

BRIA SKONBERG

Making Things Happen

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Award-winning Canadian born trumpeter, singer and songwriter Bria Skonberg is causing quite a storm. Having won the vocal jazz album Jono award in 2017 and nominated again in 2018. The New York Times said she was ‘the shining hope of hot jazz’ and the Wall Street Journal described her as ‘one of the most versatile and imposing musicians of her generation’. Strong praise from two prestigious sources. Her resume is impressive. She has played with U2, Christian Sands, Cécile McLorin Salvant and last year the Lincoln Centre asked her to lead the first integrated all-female big band, which launched her Sisterhood of Swing.

Her website describes her as ‘Trumpeter, Singer, Songwriter’ and something I found fascinating, ‘Instigator’. First time I have seen this. I asked Bria what she is instigating.

“I DON’T LIKE TO SIT AND WAIT FOR THINGS TO HAPPEN.”

scene. It’s an instrumental song, but to me, it’s where the trumpet tells a story, but then there’s a moment where things look bleak, but the trumpet lets out a call that rallies everyone back together.”

“I like to make things happen. Ever since I got out of school, I’ve been leading my bands trying to get opportunities, doing different records. But now I also direct a jazz camp for adults, I work a lot with the Louis Armstrong House Museum and helped start a couple of festivals here, etc. I don’t like to sit and wait for things to happen.

My earliest experiences with music were a coming together of people. My home town had a jazz festival and I like getting people together. My idea of music is that it should be fun, a gathering - a get-together. The trumpet for me is the same - it’s like saying ‘let’s go, come on’ and historically it has been used for fanfares, to announce royalty or to warn of danger and such. There’s a song on my album called ‘Bill and the Vanguard’ that I wrote shortly after attending the women’s march in New York and it falls into this

Bria’s recent album ‘Nothing Never Happens’ has a wonderful combination of original material and interesting arrangements of classics. Her voice has a beautiful depth and warmth to it which is outstanding. Canadian born, but now based in New York, we talked about the political climate in the USA and how this affects creators – and the relevance of jazz as a voice in society.

“The album was my response to the white noise – it gets so loud, and you can’t escape the media, the bickering, the opinions. Everything now is either meant to incite rage within people or at the very least make people reactionary – and in a way, part of you does get so fired up. Yet another part of you goes numb at the same time. It’s very overwhelming for everybody. It doesn’t matter what side of the coin you are on, it’s a lot to process. Thankfully, we have the Arts for »





» these exact moments, and I took myself off the grid and went on a few writing retreats to also process my feelings about that and it came out in song. I feel it's important when you create art that it documents the time you live in, you're reflecting in many ways.

It's not a traditional jazz album by any means, it has a lot of different styles and part of that is inspired by the feeling of the barrage of information you get, it's just too much. But also, there is a silver lining of hope within it, being a double negative — and you've probably experienced this — if you just keep going and remain optimistic you have a better chance of what you want to happen working out. To me, the album has a real breadth of emotions. It provides a nice escape from the everyday

challenges that are going on over here right now. Also, the musicians on it are incredible - it's the quartet that I've been touring with for the past few years plus some special guests and they have been really wonderful and patient with me as I tried out a bunch of ideas. Good vibes and comradery throughout it. It's authentic. I feel like the music on this album is from the heart. This is the album with the most amount of grit and yet empowering at the same time. I feel that for everything that you would classify as the negatives — the artist has come forward with a double positive.

It's raised conversations that are so necessary to have – the empowerment of women, especially in response to the administration and I have been a part of that. It's definitely lit a fire in »

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my audience, and I want them to respect me. And also, I want to be a role model for younger musicians too and so you don't have to do that. Ultimately the quality of the work, the music that you put out will benefit you in the long term.

Historically, female trumpeters have not been promoted, and the 'greats' that we know of are mostly male. We talked about the impact this can have on growing up and whether having no female role models can affect your aspirations and dreams.

"Women have been part of jazz ever since its inception. They have always been there. But they didn't always get as much coverage as men, it's disproportionate. There were always more male players but the fact that they weren't documented has a lot to do with their ability to multiply. I was lucky in that. I am a product of good public-school bands, and there were always girls next to me, so I didn't take it as a special thing. I think the first woman I

saw playing, one of my mentors introduced me to Gunhild Carling, the Swedish trumpet and trombone player. Seeing her play was very cool and inspiring. She played with such fire. Then Ingrid Jensen, on the other side of the musical spectre, very modern. These were the only two that I was aware of at that time."

I did notice that there weren't many women, but it didn't leave me any less inspired. Louis Armstrong was my hero for the longest time. Over the last couple of years, because of all the tensions and everything that has been happening here in the USA, I have become more aware, more awake to the fact there aren't many women. And also, I think, at this stage of my career, I expected there to be more, where are they? I think I'm looking more for the younger players so, now I've been actively trying to find them. Especially on social media; I like to reach out and say hey if ever you are in New York, you have a big sister in the city. There is a real wave of great young female players out there, and I am gaining a lot of inspiration from them. >>

"Horn Star? Ha, it's just a joke, a little risky, little funny, I think of it as sassy more than anything."

people, myself included, to define what you believe in. It's hard as there's so much false information and you have to have a strong sense of self. I find that music is a good vehicle for that. Whatever side you vote for, all people deserve good music and if music can serve as a bridge to bring people together, to discuss and enjoy even basic human feelings, it helps put the spotlight on what we have in common. That's what I want to fortify - what we have in common versus what rips us apart.

We discussed 'Women in Jazz' and how still today we are fighting for equality, not just in the jazz industry but everywhere. We are moving forward, but there is so far to go. I was fascinated to see that on Bria's Twitter profile, it said 'Horn Star'. We talked about the pressure of image and the importance of being a role model.

"Horn Star? Ha, it's just a joke, a little risky, little funny – I think of it as sassy more than anything. My general approach, as far as being a female, is the look that you have - getting attention may come a little easier, but keeping attention ultimately comes down to the quality of your work. I want to continue to have a career for the next fifty years so, I must create music that resonates with people on an emotional level — and not just superficial. I have a few rules for myself. I don't take any pictures lying on my back, I don't show a lot of skin - people do and if that's their emotive expression, that's great, I just have my own comfort and boundaries.

To me, the trumpet is a "call to action" instrument. I think it's important to lead. Your image should reflect the attention you want to receive. I respect >>



» Bria plays a key role in educating young musicians and clearly feels passionate about the importance of development. She is co-founder and Director of the NY Hot Jazz Camp for adults and has served as faculty at the Sacramento Jazz Education Foundation, Centrum Jazz Camp, Camp Heebie Jeebies and the Junior Jazz Academy. She also leads an ensemble for Jazz at Lincoln Centre's 'Jazz for Young People' outreach program and is an educational advisor to the Louis Armstrong House Museum.

"Well, both my parents were teachers, public school teachers, and I think the way they raised me was also about how you can empower people so they can become independent – you need to give them the tools. I've done a lot of school outreach, masterclasses, clinics, etc. That work has come more to the forefront in the last five years because I've realised that I have gained enough vocabulary in that field to feel confident and find the fun."

"It's also another level of improvising. When you teach, when you go into a room of students, you can have ideas of what you want to do, but ultimately, you don't know until you hear them. That process excites me."

Part of Bria's development as an instigator and educator is partly down to her own experiences with mentors and musicians. We talked about her almost dream-like encounter with Wynton Marsalis on her arrival in New York.

"The morning after I had moved to New York City — I had my suitcases and had kissed my parent's goodbye, maybe with the intention of not coming back — I was very emotional. After an overnight flight, I crashed on my friend's couch for a couple of hours and then she said, do you want to come out and play in the park? After about an hour in, Wynton Marsalis just walked by, which I thought was hilarious - We're not like in Chilliwack (a town in BC, Canada) anymore... this just would not happen there... so I just took it as a sign. I was already taking such a big life risk and just thought OK, this was the right thing to do. But he listened for a little bit, gave me the thumbs-up, and I think I probably gave him an awkward hello or wave, it was cool. I had to make sure and asked some bandmates – is that Wynton Marsalis? - It was everything I needed to say - yes, I made the right decision!

Can you imagine what an inspiration this must have been and how it must have felt like a sign from some higher power?"

"I've talked to him since then and he's been really supportive. He set an example for me this way because the people in that orchestra will stick around afterwards and talk to any students. My best friend and I, at the time, went backstage, and he gave us both ten-minute lessons. Behind the concert hall in Seattle. It was unbelievable. We left that experience feeling so inspired and excited. But he does that all the time. So, I had met him before, but this was a totally different experience. I think the next time I saw him, I was playing in the Armstrong gala event and he was a speaker and I was playing in the band. It was an amazing night, but you know, you meet people at different times – playing in a park versus a professional on a gig. But the bigger honour was, maybe two years ago. The Lincoln centre had a gala, honouring Louis Armstrong and I got to play the trumpet for that concert, and I know Wynton had a hand in making that happen. For me that was a big deal - a definite pinch-me moment."

Louis Armstrong has a special place in Bria's heart, not least of which is due to his humanitarian work.

"I learned a lot from just playing along with his recordings. Everything about his sound on the trumpet, as a musician, as a vocalist – he plays really difficult things. To try and emulate him, it's just...I learnt a lot of his transcriptions pretty early on and that gave me a lot of vocabulary to build on the rest of education. But he was also just an amazing human being and humanitarian, he saw everybody as in no race, religion, etc. There is one story where he was performing in Africa, and two of the countries were at war, and they called a cease-fire so that they could both watch the Armstrong concert. He literally stopped wars because of his impact on people. That is above and beyond. I loved the way he was an ambassador representing the good things.

The history of the United States can be told through music and jazz - the rhythms, the melodies and the ideas - he just embodied that and did everything with a big smile and open

arms. He wrote so many lessons and welcomed people backstage. He would stay to meet the last person at his concerts – he was just very giving."

With the release of her new album, Bria has been consistently playing across the USA and hopes to play Europe soon. What should we expect from a Bria performance?

"I like people to come away from my concerts having felt a whole range of emotions. We are all on this planet to experience a whole range of things. It's not just about joy or sadness - I'm touching on things like melancholy, and I use music as a vehicle to connect with people on those more emotional levels and especially because sometimes there are things that words can't express. I would really love to tour in Europe and work the festivals"

It was lovely to talk to Bria and I look forward to seeing her play live in Europe. A wonderful artist on a journey to connect us all together through the magnificent medium of Jazz. ■

