**KIRK KNUFFKE**

*Cornetist-Composer-Bandleader*

***“Rhythmically precise, New Orleans funky and full of grace, Kirk Knuffke’s music is a reflection of his multifaceted personality: part musical sage, part jazz philosopher, a self-taught musician with wide interests, endless curiosity and an abundance of good humor.”*** — DownBeat

Reflecting on his guiding artistic impulse, Kirk Knuffke says: “I’m concerned with making beautiful music. Even when the music is free and avant-garde, I want it to reach into people’s hearts. I like to play fast and loud and high, but beauty is always first, though not in a precious way. It can be in a rough way, too.” A prolific, lauded record-maker, the cornetist-composer has made some 20 albums as a leader or co-leader over the past two decades. Knuffke’s 2022 release as a leader — *Gravity Without Airs* (TAO Forms/AUM Fidelity), featuring pianist Matthew Shipp and bassist Michael Bisio — fulfilled his poetic aims as well as any recording he has made to date, earning a review of 4 ½ stars from *DownBeat* magazine as well as a critic’s playlist pick in *The New York Times*. As an in-demand sideman, Knuffke also records and tours the world with some of today’s leading jazz musicians, from vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant and guitarist Mary Halvorson to drummer Matt Wilson and saxophonist James Brandon Lewis. Knuffke was a standout front-line foil for Lewis on the tenor man’s hit Red Lily Quintet disc *Jesup Wagon*, which *JazzTimes* named the top album of 2021. *All About Jazz* has aptly extolled Knuffke as “one of modern jazz’s most skilled navigators of the divide between inside and outside, freedom and swing.”

In his liner notes for *Gravity Without Airs*, esteemed critic Francis Davis encapsulated the allure of Knuffke’s instrumental aplomb: “Kirk plays as if his cornet is a part of him — he plays *with* it, not just on it.” Through the rare, possibly unique, trio format of cornet, piano and double-bass, the expansive double album comprises a rich mix of Knuffke compositions and fully improvised material, all of it brimming with melody and mystery, intimacy and dynamism. The nearly 12-minute title track, a Knuffke original, opens the album and sets the tone, ranging from the darkly lyrical to the searching and energized. Among the other Knuffke-penned highlights is “The Water Will Win,” which ebbs and flows with cinematic grandeur. The trio improv “Piece of Sky” is a ruminative beauty, while the multifarious “Birds of Passage” feels through-composed even though it’s fully improvised, too. The album presents the complete session, all the music Knuffke, Shipp and Bisio recorded on their single day in the studio. It flowed so naturally that even Shipp — an icon of New York’s creative music scene who has virtually seen and heard it all — looked up during the initial playback to exclaim, “This is a masterpiece!” *Gravity Without Airs* ended up on several year’s end “best of” lists for 2021, from *The Denver Post* to *Magnet* magazine.

***“Balancing Sly Groove and Meditative Exploration”***

Born in 1980 and raised in Colorado, Knuffke was self-taught on the trumpet and cornet, later benefiting from the private tutelage of such figures as Ornette Coleman, Art Lande and Ron Miles. Knuffke began playing with influential cornetist-composer-conductor Butch Morris after moving to New York City in 2005. This friendship resulted in four recordings and several European tours. In 2009, Knuffke joined drummer Matt Wilson’s Quartet and recorded *Gathering Call*, which would be the first in a series of albums made with Wilson and company (right up to *Hug!* in 2020). The cornetist’s flair for “balancing sly groove and meditative exploration,” in the words of *Time Out New York*, has been underscored through collaborations with an honor roll of sage musicians, such as Roswell Rudd, Marshall Allen, Tootie Heath, William Parker, Myra Melford, Steve Swell, Billy Hart, Uri Caine, Pierre Dørge, Michael Formanek, Harold Danko, Ted Brown, Karl Berger, Ben Goldberg and Frank Kimbrough. Before Kimbrough passed away suddenly in 2021, Knuffke played on what would be the pianist’s final album, *Ancestors*, a trio project with bassist Masa Kamaguchi. The cornetist then contributed to Newvelle Records’ epic *Kimbrough* tribute set (profiled in *The New York Times*), which showcased 61 of the pianist’s pieces performed by 67 comrades, with Knuffke’s burnished tones featured on two tracks.

*The* *New York Times* tagged Knuffke as “one of New York City’s busiest musicians,” and rightly so. In 2022, he released *For You, I Don’t Want to Go*, a duo album with Michael Bisio for a Lithuanian label, NoBusiness Records. Also in 2022, Knuffke’s collective trio with guitarist Per Møllehøj and bassist Thommy Andersson released the New Orleans-channeling *S’Wonderful* album via Stunt Records, and it went on to top the jazz streaming charts in Germany. Knuffke is an occasional singer, and *S’Wonderful* included his hip, soulful vocals on a couple of tracks. In 2021, he also sang and played on the chamber jazz album *Near the Pond* (Stunt), with vocalist Josefine Cronholm. *The Art Spirit* (ESP-Disk), a collaboration with Bisio and cellist Fred Lonberg-Holm, also came out in 2021. The next year brought *Heart Is a Melody*, a quartet album co-led with veteran vibraphonist Karl Berger that also included Matt Wilson and bassist Jay Anderson. In 2020, Knuffke released two striking albums as a leader: *Tight Like This* (Steeplechase), a tip of the hat to the spirit of Louis Armstrong that featured tuba player Bob Stewart and drummer Kenny Wollesen; and the wonderfully grooving *Brightness: Live in Amsterdam* (Royal Potato Family), with bassist Mark Helias and drummer Bill Goodwin. It was the music-making of recordings like this that led *DownBeat* to marvel over Knuffke’s “boundless technique with a creative spirit to match.”

Praise for the cornetist’s earlier work as a leader includes NPR’s Jazz Album of the Year laurel for 2017’s *Cherryco* (SteepleChase), his homage to Don Cherry, ace of the pocket trumpet (a mini-cornet) and a prime influence for his work with Ornette and beyond. There were rave reviews for *Cherryco* on both sides of the Atlantic, from the UK’s *Jazzwise* to *DownBeat*, with the latter noting the way that the album highlighted Knuffke’s “nonchalant versatility and ebullient melodic gifts.” In an extensive profile of the cornetist in *The* *Village Voice*, Francis Davis said about *Cherryco*, “Knuffke does both Cherry and himself proud,” with the disc “nothing less than spectacular.” *Cherryco* further exemplified the fruits of his decade-plus relationship with Denmark’s Steeplechase label, one that has also yielded a five-album duo series with kindred-spirit pianist Jesse Stacken (including discs devoted to such disparate composers as Charles Mingus and Erik Satie, not to mention Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington).

In 2015, Knuffke was dubbed a “Rising Star” in the *DownBeat* Critics Poll. In that red-letter year, he released *Arms & Hands* (Royal Potato Family). That album — which partnered Knuffke with Helias and Goodwin again, plus guest horns — elicited broad acclaim, with *The New York Times* stating: “Cornetist Kirk Knuffke harbors a dual commitment to formal experimentation and bedrock tradition: There’s no either-or. Still, it’s not often that you encounter the harmony of forces found on *Arms & Hands*.” And 2015 brought two more Knuffke-led discs: the deeply felt *Little Cross* (Steeplechase), one of his best, in league with organist Jamie Saft and drummer Hamid Drake; and *Lamplighter* (Fresh Sound), which featured his trio with Goodwin on drums and Stomu Takeishi on acoustic bass guitar. A highlight of 2013 was the quartet record *Chorale* on Steeplechase, with Knuffke fronting a quartet of pianist Russ Lossing, bassist Michael Formanek and drummer Billy Hart.

***“Following his Restless Muse Wherever It Leads…”***

Guitar star Mary Halvorson has captured Knuffke’s appeal as a colleague (having recorded with him in the trio Sifter alongside Matt Wilson): “Kirk is a true individual, one whose playing is both searching and expansive… He is always up to something new and never fails to surprise.” Knuffke demonstrated his flair for leftfield ventures by collaborating with up-and-coming operatic baritone Steven Herring for the 2018 album *Witness* (Steeplechase). In Neil Tesser’s liner notes for the album, he described the music as juxtaposing “conservatory and nightclub, improvisation and spoken word, the sacred and the secular… for one of the most unusual and inventive projects of Knuffke’s career."

Of late, Knuffke has been touring far and wide as part of the 13-piece ensemble for vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant’s 90-minute song cycle *Ogresse*, playing some of the world’s top stages —from New York’s Jazz at Lincoln Center and Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center to San Francisco’s SFJAZZ and the Philharmonie de Paris. The *Wall Street Journal* described the epic musical mythology of *Ogresse* as blending jazz and bluegrass, the blues and opera in a “staggeringly original” way. A recording is in the works. Along with still working regularly with the Matt Wilson Quartet, Knuffke is an ongoing member of drummer Allison Miller’s Boom Tic Boom sextet and guitarist Charlie Hunter’s Quartet. The cornetist has also collaborated with organist/pianist John Medeski as the Angelic Brothers, performing the music of Sun Ra; the duo has an album in the can. More releases are upcoming with James Brandon Lewis, Matthew Shipp, violinist Charlie Burnham and sax veteran Joe McPhee.

 Knuffke has received a Jerome Foundation Composers Grant. In 2016, he placed second in Europe’s *El Intruso* Critics Poll for trumpet. A transcription of his solo on the track “Rise” from his album *Lamplighter* was published in the April 2019 issue of *DownBeat*. Discussing the cornet, his preferred instrument, Knuffke has said: “The way the air moves through the cornet is more open and spills out everywhere, which makes it easier for me to be dynamic and expressive. Bending notes around comes easier on cornet, whereas trumpet is more focused and direct.”

An educator as well as a virtuoso musician, Knuffke regularly passes along his expertise and experience at international jazz camps and in university masterclasses. He has led master classes at The Frost School of Music in Miami, the University of Michigan and University of Colorado. For five years, he toured with the Bridge Arts Ensemble, which was a non-profit organization of teaching artists that reached more than 50,000 students in upstate New York. Knuffke has been an instructor at the Maine Jazz Camp every year since 2010. He has also taught extensively in Denmark, at the summer jazz program of the Engelsholm Castle school and at other Folk High Schools around the country. He has also been a guest instructor for the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Privately, he teaches in person and via Zoom for lessons in improvisation, composition, jazz theory, cornet and trumpet to both jazz and classical players. Knuffke wrote the article “Time and Tone” for the *DownBeat* Brass School series in April 2018.

Through all his activities — the many recordings and scintillating performances, above all — it is apparent that “Knuffke isn’t the least bit reticent about following his restless muse wherever it leads him,” as *Dusted* magazine has pointed out. “The result is a ballooning body of work that is at once prolific, invitingly diverse and, perhaps most dependably, far from predictable.”

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