

“Still I Rise”
Liner Notes - Text Only

Derrick Gardner’s Big dig! Band is a classic jazz orchestra: spectacular sax, trombone, and trumpet sections studded with world-class musicians, and a rock-solid rhythm section to anchor all those flights of fancy. This band has weight, polish, sparkle, and drive. It swings without an ounce of apology, and at the same time feels current and fresh.

First dreamed up in 2014 with co-leader Steve Kirby, the Big dig! Band takes its name—and its retro black-and-white aesthetic—from *dig! magazine*, a bi-monthly publication designed by John Funk which thrived under Steve’s care for over a dozen years.

For *Still I Rise*, Derrick has gathered musicians from all over North America, and together their depth of experience is almost dizzying. Derrick himself is an alumnus of the Count Basie Orchestra and an heir apparent to Frank Foster, one of the band’s most celebrated arrangers. Vincent Gardner—yes, Derrick’s brother—has played with the Jazz at Lincoln Centre and Count Basie Orchestras, and is the artistic director of the Jazz Houston Orchestra. Mark Gross played in the Duke Ellington Orchestra, Bijon Watson in the Gerald Wilson and Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestras, Rob Dixon in the Maria Schneider Orchestra and the Illinois Jaquet Big Band. That’s just scratching the surface. These musicians, along with Zen Zdravec, Curtis Taylor, and others, have chalked up credits with a veritable who’s who in jazz, from the Marsalis brothers and Dianna Krall to Gregory Porter, Nicholas Payton, James Carter, Benny Golson...and the list goes on.

Since his arrival in Winnipeg in 2011, Derrick has held the Babs Asper Chair in Jazz Trumpet at the Desautels Faculty of Music at the University of Manitoba, and has instilled a love for the art form in countless students. Several of the members of the Big dig! Band—Luke Sellick, Curtis Nowosad, Tristan Martinuson, Anthony Bryson, and Kasey Kurtz—have come up through that Jazz Studies program, and are establishing themselves in New York and elsewhere. Manitoba artists Greg Gatien, Ken Gold, Jeff Johnson, Andrew Littleford, Joel Green, and Bill Green, all members of the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra, round out the band.

Still I Rise showcases Derrick’s formidable trumpet chops, but also his finesse as a composer and arranger. From greasy blues to extravagant show-stoppers to languid ballads, these tunes have sinew and sparkle, muscle and shimmer. His soli sections are fully charged, and his compositional ideas move brilliantly through the band, making room for inspired soloing. He lets his star players blaze, and makes room for the younger players to shoulder in.

Still I Rise is a sleek, powerful, gorgeous project, and under al the brilliance is a driving energy which is both musical and political. Buckle up—this ride is real!

—Charlene Diehl
Associate editor, *dig! magazine*

“Push Come da Shove” is a C-minor blues with an extended form laid over a rhythmic pedal point—but the arrangement is a beast. (When I passed out the parts, I apologized to the musicians for the turmoil I was about to put them through!) One of the unique things about this arrangement is the trombone soli; the band has a killer trombone section, and I wanted to show them some love. The trombone lines are inspired by the left hand of the legendary pianist McCoy Tyner as recorded on Coltrane’s “Resolution” from *A Love Supreme*. Where does the title come from? I’m amused by that colloquialism, and the tune definitely pushes and shoves!

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (trumpet), Mark Gross (alto sax), Curtis Nowosad (drums)

“Still I Rise” is dedicated to the great African-American poet, singer, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou. This powerful poem basically describes the plight and resilience of African-Americans, from the times of slavery through emancipation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the civil rights era, and up to today. When Angelou died in 2016, this melody popped into my head—it was as if her spirit sang this melody to me and took me to the piano to write the tune.

Structurally, the tune moves around the cycle of fourths, and rather than ending on a reprise of the opening section, I added a reharmonized bridge. That’s my shout-out to the resilience that Angelou celebrated in all her work, and modeled in her life.

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (trumpet), Vincent Gardner (trombone), Curtis Nowosad (drums)

“Soulful Brother Gelispie” is dedicated to drummer Randy Gelispie, one of the unsung heroes of jazz drumming. (There’s a great story about Randy and Dizzy playing a gig together, and Randy’s wife cussed out Dizzy on the phone, thinking he was Randy. After that, Dizzy would always say, “Hey be sure you contact your wife so she don’t cuss me out again!”) When you played with Randy, you knew you were in the presence of a great jazz innovator. One time, the Michigan State jazz faculty band was playing a concert and Randy and I were trading eights. I played my eight, and Randy responded with a groove that just knocked me off my feet—a soulful, multi-layered groove that used the whole drum kit. I looked at him like he was an alien from another planet. He just looked back at me and smiled, like “yeah, that’s my stuff...” I built the whole tune around that groove, which is featured at the opening.

Soloists: Curtis Nowosad (drums), Kasey Kurtz (guitar), Mark Gross (soprano sax)

“Melody for Trayvon” is dedicated to the African-American teen Trayvon Martin, whose senseless slaying in a neighborhood watch fiasco in Florida in 2012 initiated a firestorm of riots and protests over gun violence. As a composer and a student of human history, I see my music as a kind of activism. I’m invoking sadness, solemnity, and anger in the minor tonality and the weight of the orchestration—I want to create an empathic response that will move us toward eliminating this kind of sanctioned brutality. The tune opens and closes with two trumpets, one open and one muted, connected in a lament. For the band, this was an immersive experience—we did the whole thing in one take, then sat for a few moments in a deep silence, knowing we had shared something profound.

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (muted trumpet), Curtis Taylor (trumpet), Mark Gross (alto sax), Rob Dixon (tenor sax), Vincent Gardner (trombone)

“To Whom It May Concern” is one of those titles that leaves something to the imagination. When you compose a letter like that, you might not know exactly who you’re writing to, but you’re aiming for somebody who’s gonna get something done. I like to use that lead when I’m signaling some less-than-satisfactory action—I might have a pretty good idea of who’s dragging their heels, and I can spook them a bit by spreading the blame around...

This tune is a jazz waltz I composed specifically as a bass feature. It’s not common in big bands for the bass to display the melody, but I’m following a path innovated by Duke Ellington’s “Jack the Bear” and Oscar Pettiford’s “Tricotism.” The melody comes across as almost aggressive, given the way the notes cluster, but it’s expressive as well. I think it means business, as the title suggests.

I had fun with the trading sequence. Normally, soloists or sections trade fours or eights, but in this tune, I threw that out the window and went for unpredictable patterns. A two-measure orchestra soli is followed by four measures of drum solo; the orchestra’s four-measure soli is answered by a six-measure unit from the drums. It kept us all a bit off-balance. I figure when you send out a letter addressed like this, you can never quite predict the response. I was playing with that thought.

Soloists: Luke Sellick (Bass), Joel Green (Trombone), Ken Gold (Baritone Saxophone)

“One Thing Led to Another” is a slow bossa nova, in the sensuous style of the Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim. I used flugelhorns to add that warmth, and I spiced it up by adding a “big three” to the groove—basically the drummer hits the floor tom on the third beat. To be honest, I first encountered that trick watching Bugs Bunny as a kid. In one sketch, Bugs puts a fruit basket on his head and starts dancing to avoid being shot by Elmer Fudd; Bugs moved his foot to the side to mark that third beat and that really stayed with me. (Bugs Bunny is basically Music History 101, right?) It’s a simple tune, intended to put a listener in a mellow mood. The title? Well, I was thinking about a couple just hanging out having a good time, and all of a sudden that good time blossoms into something more...and whatever happened, happened...

Soloists: Greg Gatien (alto sax), Anthony Bryson (trombone), Andrew Littleford (flugelhorn), Luke Sellick (bass)

“Blues à la Burgess” is dedicated to my father Burgess Gardner, an incredible jazz trumpeter and my biggest influence. Through him I discovered Clifford Brown, Lee Morgan, Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw, Booker Little, and on up the line. My father is one of the bluesiest musicians I’ve ever heard—he’s able to find the blues in any and every tune he plays. Where another soloist would be trying hard to outline complicated chord changes, my father does that with elegance, but also superimposes the blues. Following his lead, I know that playing jazz means finding the blues in every piece you play. Compositionally, I based this tune on a phrase in one of my father’s solos that knocked me back when I first heard it, and I immediately incorporated it into my own lexicon. The tune itself is a straight-up blues, and I have pushed hard to come close to my father’s uncanny ability to capture the blues both

compositionally and as an arranger. Using his improv idea definitely gave me the burst of nitrous oxide that enhances the blues aesthetic.

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (trumpet), Tristan Martinuson (tenor sax), Curtis Nowosad (drums)

“8 Ball, Side Pocket” is a contrafact based on “Corner Pocket” by the great Count Basie’s guitarist Freddie Green. A contrafact basically presents a new melody over a familiar harmonic structure, and as an alumnus of one of the later incarnations of the Basie Band, I wanted to use the arrangement components that made those Basie charts so memorable. The tune opens with a Basie-inspired piano intro, followed by a B-flat blues section which gives way to a tune that is not in the blues form. That’s followed by solos, then a soft ensemble soli, a big ensemble shout, and the endings—those characteristic piano gestures that have become known as “the Basie splanks.” This tune was fun to write, and fun to play.

Soloists: Tristan Martinuson (tenor sax), Zen Zadavec (piano)

“DAAAYUUUM”

African-American culture has a particularly lively relationship with the English language—it’s actually considered a separate linguistic system called Ebonics. Hip-hop has brought a lot of this expressive language into broader usage, and I’m borrowing a simple but juicy expression for this tune. You see someone you’re really attracted to? You watch Michael Jordan executing one of his vicious slam dunks? *Damn* just doesn’t cut it—you’re looking for DAAAYUUUM!

I set up a deliberate, greasy blues melody that runs through the whole tune. You’ll hear a fall-off every second measure, after the last beat. That’s basically the melody mimicking the word—slowing it way down, stretching out those vowels. I wanted to feature my amazing trumpet section in this tune. I open with muted trumpet, then the section trades fours. As we arrived at the big shout section at the end, I was preparing to do a big screech solo when I realized that Bijon Watson could do this much better than I could. I said, “Hey, why don’t you take the screech solo while I play your lead part?” I have to say that was a good decision. On impulse, Bijon took the high figures I had written up into the stratosphere, and our jaws dropped to the ground. This is one shock-and-awe ending—DAAAYUUUM!

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (trumpet), Bijon Watson (trumpet), Jeff Johnson (trumpet), Curtis Taylor (trumpet), Andrew Littleford (trumpet)

“Heavens to Murgatroyd!” is a bit of an outlier. It looks back to the cartoons of my childhood and forward to the electronic innovations of hip-hop. This tune began with the boxed-in ragtime feel of a bass ostinato and repetitive harmonic figure. Once I had that going, I composed a melody—I was looking for something that would contrast with that pattern, but not get in the way of it. When I put them together, the combination was so humorous that I suddenly heard “Heavens to Murgatroyd!” in my head—in the voice of Snagglepuss, of course. I found this funny bells-and-chimes pattern that I remembered from a cartoon sound track, and had my engineer sample and loop it. It creates part of the oddball mechanical feel of the tune because it’s a 4/4 loop laid over a 3/4 tune. That off-balance feel is enhanced by the drums. For the ending vamp, I layered over a big drum solo with a bunch of old slapstick cartoon sound

effects like horn-honking and that funny sound when a character takes off really fast. The whole tune is a hodgepodge bouquet of chaos— it's crazy!

Soloists: Derrick Gardner (trumpet), Vincent Gardner (trombone), Rob Dixon (tenor), Curtis Nowosad (drums), DJ Stop (DJ)