

**Thad Jones Legacy/Vanguard Jazz Orchestra  
New World Records 80581**

“I’ve just heard the greatest trumpet player that I’ve heard in this life,” Charles Mingus wrote in a 1954 letter to Bill Coss, his confidant at Metronome. According to Mingus, the trumpeter he had just heard at a jam session in Detroit, named Thad Jones, was an improviser who made use of the advanced rhythmic and harmonic techniques of twentieth-century European composers, and even better, was “the first man to make them swing.” This “Bartók with valves for a pencil,” as Mingus described him, routinely executed ideas that Fats Navarro had only hinted at in the late 1940s.

On the strength of his recordings for Mingus's Debut label and his first LP for Blue Note, Thad Jones—the brother of the pianist Hank and the drummer Elvin—was voted a “New Star” in *Downbeat's* fourth annual International Critics Poll in the summer of 1956, by which point he had been a member of Count Basie's trumpet section for two years. Choosing Jones third among “established” trumpeters in 1960 (behind Miles Davis and Art Farmer), the English critic Max Harrison deemed it necessary to explain that his vote was based on Jones's work as the added starter to Thelonious Monk's quartet on the album *5 by Monk by 5*, “not for his work with Basie”—a recurring theme in the critical writing on Jones around that time.

Although Jones's fellow musicians never wavered in their admiration for him, critics had begun to view him as a notorious underachiever. Basie's 1955 recording of “April in Paris,” featuring a solo by Jones in which he quoted “Pop Goes the Weasel” at a strategic moment, had become an unexpected crossover hit when it was released the following year, a success that doomed Jones to playing the same solo (or at least the same quote) night after night for the next eight years, until his departure from the band in 1963.

But “April in Paris,” which was wonderful in its own way, was only part of the problem. Basie's band of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which featured such committed modernists as Jones and the tenor saxophonist Frank Foster as soloists and contributors to the book, was a powerhouse outfit that incorporated elements of hard bop without compromising Basie's loyalty to the values of the swing era. Basie must have been sympathetic to Jones's modernist leanings; otherwise, he wouldn't have hired him, or encouraged him to write for the band. But the band owed its popularity to a swinging formula that, although loose enough to accommodate moderate experimentation, prevented Jones from stretching out the way he had with Mingus or daring as much harmonically. Jones's technical brilliance made him right at home in any setting, and an answer to the question of why he stayed with Basie for so long (besides the guaranteed paycheck and the pride of purpose that comes from being a member of such an illustrious aggregation) may have been that he saw what he hoped would be an opportunity to fulfill his ambitions as a composer and arranger. Yet even in this endeavor, he was often thwarted. Basie, although not a composer himself, was famous for knowing what he wanted, which is another way of saying that he knew which of the charts submitted for his consideration could be trimmed to fit the Basie formula, and which could not. To Basie's thinking, many of Jones's submissions must have seemed too wild, too wide-ranging, and just too far out at a time when the band still regularly played dances. Nor were records necessarily a different matter: the unkindest cut of all came a few years after Jones's departure from the band, when Basie commissioned an entire album of

compositions by Jones, then rejected them all. To that point, the best recorded example of Jones's writing may have been a little-noticed MGM album he arranged for Harry James in 1964—an early example of jazz repertory, with Jones modernizing and putting his personal stamp on twelve warhorses from the 1930s and 1940s. Not even Mingus could have anticipated the surprises in store from Jones once he formed a big band of his own, with the drummer Mel Lewis as co-leader.

After beginning life toward the end of 1965 as a rehearsal band that met weekly around midnight on Mondays at one or another of the recording studios located within walking distance of Jim and Andy's, a New York City bar frequented by musicians on 48th Street near Sixth Avenue, the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra made its concert debut at the Village Vanguard on February 7, 1966. Neither of its co-leaders ever dreamed that their band would still be at the Vanguard every Monday thirty-three years later, undeterred even by Jones's defection in 1979 and Lewis's death in 1990. Not just the most influential big band to convene since the demise of the swing era, this was in some ways the most unusual big band of all time. Formed during a period inhospitable to jazz in general and big bands in particular, this was the first orchestra since the one Chick Webb led at the Savoy Ballroom in the 1930s to become associated in the public mind with a home venue rather than a signature sound. Stay-at-home orchestras formed by musicians for their own pleasure, with little hope of eventually making a killing on the road, are as much fraternal organizations as they are musical enterprises, which is one reason so many of them have been easily identifiable as “white” bands or “black” bands. The membership of the Jones-Lewis Orchestra, in its early years, was mixed almost fifty-fifty, at a time when relationships between black and white musicians were becoming increasingly tense. Moreover, jazz orchestras generally fall into either of two categories, a composer's band (like Duke Ellington's) or soloists' bands (like Count Basie's, in the late 1930s). The Jones- Lewis Orchestra somehow managed to be both, winning recognition for Jones as a composer and arranger at the same time as it provided an outlet for its members to blow freely and at length.

The band's charter members and their immediate replacements included a number of established musicians (including Jones and Lewis themselves) then on staff at one of the television networks, or otherwise active in commercial recording, who looked forward to getting together on Monday nights to play the sort of music they were discouraged from playing on their money jobs. This entailed more than just soloing; these were men who had grown up listening to big bands, and who relished section work, providing the music put in front of them was sufficiently challenging. And thanks to Jones, it was. There were plenty of rehearsal bands in New York in the mid-to-late 1960s, including one led by the tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan and another led by the trumpeter Kenny Dorham and the tenor saxophonist Joe Henderson. What gave the Jazz Orchestra an instant advantage was that it even before Jones wrote a note for it, there was already a book—those charts he had written for Basie, but that Basie had chosen not to use. Jones wasn't the band's only gifted writer; there were equally valuable contributions from Bob Brookmeyer, its lead trombonist and Jones's replacement as music director following his departure for Denmark in 1979. But Jones was the band's most prolific writer, as well as the one whose charts gave the band an immediate identity.

The album at hand, featuring the current Vanguard Jazz Orchestra's loving and alert interpretations of nine of Jones's charts from the 1960s and 1970s (including his

arrangement of Jerome Richardson's "Groove Merchant") begins, appropriately enough, with a piece originally intended for Basie—the marching "A—That's Freedom," written by Hank Jones, arranged by Thad, and not recorded until the Jones-Lewis Orchestra included it on their first live album (from the Vanguard, naturally) in 1967. Whimsical flutes reminiscent of the kind of thing that Neal Hefti wrote for Basie but much sharper in intonation (and resulting in a suggestion of dissonance, given a backdrop of flats) give a clue to what Jones may have originally intended, and to why Basie may have thought it a little too adventurous for his band. The touch that immediately identifies the piece as Jones's is the raspberry sounded by the bass trombone every two bars, played by Douglas Purviance, and his imaginative use of flutes and bass trombones gives an idea of the wide compass of sound he tended to employ even on as seemingly simple a piece as this. The soloists on this new interpretation are the pianist Jim McNeely (the current band's most distinctive composer) and the trombonist John Mosca, one of its most engaging improvisers as well as the man assigned the pleasant chore of announcing tunes and soloists on Monday nights at the Vanguard.

The hard-charging and modal "Once Around," which kicked off the Jazz Orchestra's very first album, in 1966, is an example of the sort of piece with which Jones made an improvisational freedom—once exclusively associated with small groups—part of the language of big bands. Again, the piece is deceptively simple—on face value, nothing more than a string of solos set up by a series of scales. The compositional detail is in the colorful background figures with which the ensemble cheers on the soloists—in this case, Rich Perry (tenor), Ed Neumeister (trombone), and Billy Drewes (soprano).

In 1974, Jones and Lewis recorded an album for Philadelphia International that only seemed to be like a commercial effort, despite including cover versions of tunes by the O'Jays and Stevie Wonder. The album has been somewhat overlooked, which is a shame, because it included, among other treasures, "Quiet Lady," a beautiful Jones waltz whose modulations were as delicate and winning as those of Burt Bacharach. It featured a swaying electric piano intro by Roland Hanna and especially lyrical solos by Jones and Pepper Adams. Their roles are capably filled here by McNeely (on acoustic), Scott Wendholt, and Gary Smulyan, with the order of the fluegelhorn and baritone solos reversed.

Paradoxically, "Central Park North," Jones's attempt to come to grips with funk, sounds less dated in this new interpretation than it did as the title track of a 1969 Jones-Lewis album for Solid State. The superfluous electric guitar has been dispensed with, and that fleeting boogaloo figure near the beginning sounds sly, even ironic, now that the craze that inspired it is long gone. Similar in heft and mobility to some of George Russell's pieces in the same vein, "Central Park North" is a wonderful blend of things—dissonance with swiveling hips. On balance, it's a near-masterpiece, and it would be as unthinkable without its reflective fluegelhorn interlude (Jones on the original and Wendholt here) as "Sing, Sing, Sing" would be without Jess Stacey's mood-altering piano solo. The other soloists are Glenn Drewes (plungered trumpet), Dick Oatts (soprano saxophone), and John Riley (drums).

"Yours And Mine" is another neglected gem from the Philadelphia International album, an impressionistic ballad much like Jones's better-known "A Child Is Born," but arguably superior in its orchestral range and evocation of tender feelings. Originally a vehicle for Billy Harper, it is here a showcase for Rich Perry, a longtime member of the

Vanguard Jazz Orchestra whose supple upper register and sudden rhythmic displacements are bound to remind some listeners of Warne Marsh, though Perry's voice is unmistakably his own.

As it was on the 1970 Jones-Lewis LP *Consummation*, “Fingers” is a springboard for a series of flying solos based on the chord changes of Irving Berlin's “I Got Rhythm.” As such, it has an impressive pedigree: Duke Ellington's “Cotton Tail,” with its landmark solo by Ben Webster, was based on “I Got Rhythm” too, and Jones proves himself worthy of comparison to the master with a saxophone chorus as breathtaking as Ellington and Webster's (but with a soprano lead—a typical Jones touch). The soloists this time around are Mosca, McNeely, Wendholt, the tenor saxophonist Ralph LaLama, and the bassist Dennis Irwin.

Jerome Richardson's “Groove Merchant” is a truncated sixteen-bar semi-blues that Jones expanded into a multi-themed work replete with a dazzling three-chorus saxophone-section passage for a 1969 recording date. Here, it features solos by Irwin and the trombonist Jason Jackson, as well as three tasty spots by Jim McNeely.

“All My Yesterdays” is one more impressionistic ballad from the Philadelphia International date, its sensuous, Johnny Hodges-like alto lead (played here by Oatts) yet another token of Jones's affection for Ellington. LaLama and McNeely offer solos in keeping with the piece's mood of sighing reflection. “My Centennial,” recorded on the *Naturally* album, was one of Jones's most charming pieces, with an equally lilting melody and countermelody; it features Smuylan at his most dashing and persuasive.

What remains to be said about this album is that it enjoys an obvious advantage over most other contemporary repertory projects, which typically involve musicians dusting off charts unplayed for decades and trying to reignite flames long ago burned out. When Jones left the Jazz Orchestra, he left his compositions behind; in fact, under Mel Lewis's leadership, the band occasionally played new pieces by Jones right up to Jones's death in 1986. Even now, on any given Monday night, although the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra's voluminous book includes charts by a host of past and current members, including Brookmeyer and McNeely, anyone walking into the club in the middle of a set is likely to hear an ensemble passage that could only be the work of Thad Jones—perhaps the opening bars of one of the numbers included here. Over the decades, this band has seen to it that these pieces have not been allowed to collect dust, which goes a long way toward explaining why this album of pieces from as long ago as the 1960s sounds so rousingly new. —*Francis Davis*

Francis Davis is a contributing editor to *The Atlantic Monthly* and the author of *In the Moment*, *Outcats*, *The History of the Blues*, and *Bebop and Nothingness*.

**Thad Jones**, trumpeter, cornetist, valve trombonist, arranger, and composer, was born in Pontiac, Michigan, on March 28, 1923, and died in Copenhagen, Denmark, on August 21, 1986. After working locally and in Oklahoma City, Jones worked with Count Basie from 1954-63, and though he was not generally featured as a soloist, he wrote many arrangements of original compositions. He left to become a freelance arranger and studio player, and, with Mel Lewis, started a once-a-week rehearsal band of leading studio jazz musicians. The Thad Jones-Mel Lewis orchestra ran from 1965 to 1978, and gained an international reputation and made several foreign tours. Jones resided in Denmark from

1978-1984, writing for the Danish Radio Big Band in Copenhagen and running his own jazz big band. During this period, he also took up valve trombone and studied formal composition. In late 1984 he was contracted to work in the United States with the Basie Band following the death of its leader, and eventually gave up touring completely; he then returned to Denmark several months before his own death.

Jones's playing was overshadowed by his composing and arranging ability, but the printed comment of Charles Mingus, “the greatest trumpeter that I've heard in this life,” gives an idea of his stylistic freshness. While Jones was with Basie, he appeared on several records (under his own name and with Mingus, Coleman Hawkins, and Thelonius Monk) combining Gillespie's rhythmic alertness with an advanced approach to thematic improvisations. His big-band compositions, especially post-Basie, employed similar rhythmic lines with astringent block-chord voicings demanding great virtuosity from the performers. They also incorporated some of the more recent freedoms of small-group work (especially when Jones directed his own music) and set new standards for the next generation of composers, arrangers, and performers.

**The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** is the current title of a band that began life as the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra in 1966 and has performed continuously ever since in New York and worldwide. With a handful of arrangements, Thad and Mel approached legendary club owner Max Gordon and were booked at his Village Vanguard for three Mondays one February. Critical acclaim, awards, and international success followed.

Thad left the band to accept leadership of the Danish Radio Big Band in Copenhagen, while Mel decided to continue the band, now billed as Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra, and enlisted the talents of his old friend and former band member Bob Brookmeyer, who, miraculously, was just returning to active playing and composing in New York. The band not only survived, but with Brookmeyer's writing continued the innovation and influence that Thad and Mel had begun. Bob moved on to other projects and ultimately also settled in Europe, the new material now coming from within the band. In 1990 the band would endure a terrible blow when Mel Lewis died after a five-year battle with cancer. For the members, all of whom had been there for five years and several for more than ten, losing Mel was a deep family tragedy, for great bands invariably become families. They are also teams—and in this spirit decided to continue the band as a cooperative effort. (When asked who was “fronting” the band, one of the veterans was heard snapping, “the music.”)

Thus three weeks have become thirty-three years, and another name change, to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. Several of the key members played with Thad, so the original precepts of sound and swinging are proudly held and displayed, while the other original precepts of creativity and experimentation are nurtured and encouraged. The Village Vanguard is still a great place to be on a Monday night, no matter which side of the bandstand you're on.

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**THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA:**

**Trumpets/Flugelhorns:**

Earl Gardner  
Joe Mosello  
Glenn Drewes  
Scott Wendholt

**Reeds:**

Dick Oatts (lead alto and soprano saxophones, flute)  
Billy Drewes (alto and soprano saxophones, flute, clarinet)  
Rich Perry (tenor saxophone, flute)  
Ralph LaLama (tenor saxophone, clarinet, flute)  
Gary Smulyan (baritone saxophone)

**Trombones:**

John Mosca  
Ed Neumeister  
Jason Jackson  
Douglas Purviance (bass trombone)

**Rhythm section:**

Jim McNeely (piano)  
John Riley (drums)  
Dennis Irwin (bass)

**Solos (in order):**

*A—That's Freedom:* Jim McNeely, piano; John Mosca, trombone

*Once Around:* Rich Perry, tenor saxophone; Ed Neumeister, trombone; Billy Drewes, soprano saxophone

*Quiet Lady:* Jim McNeely, piano; Gary Smulyan, baritone saxophone; Scott Wendholt, trumpet

*Central Park North:* Scott Wendholt, flugelhorn; Glenn Drewes, trumpet; Dick Oatts, soprano saxophone; John Riley, drums

*Your and Mine:* Rich Perry, tenor saxophone

*Fingers:* John Mosca, trombone; Jim McNeely, piano; Scott Wendholt, trumpet; Ralph LaLama, tenor saxophone; John Riley, drums

*Groove Merchant:* Jim McNeely, piano; Jason Jackson, trombone; Dennis Irwin, bass

*All My Yesterdays:* Ralph LaLama, tenor saxophone; Scott Wendholt, trumpet

*My Centennial:* Gary Smulyan, baritone saxophone; John Riley, drums

**Sixteen as One Music Inc.**, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) group, was created by the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra to promote the development and growth of jazz music through education and community outreach programs. The goals of this endeavor are to provide

performances, workshops, lectures, and symposia about jazz and related musical genres in the United States and elsewhere; to commission new and original compositions in jazz and related musical genres; to document historical and innovative projects through audio and video recordings; to help build audiences for jazz and related musical genres; and to foster and promote jazz education in schools and underserved communities.

The **Thad Jones Legacy Project** is designed to explore the repertory of Thad Jones and document his place in American history as one of the leading creators of jazz music. The project will be implemented as a series of recordings, performances, and videos that will appropriately document the depth of Thad's music. One of the primary goals of the project is to take great care in the preparation and recording of this music in order to ensure that the finest documentation will be available to future generations of jazz listeners and performers. The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra has played the music of Thad Jones for the past thirty-three years and has dedicated itself to keeping his music in the forefront, and developing a diverse appreciation for his wonderful mastery of jazz composition.

Produced by Sixteen as One Music Inc., The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra  
Executive producers: Thomas Bellino, Douglas Purviance  
Producers: Thomas Bellino, Douglas Purviance  
Associate producers: John Mosca, Dick Oatts  
Artistic director: Dick Oatts  
Recorded May 1 and 2, 1999 at Edison Recording Studios, New York City  
Engineer: Stuart J. Allyn  
Assistant engineers: Jim Murray, Takako Furuya  
Mixed June 22, 23, 24, 25, 1999 and July 13, 1999 at Kampo Studios, New York City  
Engineer: Stuart J. Allyn  
Assistant engineers: Caleb Lambert, Denise Barbarita  
Digital editing: John Lee, Alleycat Productions, South Orange, New Jersey  
Mastering: George Blood, DVD Media, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Cover art: Peter Wayne Lewis. *Blue Swan Suite, #21*(1995). Oil on linen, 60" x 48".  
Courtesy of Rosenberg & Kaufman Fine Art, NYC. <http://www.artnet.com>  
Cover design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc., NYC

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra would like to thank: Doris Sokoloff; Lorraine Gordon; The staff at the Village Vanguard; Karin Beaty; Nancy Oatts; Peter Wayne Lewis; James Jordon; Richard Kessler; Terry Lamacchia; Brenda Pressley; Obie O'Brian; Alex Abrash; Greg Weeks; Anna Sala; Anita Brown; Ed Manowitz Special thanks to Earl Gardner for his help in this production A very special thank-you to Thad and Mel.

**This recording was made possible through generous grants from The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, and the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trusts.**

1 A—That's Freedom  
(Hank Jones) (publ. by Thank Music Corp.; ASCAP ) 7:19

2 Once Around  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 5:51

3 Quiet Lady  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 7:28

4 Central Park North  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 8:28

5 Your and Mine  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 3:52

6 Fingers (Thad Jones)  
(publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 14:36

7 Groove Merchant  
(Jerome Richardson) (publ. by Immendise Music Co.; BMI) 8:34

8 All My Yesterdays  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 4:08

9 My Centennial  
(Thad Jones) (publ. by D'Accord Music Inc.; ASCAP) 7:31

All arrangements by Thad Jones

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