

Tim Green

And The Winner Is ...

Interview by Nora McCarthy

Every so often, I run across someone in this business that has it so together to the extent that he/she uplifts, inspires and fortifies me through their hard work, dedication, attitude, ethics, and positive energy. It was my recent pleasure to talk with Tim Green, an exciting young, talented and savvy musician, composer-arranger who is on the *Go* and breaking some serious ground on the jazz scene with his new release, *Songs For This Season*, and his many collaborations, projects, and tours.

JJ: Thank you Tim for joining us here at *Jazz Inside Magazine* and welcome. We are happy to introduce you and your music to our readership and looking forward to learning more about you and sharing your personal perspectives and insights into the music and your experiences thus far.

TG: Likewise, I really appreciate your putting me in your magazine. I don't take it for granted, that's for sure.

JJ: So let's get started: who is Tim Green? I know you're from Baltimore. What was the catalyst that brought you into the spotlight as "an emerging powerful new voice on the jazz scene today.?" It took me a couple of days to get

“...these guys are coming to the schools now and putting their ears to the ground to see who the new guy is, to see who is somebody who would enjoy playing in their band. It's the new recruiting ground for all the young musicians now.”

around and check out all of your stuff and I see that you're really having a nice life right now.

TG: Yes, it's been great. I recently graduated from the Monk Institute in 2007. I've really had some great opportunities to play with a lot of people and I've been enjoying it—it's been a great ride so far. One of my first gigs was with Mulgrew Miller and that was in 2008. He hired me to play with his trio. That was right after I came in second place at the Thelonius Monk Saxophone Competition in 2008. So that was

one of the first big gigs I got. After that I got a call to sub for Steve Wilson in Christian McBride's Band, *Inside Straight*. Those were the two main breaks that pretty much got me out there on the jazz scene. After I played a couple towns with Christian McBride,

we went to Japan and Carl Allen was in the band and then he hired me. Eric Reed plays in that group sometimes as well. After that I started playing with Eric Reed a little. It pretty much started snowballing. That pretty much gave me a lot of validation on the scene.

JJ: That's interesting. How did you meet Mulgrew? How did he know about you? How did he know to call you?

TG: What happens at the Monk Institute is that they give every one of the students there an opportunity to bring whomever they want to bring there to conduct a master class. For the last semester, I had been checking out a lot of Mulgrew Miller's records, one in particular was *Live at Yoshi's* and I said, "I gotta meet Mulgrew Miller." His music touched me so much that I thought if I had the opportunity to bring anybody in, for me it had to be Mulgrew Miller. So he came out and did the master class and was such a great mentor to me there. He started passing out a lot of his music for us to play in the ensemble. I really fell in love with his original music and I held on to a lot of the charts. So, when I got back

to Baltimore playing my own gigs between Baltimore and New York, I started playing a lot of his music. I would just call him on the phone or send him an email to check in with him. What I started doing was just playing his tunes and I would send him emails with me playing his songs.

JJ: You loved his music—it was through that love that brought you to the attention of Mulgrew Miller.



TG: Yes, it was through the love of his music and from then on he called me to play with his band, Wingspan. Then he called me to go to Europe with him. We built a great relationship. He was a mentor to me. It used to be you could go to a club and Art Blakey would be auditioning. Now, a lot of the guys are coming to these schools and recruiting the next new guy at the school. A lot of those guys would come by the school. I met Stefon Harris, We almost got a chance to work together but I was unable to do the gig that he called me for. But these guys are coming to the schools now and putting their ears to the ground to see who the new guy is, to see who is somebody who would enjoy playing in their band. It's the new recruiting ground for all the young musicians now. When young musicians come to the school they get a chance to play for whoever is there—whether it is Ron Carter or whoever it might be. From there a lot of guys from my generation are building relationships and are able to make gigs with a lot of the better musicians now.

JJ: What do you think about the opportunities in the clubs and in particular this city. There are places to play but there's the clubs that are for the big names who have made it up to the major leagues where they are actually getting paid, maybe not into their pensions or stuff, but they are actually getting paid and they're getting the visibility and are in the circuit. Then there are all the clubs underneath that that aren't giving anybody anything but a stage—a lot of door gigs. What do you think of the opportunities for a lot of the young guys who are leaving the scholastic arena and looking at this new landscape so to

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speak. What would you tell them about getting their music heard and their names out there?

TG: It's really hard now for all the musicians who are coming out now. All of my friends that I went to school with are all doing well, for the most part. It took a while for us. It took us going through the whole academic thing and meeting different people. The opportunities are there—you just have to have something special about you. You have to really dig deep on your instrument and really be a virtuoso—really soulful and have something that speaks to people, through the music. Once people get the word about you and how you're playing on gigs, then the word travels fast and you'll be able to work. But, you definitely have to be strategic about how you do it and kind of figure out a way to do that. I spent a lot of time in New York playing gigs at Smalls and I still do that. I just wanted to be as visible as possible and hang around all the musicians that I really wanted to play with.

JJ: Grass roots visibility.

TG: Yes, grass roots visibility. Playing those gigs in New York—no matter how small it is, anybody could pop up to the club. I played a gig down at Smalls and Kenny Garrett came down and he hung out. So, those grass root gigs in New York—people come out and listen to you and the next thing you know they can take you on the road or you can be in somebody's band or someone might be in a restaurant listening to you playing a gig. I did a broadcast on NPR when my new record came out and all types of people were listening. You never know who could walk into the club or who might be scouting you out. If the money isn't that much or the exposure isn't that much there's always somebody who could be coming from a gig at the Blue Note. Anybody could stop in—Wynton could stop in—anybody. It's still a good breeding ground for musicians; you just have to work hard and really bring it—no matter if it pays fifty dollars or a hundred dollars, if you're serious about it.

JJ: So what you are essentially saying is first and foremost you must be an excellent musician and as good as you can be on your instrument. Then, you just get out there and do it and the rest of it is just the development of the artist that comes in due course as you're moving through your life.

TG: That's right.

JJ: As somebody who never entered a competition in her life, I am curious to know what you think about competitions in general and in particular, the well-respected and recognized Thelonius Monk Competition—what did you learn from that experience?

TG: One thing I learned from it is that it is definitely a competition. A lot of guys who are in a competition and who didn't necessarily place

high, but they are incredible musicians are out here working a lot. So many guys who auditioned that I was surprised didn't make it, are among some of the great musicians who are working a lot on the scene. So that's what I got out of it, that it *is* a competition and that you play like it's a competition. You have to be very strategic about what songs you are playing, and who is with you, and how you can allow yourself to stick out. That was the main thing. But after that, for me at least, it worked out to be a great opportunity just in general, for visibility. After I was in that competition, I was mentioned in a jazz magazine for the first time. It's one of those opportunities that if you take advantage of it, at least try to go into it and really try to swing and play with some soul, at the end of the day, people will feel pretty much what you're playing. A good friend of mine, Quamon Fowler, placed third. I always tell this story but he came in and played with such soul, so much feeling and so much blues that he just wiped everybody out. It's one of those platforms that can work for you but it's not the end of the world if it doesn't work out for you. I know some people who had different experience with it.

JJ: You're testing yourself to see if you've got what it takes in terms of focus and the confidence to put yourself out there for people to judge you.

TG: To have people judge you—yes that's one of the major things. You have to be secure in who you are.

JJ: You have to be secure and ego cannot come on the set at all.

TG: No way, because you are being judged by the masters—the panel. When I did it, it was: Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath, Greg Osby, David Sanchez, and Jane Ira Bloom. But it is a competition for sure. So many great musicians who would do it, except they got bummed out about it because they think the judging is based on who is better than who, or who can play better but that's not the case. It's a competition. It's about how you play that night. If you play, in some kind of way that they see it as different from somebody else, then you're going to win the competition. But it is a competition that's all it is. It doesn't have to do with whether or not you'll be working as a musician. It will help you but it is a competition.

JJ: It's a very powerful platform but you have to really strip yourself down and lay prostrate on the ground in front of these people who judge you and be willing to take whatever it is they have to say, so it would have to make you better as a human being and as a performer and give you a sense of accomplishment that, "I did that. I put myself to task and I did that." That is a nice feeling that I can only imagine.

TG: Oh yes, I definitely felt accomplished after I did it. Of course, I wanted to win the first place prize, so I was little bummed out about it because I came that far and I wanted to win. Everybody wants to win but in the end I felt blessed to

be thought of and for those masters of the music to place me in that position. Having Wayne Shorter and Greg Osby, two of my influences, pick me out of a pile of other musicians and find something special about me—that really meant a lot.

JJ: It sounds like you did win and there's a saying that second place in many instance ends up having the greater advantage and gets the most from it. That being said, with endorsements from some very high level artists such as: Mulgrew Miller, Christian McBride, Terrance Blanchard, Kenny Garrett, Eric Reed, Carl Allen, Rodney Whitaker comes a heavy responsibility. How do you stay centered and focused on the mission?

TG: For the most part I just try to take it day-by-day and just keep doing what I'm doing and try to always stay connected with some of my heroes on the saxophone, and try to stay humble and always be open to their advice and things that they can offer me. I talked to Kenny Garrett the other day for a little while. He's always very encouraging to me anytime I talk to him. It doesn't have to be about music—just to get a chance to talk with him and build our relationship. I just did a thing down in Buffalo with Martin Gross who is from Baltimore. He's always encouraging. So I try not to get overwhelmed for the most part. I just try to keep doing what I'm doing—allowing the passion of the music to push me where it needs to go. I really don't see any big overwhelming mission, I just try to stay practicing and make sure that I'm living up to whatever expectations people have for me and if I get a phone call or an email, it could be anybody saying, "I really enjoyed what you did." That really encourages me to keep going. When I put out my last record, I got an email from Miguel Zenon saying he really enjoyed the music. That was very encouraging. Just that he took the time to let me know that I'm going in the right direction and that I'm at least doing something right, meant a lot to me. It allows me to know that I'm on the right path. As long as I keep practicing, writing the music, trying to book my own band, or be a great side man and a good servant of the music, in whatever way that it's presented to me to serve, then I'll be okay. I'm always happy to do that. To remain honest to how I hear the music and play this music the way they hear me playing it.

JJ: That's a good regimen and belief system to have. You meld three distinctly strongly rooted musical forms: swinging hard bop, fluid modernity, and soulful gospel making a complete art form, with all the necessary components and elements that gives it remarkable stability while still remaining open to possibility. Please describe for me your particular musical direction and who was a key influence in terms of developing your musical voice?

TG: The influences for me in the beginning were Charlie Parker, because of the virtuosity and technique he had on his instrument and the soulfulness at the same time. It was also John Coltrane because of the spirituality that came

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through his music, but he could also be very soulful and technical and play a lot of changes but there was always soul in the middle of it—some type of cry in his playing. After that, my dad had a lot of fusion records around the house. He listened to Dave Weckl, Spyro Gyra, Dave Grusin and all kinds of bands like that. So I got into fusion and just started hearing that sound in my mind. After that point, I started playing in the horn section for Fred Hammond, Israel Houghton and just every gospel artist out there. I started playing with them and at the same time I was in New York going to the Jazz Gallery. I was at all these different clubs that had a more modern sounding music. I was hanging out with my friend, Ambrose Akinmusire a lot and he's all about modern music. His mentor is Steve Coleman. So, I just had all of these different things and at the same time, I love to swing. I'd go down to the Jazz Gallery every weekend and hear Steve Coleman and I would hear Mark Turner and I would hear Tyshawn Sorey, Vijay Iyer, all those cats. I kind of stayed on the modern edge by hanging out with Ambrose a lot. Then I was playing Gospel at the same time. I would go to the Jazz Gallery to listen to the more modern music and see what guys were composing and then get really inspired by that. It brought everything together with regard to that sound that people hear when they hear my music. A friend of mine calls it, Coltrane/Pat Metheny style of music.

JJ: So you like all music? Ornette, Sam Rivers, Eric Dolphy, et al, you like it all.

TG: Yes, I love all types of music if it has some type of reckless abandon and a different facet to it, I love it. One thing I love so much about Eric Dolphy's story is that he would go out and play in that way then he'd come home off the road and go to church. When you think about spiritual music you think that it would be very meditative and stuff like that but Eric Dolphy, from what I know from what I've read about him, was just into that style of playing. It's hard but it was an honest thing for him and I love that. I love anyone just being true. I can take the squeaks, the soulfulness and the bending of the notes. It is just so honestly what they are.

JJ: Talk about your *Songs From This Season*, is that your most recent release? What was the motivation behind the album, the concept, the compositions and if any of them have a special meaning for you and lastly how did you choose your impressive sideman, and talk about them a bit also: pianist Orrin Evans, vibraphonist Warren Wolf, guitarist Gilad Hekselman, drummers Rodney Green and Obed Calvaire.

TG: I had all this music that I wrote on my computer so I knew I wanted to record the music. I knew I wanted to do a straight-ahead jazz record. I had two sessions with guys who I thought could really swing and really do that well: Rod-

ney Green, drums; Kris Funn, bass; Warren Wolf, vibraphone; Orrin Evans, piano. That's it. I had a lot of things that I wrote inspired and influenced by Wayne Shorter and Miles Davis' Quintet—who are some of my favorite bands. Another session I did was with Gilad Hekselman, and Obed Calvaire, drums, Josh Ginsberg, bass; Allyn Johnson, piano, and Romain Collin, piano/synthesizer. I really wanted to get that straight eighth type of sound that kind of comes across on a lot of my compositions. When I went to the studio to record it, I went with the musicians that I felt could really bring those songs to life the most and what they might feel the most comfortable with. That's why I have so many musicians on the album. I realized after I got everything recorded that every song that I wrote was based on a certain time or season in my life and at that point I came up with the title, *Songs From This Season*. One song is dedicated to my wife, it's called, "ChiTown." She went to school in Chicago. That was a pet name that I used to call her. It's about love and marriage and stuff like that. Micah Smith is singing on that one. "Don't Explain," that one represents a time when I was going through a relationship and going through a break up and things like that. So at that time I was going through a season of very real experiences. One of the songs I wrote in 2002, "Wild Souls," that's a sad song about where I grew up in Baltimore City around the inner city. I was one of the fortunate ones to make it out of the neighborhood where I grew up.

JJ: I especially like, "Time For Liberation."

TG: Spike Lee came to the Monk Institute and did a master class and the stuff he was saying was just so inspiring. It was him and Terrance Blanchard and he was just talking to us. That came out of the inspiration from his master class.

JJ: What direction do you want to take with your art/career and do you lead the music or does it lead you?

TG: The next album I am going to do is going to be a trio record of all standards. I feel like I want to just deal with that—similar to Kenny Garrett's *Triology*—really being freed up to play some standards with the bass and drums. Right now at this moment, I'm really interested in swinging. There are so many guys of my generation that can do that quite well as well as other stuff. I'm just really interested in playing swing right now and doing it very well. I'm trying to be a little more open minded about the type of gigs that I might play. I want to be open to playing a little tenor or playing different instruments, or composing something for different ensembles. I was talking to a friend of mine who was playing tenor on *The Late Night Show with Jay Leno* and we had a conversation and he said something that I already mentioned but he said, "You know, just be a servant of the music and be able to make music out of anything." I was talking to Mark Gross who is 48 years old. He's been out here for years working with so many different bands. I just want to have longevity and be known as a great musician, somebody that can

play his own music but that can also fit in and know how to phrase other people's music and be in a lot of different situations. That's my long term goal as a musician thus far.

JJ: Do you travel a lot—do you go out of the country a lot—have you done anything in Europe yet?

TG: Yes, I've been in Europe a few times. Pretty much all of September. I was in Switzerland with Eric Reid's Quartet. I just got back from Doha Qatar. I'll be in Japan in this summer and, I just recently starting playing some with Michael Blublé as well. I've been playing in his band and we're supposed to be doing some traveling to Europe and Australia. My goal in the next year or so is to get my own band overseas.

JJ: What about any management, who handles your business? Are you looking for management? It's hard for musicians to do both I think.

TG: It is hard and it's funny you ask that because this month was the first time I've really considered having a manager—to find somebody who can assist me and manage my career and different opportunities that come my way. I'm noticing that I'm needing that more and more. I get different inquiries on my website and people might see that I'm going to be in a certain city or might be in a different country. They'll send me a message saying "I see, you're going to be here, could you do this and could you do that?" If I had a manager they could see that opportunity and maybe turn it into something. I would definitely like to have a manager; someone who could create some different opportunities and open up some doors.

JJ: What about record labels? You have your own I know but usually when you do something for a label they take on some of that work of getting your tours together and promoting you.

TG: That's something as well. The top of this year has been a year that I felt that now I need to do that and I've been in contact with a few different labels. The labels that I'm looking at now and trying to work with are: Motema Records and possibly Mack Avenue. I'm slow walking my own career right now. First thing is to put out my own record. I just really want to have all of the creative control over that, and put that statement out to get the work, and also to put something out for the labels to hear. Once I have that bait out there, my plan for this year is to try and shop that around and get some labels interested in me getting on board—taking the load off of my own hands.

JJ: What's one piece of wisdom you'd give to a younger musician based on the path you've taken thus far.

TG: The first piece of wisdom would be to practice of course. Second thing is to find a mentor. Find somebody that you can ask questions. Find somebody that you can trust and that you can be vulnerable with and that you can receive correc-

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tion and advice from. There are so many things you have to learn. I've made mistakes and I will continue to make mistakes. Find somebody who you love as a musician and a person—some who you would want to follow around and go to their shows and ask questions and be willing to build a relationship with. Call them on Thanksgiving, call them on their birthday and build relationships with people whose music and career you love because you want to get all the guidance. You need to know how to be a sideman on the gig. You need to know how to handle your business. You need to know how to maneuver in the jazz scene. You need to have contacts. A lot of these things don't come just by sending emails to people that you just don't know. You have to have some type of buffer, somebody in the middle that can vouch for you. That person for me was Mulgrew. There are so many different questions, so many unspoken rules in jazz, how to carry yourself and how to just be on the jazz scene or how to conduct yourself in a rehearsal, how to handle the money at the end of the gig, how to be on stage. You need to know these things that can make or break your career, so find somebody—who can have your back and really help you out here in the scene. It is really important for sure.

JJ: What is your daily regimen like? Do you work out? Do you meditate? What do you eat?

Earlier you used the word, "longevity," that's a very important word because it is important to think in terms of the long term. Do you have any specific things that you do for your mind/body/spirit?

TG: Definitely. In the mornings I usually get up early around seven o'clock. I have a ten month old son. I've been married for three years. So I get up kind of early before my wife and son get up and I'll pray and I'll read some things or find some inspiration. I've been checking out different books—any type of self-help books: the bible, other religions, anything—it can be something I find on Twitter or Facebook. I'm always searching for something in the morning that will grab my attention. After that my wife usually gets up and goes to work and I take my son to day care. Once I get with that, some days I teach. I teach at Morgan State University in Baltimore. Eating wise, I pretty much stay away from all red meat. My wife is a vegetarian, I go to the gym and work out as much as possible, more on the road. I'm always reading something, some kind of book or something. Keeping that bubble of positivity and great energy around me and within my circle is the whole thing.

JJ: Talk about upcoming performances, new works or anything that I haven't prompted you for that you'd like our readers to know.

TG: There's a new band that I've been invited to be a part of. My friend Ulysses Owens is in the group, Michael Dease is in the group, Taka-

"Encroachment of freedom will not come about through one violent action or movement but will come about through a series of actions that appear to be unrelated and coincidental, but that were all along systematically planned for dictatorship."

- John Adams, 2nd U.S. President

shi Matsunaga, Yasushi Nakamura, and Benny Benack. We just formed a band called the New Century Jazz Sextet. We just recorded a record for a Japanese label and that's going to be coming out in May and available for purchase and features a lot of original music. The goal and concept of this band is to try to play in the style of those Art Blakey arrangements and be swinging with a lot of soul and energy and playing songs with grooves.

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