. However, the steps of assembling the release allowed Skonberg to connect with her fans and shape the final product more directly than she had in years.

The change is evident from the album’s title—a cryptic double-negative that contrasts with the straightforward titles of her recent albums. The new album’s cover art, likewise, is a departure: Rather than a photo of Skonberg, the image is a faceless, slightly abstracted female figure painted by a friend, Lisa Lockhart.

The shift also is clear in the choice of personnel. Unlike her recent albums, her core working group—pianist Mathis Picard, bassist Devin Starks and drummer Darrian Douglas—carries the load. Guitarist Doug Wamble, organist Jon

Cowherd and saxophonist Patrick Bartley augmented the unit on select tunes.

When Douglas first played with Skonberg seven years ago at New York’s swank Café Carlyle, the playlist consisted largely of unreconstructed early jazz. But, he said, Skonberg has since then expanded her repertoire and approach to encompass more originals and greater stylistic freedom. The transition, he said, was natural and maybe inevitable.

“It’s been kind of a gradual thing,” he said. “People like musicians to fit into these neat little boxes—you only play trad music, you only play music from 1964, whatever—but that’s just not realistic. We grow up listening to music from the ’20s through the current day. It’s difficult to express only one kind of music when you’ve heard Boyz II Men and Louis Armstrong, or Tupac and Baby Dodds. She does a great job of merging everything she’s ever heard.”

Perhaps the clearest manifestation of this idiomatic mixing is found in Skonberg’s mashups, the melding of songs from the 1920s and ’30s with those from the ’60s or later. On *Nothing Never Happens*, “Blackbird Fantasy” mixes Duke Ellington’s “Black And Tan Fantasy” with Paul McCartney’s “Blackbird.”

Musically, Skonberg said, the process of combining tunes starts with her sitting at the piano, digging into the basic elements of Western music to understand the interrelationships of the pieces at hand: “My mashup process is to analyze the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic content and see where they tie in. It’s a puzzle—I dig puzzles.”

On “Blackbird Fantasy,” the resulting synthesis recalls the gritty chill of Ellington’s slow blues more than the delicacy of McCartney’s ballad, especially when Skonberg gives free rein to her inner growl in a cupped solo that echoes, if faintly, Arthur Whetsol’s 1929 version.

But the lyrics, all McCartney’s, adapt easily to the new setting—owing largely to Skonberg’s vocal, equal parts poignant and piquant.

“Blackbird Fantasy,” she said, was inspired by educational outreach she undertook through a

program sponsored by Jazz at Lincoln Center. In it, she made presentations to schoolchildren on jazz and democracy, the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights era.

“As a Canadian coming to the States,” she said, “it was—and is—such an education and a humbling thing to be trying to relay this information through song to the next generation, people who are the descendants of these exact movements.”

Skonberg’s social concerns drive other tunes on *Nothing Never Happens*, perhaps none more directly than “Villain Vanguard.”

“The album,” Skonberg said, “came out of the white noise about two years ago—information, all the stress of current social events, media, etcetera. I knew that I needed to create space to process these things. So, I created a lot of space in my schedule to process feelings. My writing process is to be in front of my keyboard and just be quiet and wait to see what comes out. And the first thing that came out was ‘Villain Vanguard.’”

The immediate impetus, she said, was the women’s march that took place the day after the 2017 presidential inauguration: “That definitely was what that song was about—re-enacting a march scene, a protest scene. And I urge my players to make it personal.”

Liberated from trad-jazz trappings, on this particular number the players unleash their collective id atop Douglas’ throbbing pulse, a ticking time bomb broken only by a free middle section straight out of the avant-garde playbook. Amid the cacophony, Skonberg’s horn leads the way.

Picard focused on the tune’s kinetic nature as it hurtles through the bridge and into the free section, which ultimately transitions back to the melody. “In that part, it was about moving together, moving forward into this other part of the song. It had to do with some of the feelings of #MeToo, and we were just channeling through her that feeling.”

While Skonberg had formed musical bonds with other female players—she led a classic-jazz band consisting of all women, Mighty Aphrodite, from 2005 through 2011—she hadn’t been moved to social action. But post-2016, she has joined saxophonist Roxy Coss’ Women In Jazz Organization, an advocacy group. And she makes a point of reaching out to young female jazz musicians, offering encouragement.

“Only in the last year or two, I feel like I’ve been proactive about it,” she said.

Skonberg’s activism extends to other issues, like gun violence. She has played the Instrument of Hope, a trumpet made of brass and bullet casings created by ShineMSD, a charity formed by students and parents from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the site of a 2018 massacre. The goal is to raise awareness and money for the organization.

“This gives me a chance to talk about it and play,” said Skonberg, a product of public schools

who often speaks in them through programs like Jazz at Lincoln Center's.

She played the trumpet as a member of the Monterey Jazz Festival touring band for a month of concentrated concerts last spring. Along with pianist Christian Sands, the music director, the tour included singer Cécile McLorin Salvant, saxophonist Melissa Aldana, bassist Yasushi Nakamura and drummer/vocalist Jamison Ross.

The Instrument of Hope trumpet's origin added a layer of meaning to the music, though Skonberg's presence itself lent the tour a distinct historical dimension, Sands said. She introduced the language of traditional jazz to the proceedings—most pointedly, perhaps, in a tribute to pioneering female musician Valaida Snow (1904–'56), who sang and played multiple instruments, including trumpet.

Sands, who played classic jazz with Skonberg nearly a decade ago, said she brought a growing maturity to that language: "She has evolved from where she was, within the stylings, the trad-jazz style, and also creating her own." Her arrangements, he added, were very complex. "As a pianist, you're going through a lot of different motions. It was a welcome challenge."

Skonberg said the experience of the tour has stayed with her: "Musically it evolved every night. It had a musical effect on me in that it gave me confidence to dig into tension a little bit more. I love how it enabled me to stretch."

But Skonberg's stretching has not always been welcomed. Along with the raves, a few reviewers have suggested that, as pop interpreter, social commentator and trumpet virtuoso, she wears too many hats. Some have said her work lacks stylistic cohesion.

Skonberg defended as genuine her "revisiting nostalgia in a way that appeals to a larger group of people outside of the jazz scene, and to me first," and offering social commentary "to reflect what's happening in the world, or at least your view of it, so that other people can have the same experiences."

"I definitely stand by the things I've done," she said. "I do think this is authentic."

Looking forward, the trumpeter is preparing for a quartet appearance at Zankel Hall (within the Carnegie Hall complex) as part of the Joyce and George T. Wein Shape of Jazz series; her first full symphonic collaboration, with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra; and an Aretha Franklin tribute with the American Pops Orchestra at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, she was formulating educational programs for the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Queens and the New York Hot Jazz Camp, which she co-founded and directs. All in all, it was a full plate that reflected a consistency of voice and a commitment to keep spreading her talents widely—and wisely.

"I like being put into a lot of different experiences," she said. "I like being a wild card." **DB**

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