

PHOTO BY ROB LOWELL



# JEFF LEDERER

## A WINDOW INTO IMPROVISATION

BY TRISTAN GEARY

What is it about the wintertime and jazz that pair so effortlessly well? New Yorkers, emerging from various underground establishments, scurry from club to club, coats pulled tightly over, hats drawn down, seeking respite from the biting cold, warmed by the music and spirits.

This quintessential New York scene, deeply felt by all music-hungry nocturnals, is the backdrop for reed player Jeff Lederer's twelve-year-long holiday concert series with Matt Wilson's Christmas Tree-O. Formerly held at The Jazz Standard (which closed in 2020), it now tours across the country each December, making its NYC appearance at Dizzy's Club this month. Far from Christmas commercialism, the Tree-O, rounded out by bassist Paul Sikivie, swings the lexicon of holiday carols and spirituals with Yuletide merriment, without sacrificing the sacred sensation that permeates a song like "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel". Even when adorned in Christmas sweaters and reindeer ears, gesticulating on a stage decked out in artificial Christmas trees, they leave the audience feeling positively holy.

This is just one of the many projects and ensembles in which Lederer is involved. He's a musician with an insatiable musical appetite, which allows him to straddle a huge spectrum of jazz. Equally at home in the free tradition of Albert Ayler, or the minimalism of Morton Feldman, or as an adept player of Latin music, Lederer's abilities on reeds and as a composer cannot be neatly categorized.

It's not all sleigh rides and snowmen this time of year for Lederer, who released two mind-bending albums in October. "If I have one redeeming quality," Lederer wrote in a 2020 essay, "it is that I will follow the thread of curiosity doggedly." The proof is in these two albums. The first, *Schoenberg on the Beach*, is a jazz song cycle reimagining works of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern for an ensemble of cello, vibraphone, bass, reeds, electronics and vocals. Each is set to the anguished writings of Rilke, Goethe and Nietzsche. Vocalist Mary LaRose matches the intensity of the sweeping words above the ensemble's hard-driving, spiraling sound. Haunting soundscapes created by turntablist ArturEyE introduce the pieces with found seaside sounds from Coney Island, a particularly sentimental part of NYC for Lederer. In *Schoenberg on the Beach*, the Viennese art song has moved from the parlors of the storied capital to the fairgrounds of Coney Island.

But if that all sounds too heady, and the thrashing existentialism of tortured poets and philosophers just isn't what you're looking for on a Friday night, Lederer also has an ensemble called *Swing n' Dix* that provides a raucous jamboree of danceable swing tunes. It's another collaboration with drummer Matt Wilson, and the ensemble features Kirk Knuffke (cornet) and veteran Bob Stewart (tuba). Even *Swing n' Dix*, though, is sincere in its silliness. Each of the saxophonist's projects demonstrates a unique part of his voice: intellectual, improvisatory, even comedic. "He is able to insert his very singular personality into any kind of musical setting," noted trombonist Joe Fiedler, a close collaborator. "Even gifted improvisers have their bag that they do, and they either put it in low

gear or high gear, but Jeff is thinking on another plane. He's thinking about the entire shape of a musical piece in real time."

Lederer's own comments confirm this observation. "I'm always looking for a window into improvisation," he said, and his recent appearance on Jeff Cosgrove's *Welcome Home* spotlights his fearless improvising on tenor saxophone. The track "No Booze Blues" sees him confident in spacious simplicity, taking his improvisations into curiouser and curiouser realms, pushing the tenor into ultra altissimo, finally returning faithfully back to the blues.

If *Schoenberg on the Beach* is a maximalist explosion of words and improvisation, Lederer's other recent album, *Balls of Simplicity*, achieves its intensity through restraint—an airiness that conveys a soaring freedom. It's astonishing to think that both albums, one an ode to the "youthful romanticism" of Schoenberg injected with improvisation, the other a breathy, through-composed musing inspired by Shakerism (more on that later), were created by the same artist.

"I was making a point in releasing these both on the same day. The musical language couldn't be more different," noted Lederer. *Balls of Simplicity* is a summation of 35 years of his notated music previously kept behind closed doors, finally realized by the Morningside Tone Collective. "If [people] have any impression of me, it's as a noisy jazz tenor player. But to me, *Balls of Simplicity* sounds as much my voice as when I'm playing more edgy improvised music."

It's clear that Lederer's array of extramusical interests inspire his creations. In *Schoenberg on the Beach*, he is a bedfellow of a range of deep thinkers. In *Balls of Simplicity* his inspiration comes from his fascination with religion, specifically a sect of Christianity called the Shakers. Now all but extinct, the Shakers were lauded for their simple living, egalitarianism and ecstatic worship. "The shiny balls of simplicity will set you free" goes a Shaker saying, and thus the name and ethos of the album were born. The music on it, like the Shaker way of life, is simple but rich, airy yet expansive and, most importantly, endows pure sound with spiritual significance. Lederer's label itself is called Little (i) Music, another point of Shaker inspiration. "It's a phrase of humility that comes from a [Shaker] song lyric," he explained, a statement of the Shaker belief in the abandonment of ego, of surrendering power. In that vein, both album covers feature images with personnel turned away, underscoring their gravitas and yielding to the wisdom of the world.

From Goethe to Shakerism to Winter Wonderland, Lederer's albums and ensembles are propelled into existence based on the pursuit of spiritual depth, ecstatic improvisation and freewheeling raucousness with equal earnestness. If you catch him with the Christmas Tree-O this month at Dizzy's Club, while overlooking that hallowed New York vista, you will hear music that flows effortlessly from foot-stomping to belly laughs to something sanctified and holy. That's the highlight for Lederer, too: "Sacred song[s] come seamlessly out of some

of the more silly things we do, and those are the moments that I really love."

For more info visit [littleimusic.com](http://littleimusic.com). Lederer is at Dizzy's Club with Matt Wilson's Christmas Tree-O Dec. 12. See Calendar.

### Recommended Listening:


- Matt Wilson Quartet – *Humidity* (Palmetto, 2002)
- Matt Wilson's Christmas Tree-O – *s/t* (Palmetto, 2010)
- Jeff Lederer – *Swing n' Dix* (Little (i) Music, 2012)
- Honey Ear Trio – *Swivel* (Little (i) Music, 2014)
- Jeff Cosgrove/John Medeski/Jeff Lederer – *History Gets Ahead of the Story* (Grizzley Music, 2018)
- Jeff Lederer Sun Watcher – *Eightfold Path* (Little (i) Music, 2020)

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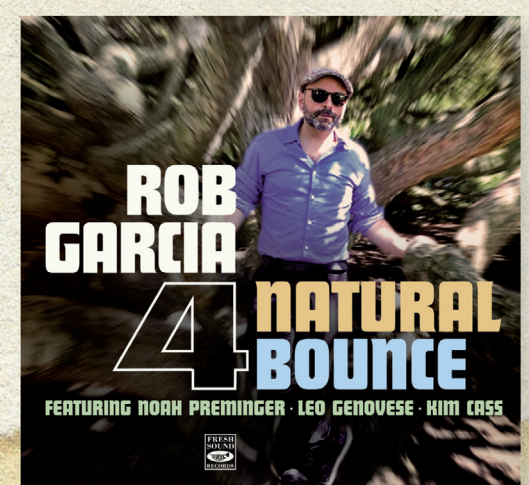
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