



*Song for the Big Chief*  
Joe McPhee/Paal Nilssen-Love (PNL)  
by Kyle Oleksiuk

In late 2017, the day before they were scheduled to perform as a duo at Café Oto in London, saxophonist/trumpeter Joe McPhee and drummer Paal Nilssen-Love heard that drummer Sunny Murray had passed away. In response, they dedicated their performance, released as *Song for the Big Chief*, to him.

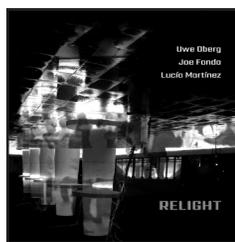
The title is taken from Murray's 1969 EMI-Pathé album *Big Chief*, recorded shortly after the drummer's relocation to Paris (where he died) and McPhee opens the album with a dedication: "Before we begin, I'd just like to say that in the last few days, we lost, in our musical community, the drummer Sunny Murray, at age 81. A big influence on Paal and me. And so to begin I'd like to play a little something and I asked Paal to join me. For Sunny Murray."

Each song opens quietly and McPhee and Nilssen-Love move the volume carefully up to moderate crescendos, then descend again slowly back to silence. McPhee leads the performance, the first and last player of the duo to be heard on each song. His playing is consistently gentle, even at its loudest. In this respect, his playing on *Song for the Big Chief* is similar to that of the late Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, another gentle giant of the saxophone and McPhee's peer.

Like McIntyre, McPhee expresses himself with somber, searching tones. There are frequent silences and pauses. He repeats many phrases with minor but thoughtful variations and spends a lot of time slowly taking his saxophone back and forth across the line where you can begin to hear his breath dancing along the reed of the instrument.

Nilssen-Love occupies the middles of each song, building off of and responding to McPhee's playing with great sensitivity. It is obvious, even without knowing anything about their long collaboration (which comprises four earlier albums as a pair), that the duo have played together closely for many years. Together, they give a performance commemorating a musician who meant a lot to them both and to avant garde jazz as a whole. This is a very special album.

For more information, visit [paalnilssen-love.com](http://paalnilssen-love.com). McPhee is at Downtown Music Gallery Feb. 23rd. See Calendar.



*Relight*  
Uwe Oberg/Joe Fonda/Lucio Martínez  
(Not Two)  
*New Origin*  
Christophe Rocher/Joe Fonda/Harvey Sorgen  
(Not Two)  
by Robert Iannapallo

Since the release of his first album in 1981, bassist Joe Fonda has participated in over 150 recordings, in addition to leading sessions under his own name and as a co-leader of bands (Fonda/Stevens Group, Nu Band). He's always had a penchant for 'outside' collaborations, many with international improvisers; recent releases have included work with Japanese pianist Satoko Fujii and German guitarist Erhard Hirt, to name just two. Below are the two most recent releases of Fonda continuing his exploration of new music by players with whom he has not previously recorded.

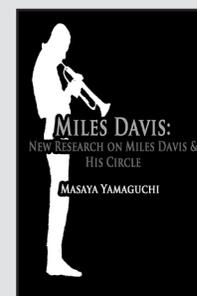
German pianist Uwe Oberg has amassed a solid discography since his first solo piano album (1993), followed by several trio and quartet records, as well as duos with players such as saxophonist Evan Parker and guzheng player Xu Fengxia. It's the latter who provides the link between Fonda and Oberg as the bassist also recorded a duet album with her. Add Spanish percussionist Lucio Martínez and the result is *Relight*, an all-improvised piano trio album with wide purview. The opener is a good demonstration: it starts slowly, the players feeling each other out with Martínez particularly effective, focusing on the metallic elements of her setup; gradually becomes denser, more active until the listener is drawn into Cecil Taylor-like intensity; and finally recedes into delicate interplay, rebuilding up to a barrage to finish off the piece. "Lighter Than Before" is as its title suggests. It's a perfect followup, a more subtle exploratory piece with Oberg focusing on the inside of the piano and Fonda engaging in a brief uncredited flute interlude. "Almost Two" contains a lengthy duet section between Fonda and Martínez, which is one of the highlights of the disc. "Relight Year" is pure soundscape. Oberg's instincts were spot on when choosing his partners for this disc and *Relight* is free piano trio playing at its finest.

French clarinetist Christophe Rocher has been playing with American counterparts for the past couple of decades but *New Origin* is his first recording with the rhythm team of Fonda and drummer Harvey Sorgen, the engine of the Fonda/Stevens Group (and other bands) for the past 25 years. The program consists of several Rocher and Fonda originals, five free improvisations and a cover of Ornette Coleman's "Broken Shadows" (nice to hear this played on clarinet). The set opens with Fonda's "Read This", a particularly tricky line played by Rocher on bass clarinet. The rhythm team is open and allows Rocher free rein but the performance is very tight. Rocher's "African Roll Mops" percolates on an active rhythm while B flat clarinet dances above. It's succeeded by the contemplative "Berceuse", carefully chosen notes eventually dissipating to breathy sighs by the end. The 12 tracks present a varied program, from the unrestrained freedom of "For Perry (Robinson)" and minimal quiet of "Gastronomy" to the rolling backbeat of Fonda's "ZCSNY". *New Origin* is a complete statement and the results are worth hearing.

For more information, visit [nottwo.com](http://nottwo.com). Fonda is at The Stone at The New School Feb. 25th. See Calendar.



## IN PRINT



*Miles Davis: New Research on Miles Davis & His Circle*  
Masaya Yamaguchi (Masaya Music)  
by Kevin Canfield

Four years ago, Masaya Yamaguchi, a guitarist and the author of several music instruction books, learned that Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture had obtained some intriguing documents. The "Quincy Troupe papers", as they were billed, promised to reveal more about *Miles: The Autobiography*, Troupe's evocative 1989 collaboration with Miles Davis. Yamaguchi went to have a look—and kept going back. His labors have resulted in a sprawling 600-plus page book. In *Miles Davis: New Research on Miles Davis & His Circle*, Yamaguchi broadens what we know about the great trumpeter. But if his text is sometimes compelling, its flaws undermine many of his assertions.

Yamaguchi's trips to the Schomburg and other archives have yielded an impressive cache of documents. In addition to his survey of transcripts from Troupe's interviews of Davis, he includes images of census and school records, business correspondence mailed to Davis' W. 77th Street apartment and many other papers. This makes for interesting reading. Likewise, Yamaguchi's analysis of the music itself—he writes particularly well about the artistic exchange between Davis and John Coltrane—is sophisticated.

But Yamaguchi can also be pedantic. He tartly criticizes Troupe for a misspelling ("Troupe obviously did not research"), yet his own book contains its share of errors and misjudgments. In one chapter, he refers to "Rollin Stone", depriving the magazine of its "g". In another, he dings the writer Stanley Crouch for having "selectively quoted" from *Miles: The Autobiography*, failing either to realize or acknowledge that practically all quotations are selective.

Yamaguchi's criticisms of Troupe's work are often poorly argued and unduly harsh. When a transcript shows Troupe shifting the topic of conversation from music to Davis' "nice boots", Yamaguchi deems it "very unprofessional". Later, Yamaguchi chides Troupe for asking Davis a "stupid question" ("Can you tell me the difference between modal music and chromatic, improvisational music"?). This is a blinkered reading of the transcripts. Troupe's job was to get Davis talking, to elicit anecdotes for a book aimed at people who, by and large, aren't professional musicians. To rip him for casually phrased questions not intended for print is to demonstrate a lack of understanding about how a lot of nonfiction is written.

This book deserves praise for illuminating bits of Davis' past. Yamaguchi straightens out the chronology and location of certain events and notes the contributions of musicians who weren't properly credited. But the text would've benefited from a tighter focus. Around the halfway point, Yamaguchi devotes four pages to Davis' contention that Coltrane was a frequent nose-picker. Not everything merits in-depth research.

For more information, go to [masayayamaguchi.com](http://masayayamaguchi.com)

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