

PHOTO BY KATE DELACORTE / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



# DAVID OSTWALD

BY MARILYN LESTER

*David Ostwald began studying piano at 7, taking up the tuba at 11, headed, he thought, for a career in classical music. But then, in his junior year at the University of Chicago, the jazz bug bit. Ostwald was already primed, having discovered the joys of Louis Armstrong while still in high school. He formed his first jazz band at that time and after moving to New York, the Swarthmore, PA native created the Gully Low Jazz Band, which in 2000 morphed into the Louis Armstrong Eternity Band with a weekly gig at Birdland. His second album, with blues great Big Joe Turner, was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1986. Ostwald has performed with the likes of Wynton Marsalis, Dick Hyman, Nicholas Payton, Clark Terry, Benny Waters, Woody Allen, Jon Hendricks, Leon Redbone and the Oxford University Orchestral Society under Sir Jack Westrup. For many years, he has also presented jazz education programs for children at Lincoln Center's "Meet the Artist" and "Reel to Real" series and at the Louis Armstrong House in Corona, Queens. He has also written extensively about jazz music.*

**The New York City Jazz Record:** As we know all too well, the pandemic has wiped out most gigs. But recently, you've been playing outdoors at Holocaust Memorial Plaza and also recorded for Radio Free Birdland's streaming series. What was that latter experience like, playing to an essentially empty house?

**David Ostwald:** Over the years we all get used to playing for an empty room. So, I just pretended that there were people there! I draw inspiration from Louis Armstrong — as I always do — who, once at a concert in North Dakota where there was a huge blizzard, played to five people in a 2,000 seat hall. He said, they showed up, so we're gonna play. So, we just had to psych ourselves into thinking that there was an audience there. I went through all my usual shtick. I asked the audience to please remain seated, even though they weren't there, so it was fun. As for the park, it's dependent on the weather, but it's a really nice experience for us and for the audience, especially in these times. It's a fun thing. So, I encourage people to check out when we're playing there because there's also a natural dance floor. We've been getting a lot of swing dancers, which we never had at Birdland.

**TNYCJR:** You were thwarted in having a major celebration this past year.

**DO:** Yes, and it was quite jarring to have to stop everything, having been used to playing for 20 years every week. March 11th, 2020 was our last regular Wednesday at Birdland and May 8th was going to be our big 20th anniversary. I'm very proud of that. We were going to really celebrate that.

**TNYCJR:** Prior to Birdland, you had a long run as the Gully Low Jazz Band. I'm curious about that name.

**DO:** I came to New York in the late '70s, right after

college. I used to hang out at the Red Blazer Too, a club that had a different band every night. That's where I first met Vince Giordano. I'd tape all the bands, with their permission, and go home and learn the tunes. After a certain point, I realized I was doing gigs with other people's bands but I didn't have my own band yet. You think to yourself, well maybe I'd like to play the music my own way. So, I started putting together a group of people that I played with and one night I said to the owner, I don't want to take anyone's gig away, but if there's an opening, I have a band, although I didn't really have one yet. I wasn't expecting him to say yes, but he did and asked, what's the name of your band? The first thing that came to my mind was a Hot Seven tune running through my head at the time called "Gully Low Blues". I had to appear as though I already had a name for the band so that's how that got started.

I stuck with the name though, because we started getting a lot of work. Fast forward to 2000 and the 100th anniversary of what Louis Armstrong thought was his birth date of July 4th, 1900. I'd become good friends with George Avakian, who was a great supporter of the band and who thought it would be a good idea to talk to the owner of Birdland, Gianni Valenti, about starting a gig there. Gianni was all for it, but for publicity purposes, wanted to give the band an identity. I was a little bit leery about the name change because my idea of the band has never been to imitate anything anybody does, but rather to be inspired by them. I didn't want to be trapped into being identified with Louis Armstrong, so for a while we used both names. We started gathering a following and as 2003 came along it looked like we were safe that the gig was going to be ongoing — so the name stuck.

**TNYCJR:** Along the way you've had the distinction of having some major guests sitting in with the band.

**DO:** Some of them weren't famous at the time, but then got famous, like Wycliffe Gordon and Anat Cohen. They both still play with us from time to time. Names aren't important. My attitude is that no matter how famous you are, everyone in the band is the same. My number one rule of bandleading is not to have any players who don't fit in because the band's just not going to sound good. Part of the reason we get the sound we do is because we make each other laugh. We listen to each other, we like each other, we enjoy each other and people can feel that. Solid musicians know their roles as sidemen even if they're leaders of their own bands, like Wynton Marsalis. When I've played with him, I'm a sideman. It's a dynamic we all respect.

**TNYCJR:** Besides the band's sound, what do you strive to achieve in performance? If I'm sitting in the audience, listening to you, what is it that you want me to experience?

**DO:** Heart to heart. That's what I want. I want you to

be moved to joy or sadness or reflection or whatever it is without a filter. That's what Louis Armstrong did for people. And it was direct from one soul to the other. What my goal is is to have the band be one soul and emotionally on the same page. And I want that to go directly to someone else's heart, without them thinking about anything, without barriers. The variety of people who one can affect if we're doing our job properly is infinite. It's as infinite as nature.

**TNYCJR:** You were attracted to the music of Armstrong around age 15. What is it that clicked, whereupon you said, Oh, my God, this is the guy for me?

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 25)

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

**DO:** This is what I was just talking about. What I want to project with the band is what he did to me in an instant. I felt like every human emotion was embodied in every note that he played. He gave me chills down my spine. He made me cry. He made me joyous. He made me think about other people. He seems to hit all the common nerves of humanity and it just knocked me over, that there could be one person who could do that. “Swing That Music” in particular. As a 15-year-old full of pep and vigor, I was excited by the speed and the unbridled joy of the music. And so that’s what kind of caught my attention. That was the first one. I started getting more and more interested in reading about him and learning about him, learning about how he lived his life and how he was treated and how he treated other people, how he dealt with adversity and it all matched up with his playing.

**TNYCJR:** Was your attraction to the tuba as dramatic as your discovery of Armstrong?

**DO:** The passage of time has revealed an answer, but it took a while for me actually to realize what it was about the tuba because for years, when I was asked that question, I would give a flippant sort of silly answer. Like how can you not want to play the tuba? A few years ago, I was hanging out with a friend of mine who showed me a clip of a 1965 ballet of *Romeo and Juliet* with Margot Fonteyn. There was a musical section called “March of the Capulets”, which has the most incredible, beautiful, heavy, deep tuba part. I’d actually seen that production when I was 10. Shortly after, I was passing the band room in school as we were running out for recess. I saw the tuba there. It was actually a sousaphone, the kind that wraps around. It was gold and beautiful. And, as I remember it, there was a ray of sunshine coming in through the window onto this golden horn. I screeched on the brakes, like in a cartoon, and I ran in and I started blowing on it. The band director came out and gave me my first lesson on the spot. I realized when I saw the clip that there was a connection between it and learning to play the tuba. That ballet experience sunk into my head and it changed my life. Since then all I ever wanted to do was to have kids and play the tuba in that order.

**TNYCJR:** And because of that first desire you also became a lawyer.

**DO:** I did. In the beginning I tried to keep it secret that I was a lawyer because I didn’t want people to think I was a part-time musician. I found a position where I could cut out to do gigs and I never turned down any gigs. I didn’t make huge amounts like some lawyers do, but I made enough to assure an income and I was able to do gigs along the way. I had worked for two years for a lawyer who did personal injury and divorce cases and I really hated it. So, I quit without another job. I wasn’t married at that time. When I did go back to being an attorney, during my interview my prospective employer allowed that he’d spoken to my old boss and learned I’d leave the office for a gig from time to time. I wanted to be up front about it, so I told him that most of my gigs are at night or on weekends so those won’t affect the job. I added that occasionally a gig will come up during the day and I won’t turn it down. Let me assure you, I said, if you hire me, I’ll continue to do that. He hired me and it worked out. I’ve been very lucky.

**TNYCJR:** How do you feel about the future?

**DO:** We can’t be stopped. At some point we’re going to be back at Birdland. I’m sure of that. I think that, before you know it, things will ease back into where they were. Hopefully, having lost so much, I think that people will appreciate more what they have, because of

what was taken away from them. And so, I’m optimistic about the future, not only for my band, but also for humanity. As for streaming and virtual concerts—for music, it really needs to be live, so those platforms we rely on now will fade away eventually. And on a bright note, things are beginning to pick up. On April 30th on International Jazz Day, we’re going to be doing a live stream from Flushing Town Hall. We’re going to be playing at the Newport Jazz Festival on July 30th and we also have a concert that Ricky Riccardi of the Louis Armstrong House runs at Ocean County Community College in Toms River, New Jersey on June 27th. ❖

*For more information, visit [ostwaldjazz.com](http://ostwaldjazz.com). Ostwald’s Louis Armstrong Eternity Band live-streams Apr. 30th at [flushingtownhall.org](http://flushingtownhall.org).*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Big Joe Turner — *With Knocky Parker And His Houserockers* (Southland, 1983)
- Gully Low Jazz Band — *In Dreamland* (G.H.B., 1983)
- David Ostwald’s Gully Low Jazz Band — *Down To Earth* (G.H.B., 1985)
- The New York Allstars — *We Love You, Louis!* (Nagel Heyer, 1995)
- David Ostwald’s Gully Low Jazz Band — *Blues In Our Heart* (Nagel Heyer, 1998)
- Randy Sandke and The New York Allstars — *George Avakian Presents: The Re-Discovered Louis and Bix* (Nagel Heyer, 1999)

(ENCORE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

the clubs, met a lot of musicians and did a few sessions and I said, ‘there’s still something I wanna do’. Then I got a call from Ray Charles. I think I joined Ray in 1970 and I worked with him ’70 through ’72 and part of... actually I worked with Ray off and on for the next 25, 30 years.”

It was also in 1970 that he met Gene Russell, who was about to get Black Jazz Records off the ground. Keys realized his dream of producing his own albums, *Shawn-Neeq* (1971) and *Proceed with Caution* (1974). “‘Cause it was a movement going on then. Whatever you’re about you better proceed with caution in this madness. And I had that experience. We were going through the same thing that we’re going through now, but it was 50 years ago!”

In 2020, Keys took part in the Black Jazz 50th Anniversary tour with Doug Carn, Henry Franklin, Michael Carvin and Jean Carne, breaking attendance records at performance halls in Paris and Berlin before the pandemic put a stop to everything.

After his first stint with Charles, around 1974 is when Keys got the opportunity to join Jamal’s trio with bassist Jamil Nasser and drummer Frank Gant. “He called me and he gave me a couple charts and we started playing some of his music. He looked at me and he said, ‘Calvin, do you read that well?’ I said, ‘tell you the truth, no, I don’t, but I know all your music because my aunts and uncles used to play it on the weekends, that’s how I learned most of the stuff.’ [laughs] He was just an incredible master of this American classical art form.” Between Charles and Jamal, when he wasn’t working with one, he was working with the other for decades to follow.

Keys has two albums in the can, including *Silver Keys* dedicated to Horace Silver and *Simply Calvin* coming out on LifeForce Records. As soon as the venues start opening again, he’ll be back on the bandstand as he’s been for over 60 years.

“I’ve been so blessed, it’s unbelievable, to be able to play this music. I’m fortunate enough to [have been] in the company of some of the greatest musicians on the planet and I’m still searching for that note. This music is one of the most powerful forces on the planet. It’s all about life and love... Without this music, what

would it be?” ❖

*For more information, visit [calvinkeysjazz.com](http://calvinkeysjazz.com)*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Calvin Keys — *Shawn-Neeq* (Black Jazz, 1971)
- Ahmad Jamal — *Steppin’ Out With a Dream* (20th Century Fox, 1977)
- Calvin Keys — *Standard Keys* (LifeForce, 1992)
- Calvin Keys — *Detours Into Unconscious Rhythms* (Wide Hive, 1999)
- Gloria Coleman — *Sweet Missy* (Doodlin’, 2007)
- Calvin Keys — *Electric Keys* (Wide Hive, 2012)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8)

using elements of classical music and jazz, the latter heavily influenced by Ellington.”

His Ellington connections also continued in his semi-retirement years. “He got to play Duke Ellington’s role on piano in Clark Terry’s Spaceman bands, tributes to the Duke, on summer tours in the ‘90s,” remembers Bell-Stevens. Aaron Bell died in 2003 at 82. He would have turned 100 this year on Apr. 24th. ❖

*Jazzmobile’s “Keep The Music Playing” celebrates Bell’s centennial on International Jazz Day, Apr. 30th, on JZMTV. For more information, visit [jazzmobile.org](http://jazzmobile.org).*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Aaron Bell — *After The Party’s Over* (RCA Victor, 1958)
- Duke Ellington Orchestra — *The Nutcracker Suite* (Columbia, 1960)
- Duke Ellington — *Piano in the Foreground* (Columbia-Legacy, 1961)
- Duke Ellington — *Meets Coleman Hawkins* (Impulse, 1962)
- Cat Anderson — *Plays W.C. Handy (Definitive Black & Blue Sessions)* (Black & Blue, 1978)
- Harold Ashby — *I’m Old Fashioned* (Stash, 1991)

(LABEL CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9)

expect to make money. Some of the albums have met their buy back and the artists make money off of it and we make a bit to put towards future releases. Overall it has been incredibly successful and we’re going to keep pushing forward and putting music out.”

Whereas Hopkins and Clark schedule the physical releases so they are far enough apart that they can devote attention to the production and marketing, they aim to issue Untamed albums as fast as possible. Upcoming physical releases include *Asp Nimbus* from cellist Christopher Hoffman’s quartet and a solo guitar/banjo outing from Wendy Eisenberg while the latest editions of Untamed are live documents from Jonathan Goldberger/Simon Jermyn/Mat Maneri/Gerald Cleaver and a saxophone/drum duo from Chicago pair Nick Mazzarella and Quin Kirchner.

Beside sharing music, OOOYH has engendered other benefits. “In hindsight it was a great thing for me to start when I left NY. The record label has been an incredible way, especially during COVID, to stay in touch with people, still be involved in the music scene and hear about all this great music that’s coming out. I was pleasantly surprised that my friends kept calling me to play with them.” ❖

*For more information, visit [outofyourheadrecords.com](http://outofyourheadrecords.com). Live-streaming events this month are Nick Mazzarella/Hamid Drake on Apr. 4th at [constellation-chicago.com](http://constellation-chicago.com); Anna Webber with Simon Jermyn, Devin Gray/Simon Jermyn with Nick Dunston, Cansu Tanrikulu, Jim Black on Apr. 6th at [a-trane.de](http://a-trane.de); and NEA Jazz Masters Presents: Henry Threadgill with Christopher Hoffman, David Virelles and Román Filiú on Apr. 22nd at [arts.gov/about/news/2020/national-endowment-arts-announces-2021-nea-jazz-masters](http://arts.gov/about/news/2020/national-endowment-arts-announces-2021-nea-jazz-masters).*