



Jazz Album Reviews and Commentary: Jazz Composers' Omnibus 2024, Take 2

January 8, 2025 | By Steve Elman

In four (more) projects from 2024, jazz-oriented composers supply some of the decade's best music so far.

. . . in times like these, to have you listen at all . . . — Adrienne Rich

In August, I [looked at four releases](#) from some respected names in jazz composition, and found much worthwhile music, although not as much as I had hoped for. By contrast, four more composition-oriented releases came to my attention by the end of 2024 — by Frank Carlberg, Kevin Harris, Jamie Baum, and Florian Weber — and each one of them is a jewel. I have given each a good deal of listening (just as they deserved), and I had the additional pleasure of hearing some of Kevin Harris's music played live, which enriched my understanding powerfully.

The listening was also a sobering experience in a way that had nothing to do with the music. Here are four artists of consummate ability making music that is rich and worthwhile. But in the sea of music we inhabit — a sea of music that is audible wallpaper everywhere we go, emotional drapery in our films and games, an engine for our on-stage spectacles or ecstatic dance experiences, and all the other utilitarian functions that vie with serious appreciation — I repeatedly wondered: How will listeners who could love this music find their ways to it? How will they listen? Can the creators sustain themselves on the tiny segment of the public that will find their music and involve themselves in it?

I also wondered, who are the people who are giving this music the hearing it deserves? At least two of the composers I spotlight here are cultivating their audiences directly. The other two give concerts, but I'm not sure how well they are received.

It was gratifying to see some of these astute listeners personally, when Kevin Harris played the Regattabar in Cambridge in December 2024 and performed much of the music on his new recording *Embers*. Harris (an Associate Professor at Berklee) has seized the challenge of self-marketing and built his audience from the ground up. The house at the Regattabar was full and the response to Harris's art was enthusiastic.

Jamie Baum (who teaches at the Manhattan School of Music) is also an assiduous self-marketer, and I suspect that her audience, which is mostly NYC-based, turns out for performances by her "Septet +" with a commitment like that of Harris's.

Frank Carlberg, a three-time MacDowell Fellow, augments his performances (again mostly in the NYC area) with academic connections — he teaches jazz performance and composition at the New England Conservatory, and directs the NEC Jazz Composers' Workshop Ensemble.

Florian Weber is based in Germany; according to his handsome website, he has married an active performance career in both classical and jazz contexts with academic positions to create what appears to be a sustainable way of life.

But not one of these four is in any sense "popular." Perhaps that does not matter to any of them. But it is a heartbreak to me that in a time when music can provide so much sustenance for the soul their work is appreciated by so few.

The four recordings here (along with Bruno Råberg's *Evolver*, which I reviewed in August), are among the best things I heard in 2024, and their impact will stay with me for quite a while.

This post will look at each one in turn, approximately in the order of the project's relationship to "traditional" jazz performances.

When I heard Kevin Harris's quintet at the Regattabar on December 6 last year, I knew right away that his new CD *Embers* (independently released on Kevin Harris Project Records) needed to be part of this end-of-year survey.



Kevin Harris, pianist, composer and leader of the Kevin Harris Project. Photo Credit: Robert Torres

For the most part, Harris works in the frame of a small group, but his ideas are big. Comparing his writing to that of Charles Mingus in the early '60s and Herbie Hancock in the late '60s is not faint praise. He stands on the shoulders of these masters, adds a singular personal voice, and has recruited strongly individualistic players to give his music definitive interpretation.

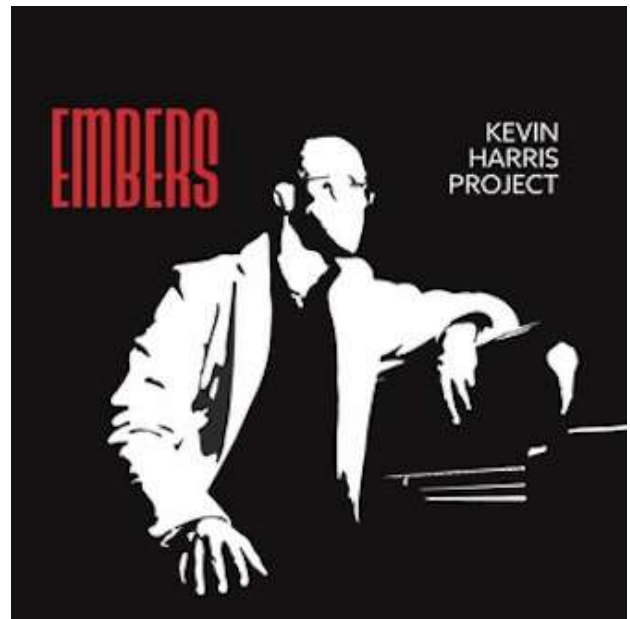
He is not content with simple theme – solos – theme structures, although the pieces on *Embers* roughly follow that form. His compositions are pointed by rests, tempo changes, and bursts of sound that the soloists adhere to or soar above. These elements (much like guideposts in the work of Mingus) serve to lock the solos into the larger context of a compositional whole.

Embers stands perfectly well by itself as pure music, but Harris poses some extra-musical purposes: "With this project, I aim to illuminate the EMBERS that quietly burn within the evolving history of our societies — embers of courage, progress, respect, and also of prejudice, inequity, and resistance to change . . . I celebrate the strides we have made toward a more just society, while also holding up a vigilant light to areas where progress still falters." Although we may tend to think of embers as the remnants of dying fires, Harris noted during the Regattabar performance that embers can re-ignite if given the proper air and fuel — and there is plenty of fire in this new CD.

It consists of five quintet pieces, two trio performances, and three fragments (called “Canvases”) that show Harris trying out short-form ideas with bassist Max Ridley and drummer Tyson Jackson. In the context of a more expansive piece (“Lullaby for a Yellowbird, Lullaby for Humanity”), the three of them create a group music that recalls the intuitive play of Keith Jarrett’s early trio with Charlie Haden and Paul Motian — again, this is not faint praise.

Ridley and Jackson are equally marvels in Harris’s quintet pieces, providing the vitally important sure feet for his ingenious writing. The quintet tunes on *Embers* are filled with stop-time rests, splashy directional chords, and fluid lines that snake and curl. A lesser rhythm section might sound tentative negotiating these features; Ridley and Jackson never do.

The three front-line voices provide perfect complements to each other in these performances, and they fill out the potential of Harris’s tunes with deep maturity. Jason Palmer, a long-time associate of Harris, is one of the most distinctive trumpeters working today. He draws on speech-patterns and puckish half-valving in his playing, and each of his solos seems to be telling a story — a quality that links him to a long line of thoughtful brass players like Art Farmer, Kenny Dorham, Ray Nance, Harry Edison, and others, going right back to Bix Beiderbecke.



His solo on “Embers” is just one choice example of his talent. Caroline Davis is just as thoughtful, but in a different way; she is a structuralist, drawing from the architecture of the compositions and then building her own ideas dramatically. She has a softish sound on her axe that recalls Paul Desmond, Johnny Hodges, and Benny Carter; in her thinking more than her sound, she draws on Jackie McLean (but what alto player isn’t influenced by Jackie?). Her solo on “Pendulums” is a model of craft.

The leader, when he becomes a soloist, does not try to dazzle with technique. Instead, Harris fills the role with the same creativity he brings to his writing. He has plenty of speed, but he uses it carefully, for maximum effect. In “Beyond Gravity,” for example, he is thoughtful from the get-go: Ridley is crucial in making his ideas work, and then Harris shows a wealth of excellent thinking all around the melody, leading with almost inevitable logic right back to the closing head.

The CD has the additional pleasure of Terri Lyne Carrington sitting in Tyson Jackson’s chair on “Beyond Gravity” and on a trio piece called “Jim Crow and the Medicine Man.” As she always does, Carrington provides exactly what’s needed to perfect a performance.

Embers will satisfy anyone who loves jazz creativity on a small scale. And you would be wise to grab your tickets early for Harris’s next live date, because his fans are avid, and they fill those chairs. ■