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MAHANTHAPPA
ON IMPROVISATION**



**INTERNATIONAL
JAZZ FESTIVAL
GUIDE**

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THE PULSE OF ANTONIO SÁNCHEZ & THANA ALEXA

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'Our Ears Together'

BY STEPHANIE JONES

DownBeat sits down with drummer Antonio Sánchez and singer Thana Alexa, who are married, to talk about their collaborations and their individual work as bandleaders. The two musicians have toured extensively in the band Migration.



Marcus Printup performs on Feb. 5 at Gateway Center Plaza 4 in Newark, New Jersey.

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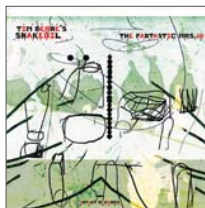
Cover photo of Antonio Sánchez and Thana Alexa shot by Jimmy and Dena Katz on Feb. 6 in New York City at Yamaha Artist Services, Inc.

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Carmen Lundy

Marcus Printup

'I WANT MY SOUND TO SING'

By Phillip Lutz | Photo by Adam McCullough

Marcus Printup swung around New York's Columbus Circle behind the wheel of his black Cadillac SUV, stopping briefly under the Jazz at Lincoln Center sign to scoop up a writer and head home to New Jersey.

Printup, who has spent half of his 53 years in the trumpet section of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, would fly out with the band the next day for a European tour that would consume February. He had plenty to do before then—not least, secure the home front for his wife, harpist Riza Printup.

Despite the rush, he had agreed to talk to DownBeat at some length. And if he was antsy about it, he didn't let on. By his own account, Printup often keeps his feelings buttoned up—speaking, when possible, through his trumpet, especially when it comes to, well, tooting his own horn. It's a quality with some virtues.

"I express my emotions better musically than socially most of the time," he said as he munched on a cracker at his home.

But that reticence can, at times, leave him in a kind of professional half-light—more vulnerable to the Wynton Marsalis effect than he might otherwise be. Marsalis, a cultural monument and one of America's most famous jazz musicians, often presides over the JLCO from a seat in the trumpet section—casting a shadow that can eclipse the enormous talents of the bandmates he earnestly promotes.

Marsalis shone a spotlight on Printup at the JLCO's concert at the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg, Germany. About 90 minutes into the performance—and a short five days after the conversation in Printup's home—Marsalis laid a laurel on his fellow trumpeter before the band launched into Marcus' "Salvation, Serenity, Reflection."

"You can't get any deeper than he is," Marsalis told the packed crowd in the concert hall and the global audience livestreaming the event.

Since he was a teenager in Conyers, Georgia, Printup has been digging into the roots of jazz—and coming up with the goods. At the Elbphilharmonie, his opening salvo on "Salvation"—a deceptively simple, decidedly soulful solo turn that led seamlessly into the heart of the gospel-inspired waltz—prompted an ovation.

"He's got something in his sound," said JLCO baritone





LUIGI BEVERELLI

Marcus Printup on tour with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra

saxophonist Paul Nedzela. “As soon as he’s done playing, the audience is already in love with the tune.”

Printup chalked up that “something” to his years in Conyers, where his family members were dutiful choristers of the Peek’s Chapel Baptist Church. Though he was the reluctant choir recruit, he listened closely to the preacher’s tremulous cadences and pitches. “There’s a certain sound I heard from those deacons. When I play, that’s where it comes from.”

His writing, too, can have the pulse of the pulpit, as the buoyant swing and sway of “Salvation” suggests. Part of a suite called *Of Thee I Sing*, the piece is just one of the 40-plus JLCO charts Printup has produced.

But the pulpit is not Printup’s sole influence. His chart for Wayne Shorter’s “Armageddon,” for example, utilizes the language of a very contemporary jazz, evoking what he called “the end of the world” with a 15-instrument cacophony of “musical chaos.”

Less scriptural, but no less spiritual, is his take on tunes with a more secular sensibility. On Ahmad Jamal’s “Manhattan Reflections,” a divine shout chorus “that’s all me” sets off range-appropriate instruments assigned to Jamal’s right and left hands. On Paul Simon’s “50 Ways To Leave Your Lover,” another such chorus blissfully enlivens a chart largely “geared for his voice and the band.”

In the past, the composers of these tunes were on hand during rehearsals, though it was Shorter who, with his unhurried way of getting precise-

ly to the point, made a particular impression. The impact of the 2015 visit on Printup was profound: “He helped me find my voice more so than any other musician has. His mere presence elevated us in so many ways.”

But it’s safe to say that Printup has felt most elevated by his collaboration with Riza. The two found each other in 2006, meeting through a mutual friend. Riza accepted an invitation to dinner, they hit it off and, by 2010, they were married. The union has proved both fruitful and comfortable.

“It’s so easy just to play with her,” he said. “I think the harp fits my brand of trumpet. Her lyricism—even if it’s just one note—it sings. I want my sound to sing.”

Given the particulars of harp technique, Riza, already an accomplished instrumentalist, nonetheless had to adjust her game to meet the chromatic demands of Marcus’ brand of jazz. She did so, appearing on his SteepleChase albums *Bird Of Paradise* (2007), *Ballads All Night* (2010), *A Time For Love* (2011) and *Desire* (2013), to which she contributed a powerful pair of tunes, “Along The Way” and “Rebirth.” All of which constituted preparation for the couple’s latest album, a duo effort titled *Gentle Rain* (SteepleChase).

“Of all the records I’ve done, this one stands out,” Marcus said as he sat back and Riza elaborated at their dining room table.

The choice of tunes, she said, came in part “from wanting to describe parts of our relationship.” And the track list includes rough analogs to that relationship’s progression. The title tune—a

Luiz Bonfá piece on which the Printups’ sonorous blend is heard to brilliant effect—grew out of Riza’s advocacy of bossa nova early in their courtship. Initially resistant to the idiom’s easy-going swing, Marcus quickly yielded to his wife’s embrace of it.

“I was the one who said, ‘Have you checked out these artists?’” Riza recalled. “With the Brazilian undertones, this represents the beginning of our relationship, the tenderness.”

The evolution of the relationship is captured in the unfolding of a moment, courtesy of the harmonically rich “When He Embraced Me With His Eyes,” a Riza original. By tactically deploying suspended chords and modulations, the tune, inspired by an actual moment shortly after they married, documents the stages of a bonding that can take place while peering into the windows of a loved one’s soul.

“It’s a really deep thing to connect with your partner’s eyes,” she said.

But the album’s deepest moments—ones that brought a tear to Riza’s eye as she gazed at Marcus—might be on the tender “Madison.” The title refers to the name of the child they might have had, had she not miscarried. Opening with Marcus playing solo, the piece closes with Riza doing the same—an acknowledgment, he said, that such an experience is ultimately “a woman’s journey.” Riza explained: “We were in the process of grieving, letting go.”

The Printups have channeled their grief into a joint educational project, *I Have a Song Inside My Heart*. Using companion literature and visual aids along with sound, the program is about “finding your song through the music of jazz,” said Riza, who worked in childhood education for two years in Georgia and seven at Jazz at Lincoln Center. The project is used in schools in the United States and Japan.

Though prerecorded material is available for use in schools, Marcus led a live band through the program’s paces on a February night on a third-floor stage at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. At the event, booked by the Apollo with the participation of radio station WBGO, the band—Marcus, Regina Carter on violin, Mika Nishimura on keyboards, Kevin Smith on bass and Henry Conerway III on drums—was fully engaged in the process of integrating the educational and musical aspects of the performance.

As Marcus took his place, Riza was an out-front presence—moving on and off the stage as she interacted with a room full of children eager to respond to her entreaties. At one point, she encouraged them to describe the emotions suggested by the instrumentalists, who, even as they swung hard, purposefully evoked a variety of anthropomorphic sounds. At another, she urged the children to scat in call-and-response mode. Beyond helping the kids develop their power of expression, the exercise might have unearthed a budding talent or two.

Call-and-response scat also was employed by Marcus on a tune of his, "Soul Vamp," at a very different kind of event: a noonday concert, four days after the Apollo program, in the atrium of an office building near Newark Penn Station in New Jersey. Produced by WBGO, the concert, part of a monthly series, found Printup leading a quartet of top students and graduates from The Juilliard School, the Manhattan School of Music and Indiana University before a mixed crowd of aficionados and casual fans. Selling CDs on the side was Riza.

The young musicians—Miles Lennox (keyboard), Hannah Marks (bass) and T.J. Reddick (drums)—demonstrated great maturity as they dispatched a set of guileless Printup originals filled with simple but artful melodies

three musicians at the Newark gig, said she had valued Printup's words ever since he discovered her last year at the Betty Carter Jazz Ahead educational residency, with which he has been involved since meeting the late singer with Marsalis at a 1993 jam session.

"That was my banner year," he said.

That year, during a performance at the inaugural Jazz Ahead program in the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Printup, backing Carter on "The Nearness Of You," discovered the value of restraint. Near the tune's end, he added a coda to her final flourish, topping her high note with an even higher one. She was not amused.

"I learned my lesson," he said. "Even though I thought that would be musical, and I had the utmost respect for her, I think to her it seemed like

money, help him get dressed and everything. Marcus would give me lessons every night after the gig."

Printup, Roberts said, developed "a really intriguing balance of a sound. It sounded like it could have come from 500 years ago combined with a unique modern approach to playing jazz music. He was one of the anchors of the band I put together." That ensemble also boasted fast-rising reedists Victor Goines and Walter Blanding, as well as trombonist Ron Westray—all of whom, like Printup, ended up joining the JLCO.

"I love him," Roberts said. "He's like a little brother to me."

Printup actually is a little brother to Angela Forte, who is four years his senior and, as a reed player in school and a member of the church choir, became an early model for him.

"Watching her play, and sing in church, she was one of my first influences musically," Printup recalled.

Thinking back, Forte said, a real turning point in his life came in middle school, where Bishop Hudson—whom she praised for his compassion and dedication to hard practice—led the jazz band. "That's when Marcus took things to a whole other level," she said. "He is who he is because of the jazz band."

Printup said his understanding of Hudson's role in his life came late. "It wasn't until I got older that I realized how much he meant to me," he said. But he has shown his appreciation. When Hudson died in 2007, Printup returned to town for his funeral, where he joined saxophonist Sam Skelton, another Conyers native, in what observers remember as a poignant "Amazing Grace."

"It really did sound good," recalled James "Dub" Hudson, 89, a saxophonist and David's surviving brother.

Between his obligations with the JLCO, Printup said he would like to become more of a presence in Conyers. "Do some teaching, maybe do some kind of festival—invite all the kids just to see what jazz is."

Such thoughts are typical of Printup, Forte said: "What you see is who he is. Even in the midst of the glitz and glamour of being a jazz musician, he never changed. He never became arrogant."

Printup, in fact, has brought some of that glitz and glamour to Conyers, albeit for a sad occasion. In February 2013, members of the JLCO, including Marsalis, attended the funeral of Marcus and Angela's father, Deacon Willie "Bobby" Printup. They played "When The Saints Go Marching In."

"Marcus took a solo," Forte recalled. "When it was over, the guys stood in the middle of the aisle and walked in front of the people carrying Dad's casket. When we got to the graveside, they continued to play." Through it all, Printup tried to maintain his reserve. "Marcus had his sunglasses on; he didn't want us to see his tears," she said. "But he played the heck out of the trumpet." **DB**

'Marcus Roberts taught me how to put my upbringing into my music.'

and subtle but swinging propulsion. Some had themes harking back to the trumpeter's own youth. Among them: "Hopscotch," from 2014's *Lost* (SteepleChase), an upbeat recollection of active afternoons in the Printups' backyard, and "The Bishop," from 2015's *Young Bloods* (SteepleChase), a reverential remembrance of a mentor, the late Bishop David Hudson.

Printup said he used young musicians in part because "they have something different, something that inspires me to play." And play he did. In the JLCO, which occupies him for nearly 10 months a year, a musician rarely is assigned more than one or two solos a night. But in the context of a quartet, he had the luxury of extending improvisations and stretching forms.

Gigs like the one in Newark allow him to give young musicians a taste of the trial-by-fire apprenticeship experience that he mostly missed out on, save for working with the players from Duke Ellington's band who still populated the Lincoln Center orchestra when he arrived.

"Coming up in the 1990s," he said, "I never got to play with many older musicians, except for in the orchestra."

Meeting young musicians, Printup's reticence fades and he liberally dispenses advice. In a nutshell: "I try to get the kids to go inside themselves, not just play the notes." Those words are as relevant to high school kids (in JALC's Essentially Ellington band competition, with which he has a long association) as to college students (at Montclair State University, where he recently joined the faculty).

Bassist Marks, who at 22 was the oldest of the

I was trying to outdo her. I learned that when you play with a vocalist, you are the accompaniment."

Also in '93, he marked his Lincoln Center debut with a man he described in a recent email as "the most influential person/friend to light that spark in me"—pianist Marcus Roberts, whose epic suite *Romance, Swing And The Blues* was having its premiere. It was revived two decades later, with Printup again on board.

The piece, Roberts said, "had abstract thematic elements but also could be expressed through various approaches to blues playing." He added, "Marcus has a really, really special connection with the blues. His playing has intensity. It sounds like somebody who really enjoys life, developing as a man and as a musician."

Roberts and Printup first met in 1991, when the pianist noticed the trumpeter in the band at the University of North Florida, where he was studying when he won the International Trumpet Guild Jazz Trumpet Competition.

The meeting, Printup said, marked a turning point: "Everything started for me. Marcus taught me how to put my upbringing into my music. Before Marcus, I played things straight. He said, 'Where are you from, Georgia? Did your parents raise you in the church?' I said, 'Yup.' He went, 'How did your mama sing?' I started singing something. He started singing something and told me how I could incorporate that voice into my horn."

Soon, Printup was on the road with Roberts (who has been blind since age 5), doubling as his tour manager for a year-and-a-half. "I just wanted to hang around him. I would take care of his