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# Brooklyn Jazz Underground

By Eric Nemeyer

*The Brooklyn Jazz Underground is an association of independent bandleaders with a shared commitment to improvised music. Through cooperative effort, members of the BJU strive to create greater awareness of their work.*

**JJ:** Could you talk about how you met and how the Brooklyn Jazz Underground grew out of that association?

**Alexis Cuadrado:** We all knew each other from networking, playing together, playing in each others' bands, or having seen each other's bands. We had often spoken about being frustrated about being bandleaders, and being alone in the field and trying to get our projects moved ahead. That was about three years ago. Alan Ferber and myself sat and made a list of people who we thought would be interested in forming the collective. We ended up with ten people and we formed the initial collective. The idea was to pool our resources, to get more attention, and to outreach to the community where we are, and also to start different creative projects, and to inspire each other with this project. We started a website. We have done a couple of festivals. We have a number of podcasts, interviewing each other, and they are available on iTunes. Eventually, this developed into the formation of the record label. The collective is looking into becoming a non-profit organization. So, we have created two different entities that are totally linked together, that are legally and physically separate.

**JJ:** Was there a written plan that you put together when you organized the Brooklyn Jazz Underground?

**AC:** We had a number of goals. We all wanted to share our contact information because we are from different parts of the world. I'm from Spain so I know a lot of people from Spain and Portugal. Anne Mette is from Denmark. Jerome Sabbagh is from France. Sunny Jain is from Southeast Asia, India originally. We wanted to bring things to the table that would be beneficial for all of us. We developed a system of functioning as we went along. We didn't have an established business plan. We set baby-step goals and tried to achieve them, and learn how to achieve them as we were going — kind of improvising.

**Anne Mette Iversen:** We worked for almost a year before we launched the Brooklyn Jazz Underground. Throughout that year we had meetings where we were trying to figure out how we were going to do this, what we wanted to achieve. For about a year and a half we have been looking at how it has worked, and if it works, and where are we now. We've found that it does work and that we've gotten a lot of really good things out of it. Because it has worked so well, we've decided to expand it by creating this record label.



Alexis Cuadrado

**JJ:** Are there members of the collective who bring business experience to the group, or is there a business consultant with whom you are working, who provides advice.

**AMI:** None of us really has business experience. Alexis and I run the label. It is not a record label in the traditional sense. It is artist run. It is very independent. We are not putting money into artists. The label is really a tool for artists who would like to release their albums, using this vehicle. The artists receive all the profits from any sales.

**AC:** We created a legal platform with the label, so that we could publish, as a publisher. We also had quite a bit of help from friends who are lawyers, accountants. So it has been a long period of research to figure out what kind of company we wanted to form.



Anne Mette Iversen

How do we want it to work? We had to create an operating agreement. What's an operating agreement? We didn't know anything. We have learned as we've gone along. The basic philosophy is that we are a non-profit company, and the organization provides a tool for us. Perhaps, eventually, it may be for other musicians, although we are not sure about that. But, basically we wanted this as a tool to publish our own music.

**JJ:** What are the musical goals that you have in working together?

**AC:** We haven't really set a structure like "this is the way the music has to be." We were looking more for a group of like-minded people — one that has a very strong creative personality. We also wanted people who were trying to put their work out there, and were working actively on putting out CDs, and setting up tours; and not someone with a nine to five job, and writes some music on the side. Everyone is seriously committed. That is basically the only requirement that we wanted from the members of the initial collective, and the record label has the same philosophy. We all have pretty high standards in how we want the music to be, so there's a lot of trust between the members. When we organized these festivals, there were all these meetings, and we were hanging out, and talking about tax returns and things like that. Suddenly, you see people play, and you go "Wow, this band is great." It has been very reassuring for all of us to know that everyone is very dedicated to the music.

**JJ:** What kinds of challenges do you experience as independent artists and how is the collective helping you overcome those?

**AMI:** The challenge is that it is extremely difficult to be a single musician, a bandleader, having to do all the work. This is including writing the music, running the band, getting rehearsal times together, booking the studios when you record, pay for the recordings, publish it afterwards, book the tours, do all the logistics. It's like two, three, four full-time jobs when you're doing that as a single person, a single bandleader. It is minimizing the workload of the individual that we are experiencing that the Brooklyn Jazz Underground does for us, and the record label does for us. In terms of reaching out to the public and the audience and the media, that's probably where I get the biggest benefit from these two organizations.

**JJ:** Could you talk about your musical background?

**AC:** I think I always had a creative personality. After a number of chances I ended up liking to play the bass, and loving to play jazz. When I was nineteen or twenty I was writing my own music, and having my own bands. It's kind of just become what I do. I love playing as a sideman and freelancer. But there is always the itch of having my own creative project. I

stopped worrying about why I do it. I just try to do it as best I can and have as much fun as possible.

**AMI:** I knew I wanted to play music when I was thirteen or fourteen. But I had to go through a lot of different ways. I was a classical pianist for awhile. Eventually, I ended up playing the acoustic bass and playing jazz. I had no doubts anymore. I knew it was the right thing. My instincts were guiding me.

**JJ:** Talk about your influences.

**AMI:** What has driven me more than single musicians has been when I have heard good music, or good writing. When I was playing electric bass, I was into Steve Swallow a lot, both his writing and his melodic playing was very inspiring. Because I had this long history of playing classical music, one of my main driving forces has been classical composition: Brahms, Beethoven, Dvorak. I also went through a period where Brazilian music was inspiring me. When I was younger, I listened to everything. It wasn't just jazz music.

**AC:** When I was a teenager I was into the pop music of the 1980s — luckily the good music. I feel like my music research moved backward. I started with music that was current at the time and then worked back and started discovering music from the 70s and 80s — like jazz fusion. Then I traced back to Miles Davis' second quintet, then back to bebop... Now when I listen to Louis Armstrong I am hearing things I couldn't hear before. I am gradually getting more interested in classical music from the last century, and Baroque music. I go backwards in time as my life goes forward — kind of a little weird paradox. For me, it's important that the music hits me at some emotional level. It doesn't really matter to me if its punk rock, or Steve Reich, or Charlie Parker. I really don't want to have my mind boxed in by labels. I really listen to a lot of varied stuff. Miles Davis' album *Decoy*, in the 1980s, was a breakthrough for me. I thought, "This is really cool. I want to do this." Also, Jaco Pastorius.

**AMI:** I've had two periods in my life - one where I switched from classical piano to playing bass. That was definitely because I attended this summer jazz camp, and met some of the greatest jazz musicians. I was playing bass for a year, and one of the teachers said, "Forget about the piano. Play the bass." I went home and quit the conservatory. When I came to New York, I met and took lessons with some of the great jazz musicians. They were very encouraging also.

**AC:** I was very fortunate to find this great bass teacher, Francois Rabas, who was very kind to me, showed me a lot. He is a super virtuoso, contemporary classical guy. I used to commute to Paris to study with him. He set me free to do what I wanted to do. I didn't know whether I wanted to do jazz or study classical on the bass. He told me to do whatever felt right and do it the best you can, and it will be cool.

**JJ:** In the past, jazz musicians had the opportunity to apprentice in different bands that were touring and playing every night. The economy is different now

and those opportunities don't exist. How has the absence of these opportunities, and the nature of being an independent artist, helped or hindered in your pursuit of your own voice and creative efforts?

**AC:** It still happens in a different way. I came from Europe and I'm now playing with a lot of players whose records I used to buy. Suddenly, I'm playing with somebody that I really admire. I've learned a lot by playing with musicians that I know, and from just being exposed to the New York scene. It is constantly inspiring for me. I go out to see music and get blown away a few times a month. Having conversations and traveling with people...I have a sense of community. It is very enriching.

**AMI:** My move to New York gave me some of that. I got to play a lot when I first got here. I've been here nine and a half years. If I had been playing five times a week, for ten years, my voice on my instrument would be more developed than it is at the moment. It's just a slower process if you don't get to play that much. I feel like my composing skills are developed much more. I know my own voice in my composition language. I do also playing-wise. But it may not come out as clearly on the instrument. I think that may have to do with the situation you were describing — by playing every night with the greatest of the greatest, and learning first hand.

**JJ:** Tell us about your new albums on the Brooklyn Jazz Underground label

**AMI:** I have a double CD, with my jazz quartet, and the jazz quartet with string quartet. It is called *Best of the West + Many Places*. **The quartet music came out of our playing together, new writing when we've been touring. The music with the string quartet evolved from my classical background. I wrote to fuse the two genres, but to try to keep the identity of each genre. I didn't want the strings to be background for the jazz group. I really wanted all the musicians that they were playing serious music, and doing what they do best.**

**AC:** In my case, it's a band that I've been playing with the last couple of years. I have long relationships with all the members. It was a very homemade CD, that culminated with the formation of the record label. I have a music room here at home, and we rehearse all the material here. I decided that I was going to record the CD at home. So I hired an engineer and we recorded the CD in my living room. So, it's very linked to the house where I live — my wife and I. We bought the house and we've been fixing it for the last four years. While we were working on the house, I was writing all this music. Both project grew together. Doing it here at home, it was a lot of fun and very relaxed. It has a strong identity. It was almost like the way the Blue Note records used to be made in Rudy Van Gelder's living room. There were a few panels between us. We weren't using any headphones. The musicians sound phenomenal. They understand the personality of each piece. It's pretty straight-ahead with influences of things I like, such as pop music, world music, Spanish music. It definitely has a jazz essence with a modern kind of take. ■

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