



ART

By Josef Woodard
Photo by Michael Jackson

EMERGES

Wayne Shorter was never one to abide by a strict plan—even his own. That goes for his musical endeavors, interviews and holistic views of art and life.

There he was on a November evening in 2016, in Wrocław, Poland, at a press conference before playing his chamber-jazz piece *The Unfolding* at the Jazztopad festival, one of the work's commissioning bodies. In lieu of the typical Q&A format, Shorter launched into a 15-minute tone poem/essay, laced with personal philosophies.

"This music is just a drop in the ocean of life," he said, later referring to his visit with astrophysicists at Stanford, a strong influence on *The Unfolding* (as in the "unfolding multiverse," in contradiction of the Big Bang theory). He surmised that "music is a vehicle to discover what it means to become more human, in eternity."

He ended his talk shortly before going on stage with an orchestra and band, and dazzling the crowd, with one of his operative adages: "Never give up."

At age 84, Shorter is living up to that credo. His ambitious new album, *Emanon*, is a three-disc set recorded with both the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and his long-standing quartet. It is packaged with a graphic novel, which Shorter helped create with writer Monica Sly and comic book artist Randy DuBurke. (The album title is the phrase "No Name" spelled backwards.) In addition to this auspicious project, Shorter is working on his first opera, in collaboration with musical comrade and kindred spirit Esperanza Spalding. He's also the subject of an eagerly anticipated documentary, fittingly titled *Zero Gravity*.

Shorter long has been one of jazz's paradoxical superheroes, an important composer and distinctive improviser who sometimes seems to be hiding in plain sight. His quixotic and non-linear approach to music (and communication) has made him a unlikely candidate for a high-profile spotlight. Yet he has been in lofty situations for decades, as a critical player and writer in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers going back to the '50s, in the great Miles Davis Quintet of the 1960s, and as co-founder and co-captain (with Joe Zawinul) of Weather Report in 1970.

Shorter's solo career has been a circuitous and modular adventure, from the classic early Blue Note albums to the brilliant Brazilian project *Native Dancer* (with Milton Nascimento), to masterful electro-acoustic album projects such as *Atlantis* and *High Life*. In this millennium, he has steered his quartet with pianist Danilo Pérez, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade.

"There are many moments that exemplified what we called 'Zero Gravity,' a musical language created by this quartet that is based in an experience of freedom," Pérez said. "We do not hang on any preconceived musical idea to start playing, but explore the process of composing music instantly as a group, trusting our individual and communal relationship. Many times, we go on naked, without rehearsing. I call this 'comprovising.'"



Danilo Pérez (left), Wayne Shorter, John Patitucci and Brian Blade perform on the saxophone icon's new album, *Emanon*.

The quartet has recorded, if sparsely, for Verve Records and, starting with 2013's *Without A Net*, for the Blue Note label. Blue Note President Don Was, who signed Shorter, was essential in making the complex *Emanon* a reality, despite its potentially limited commercial appeal.

Was acknowledged that he, Shorter and the creative team “knew that something was happening that hadn't been done before, which is really an extension of what I think is at the core of jazz, anyway. The whole idea behind improvisation is to do anything but what you've done before. There's a real excitement when you do that, when you feel like you're doing something that hasn't been done before.”

In recent years, Shorter has been maneuvering ever deeper into orchestra work—favoring what he called “sagas,” rather than “tunes.” The “sagas,” so far, include 2016's *The Unfolding*, and the even more ambitious 2013 work *Gaia*, featuring the Los Angeles Philharmonic, his quartet and Spalding as miracle-working vocalist.

DownBeat caught up with Shorter at his Hollywood Hills abode above Sunset Boulevard. He wore a T-shirt with an image of Albert Einstein swirling in psychedelic regalia, and a baseball cap a friend had made for him. It said: “Wayne Shorter, Saxophone Hero” and “Top Human Being.”

On this early summer morning, Shorter was recovering from a bout of pneumonia, but still eager to talk, in his inimitable way. He spoke of his current projects and what he and his wife, Carolina, referred to as a new flowering of creative energy, following his illness.

“In Buddhism,” said Shorter, who has practiced Nichiren Buddhism for 40-plus years, “we call it Sancho Shima—three demons and four devils. They will appear when you seem to be getting to some creative, original something, thwarting your mission. The Sancho Shima, or

‘resistance,’ will surely arise. That's when a lot of people give up. In some of the sutras, they say, ‘But remember, an airplane cannot take off without resistance.’”

Below are edited excerpts from the cosmic conversation.

Was there a grand design at the outset of *Emanon*, or did the idea grow and take on a life of its own?

Actually, it emerged rather than started. I like to think about, “There's no such thing as a beginning or an end.” It emerges.

We got together with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. We actually rehearsed with them and played at Carnegie Hall. Then we played in the studio the next two or three days to record what we did. After we did that recording, [the quartet was] going to London, anyway. With all of this talking with Don Was, it just emerged. There was no grand, strategic plan or anything like that. It was the opposite.

Don asked me about [Blue Note founder] Alfred Lion and [label partner] Frank Wolff—“What were they like?” I would tell him as much as I could. He said something about, “I don't want to stray away from that vision.”

When Frank Wolff had pictures taken in the studio all the time, all the artist knew that you'd have a first take, second takes. Maybe on the fourth take, when Frank Wolff was taking pictures and he started dancing, that was the take. He knew. Alfred Lion was crazy about the bebop years and all that. They both came over from Germany, escaped Hitler. That kind of spirit is something Don Was didn't want to go away. This kind of record is another kind of spearhead for what Frank Wolff and Alfred Lion, and people in Japan, say about jazz and bebop. They talk about the “authenticity” of it. There is authenticity, and then there is classical. I know, on the totem pole, jazz and classical are on a low rung. It's a kind of

a salute to everybody—not to say that [it's about] jazz more than the rest.

Regardless of how people talk about separating jazz and classical, let's say what this really is. It's without a name. It goes along with Stephen Hawking, when he was dealing with the question, “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” He said [imitating Hawking's voice], “Neither, it was simultaneously.” There's no such thing as a beginning. He also said, “There's no such thing as nothing.”

That's what this album is. I'm surprised the front-office guys went along with it. But they don't want to lose Don. He put this thing on the line. He went to them several times. He has his name on it.

The [live quartet recordings] we did in London, at the Barbican, that's like fallout from the large ensemble stuff. Or it's the reverse—“fall in.” They're both “fallout” from each other.

How did the graphic novel become part of the project?

It was Don Was' idea. He said, “Why don't we do a graphic novel?” It's about the multiverses. The main thing in that novel is that the greatest awakening that exists in humanity is within humanity itself.

I use the name “No Name.” Elizabeth Kolbert, who won a Pulitzer Prize, wrote the [2014] book called *The Sixth Extinction*, and she says, on the first page: “We get in trouble when we start naming things.”

The album segues from the scored Orpheus version of “The Three Marias” into the quartet's extended version of that same tune, a juxtaposition we also hear with “Lotus” and “Prometheus Unbound.” Was the contrast something that you wanted to impart?

Yeah, it represents to me the idea that there's no such thing as “finished.” Something evolving may be occurring. But something more than evolving or evolution is at work. And that's “no name.” People name something, and they figure the work is done [slaps his hands]. Or you can blame with a name, or brand stuff, like Trump does.

You can try to separate all you want, but connection and the kinsmanship among people and things and sound, all the senses, it's like a relative mission that seems to have no name, too. The mission is hidden in the attempt to separate. But the mission is not separate. The mission goes on. There's a whole thing about this album [that says], “Never give up.”

Also, the closest thing that comes to creation itself is the attempt to make something original that *inspires* creation. You can't have one without the other. It's intertwined.

This has a lot to do with trust. When we play as a quartet, there's a lot of trust going on. The Orpheus orchestra has no conductor.

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And now you're working on an opera: That's a major undertaking.

What a great team, with Esperanza Spalding. The director [Penny Woolcock] directed *Doctor Atomic*. Opera Philadelphia is the home base. There's one person who said, "Count me in" for set design—that's [architect] Frank Gehry. Esperanza went to his house. He called her to come to his house one time. She came back and said, "You know what we were doing? We were jamming." She was playing bass and singing while he sketched.

Spalding was quite amazing on your piece *Gaia*. You two are kindred spirits, it seems.

Esperanza is writing the story, the libretto and all that, and she's gonna be in it.

The opera's called *Iphigenia*. She was the daughter of Agamemnon. They say it's the only tragedy from that time that did not end in a tragedy.

Miles called me, before he died. Most of the time, he would say, "When you work with classical musicians, the hardest thing is to get them to swing." Classical musicians know what swing is. You alter [the rhythm]. But Miles never said, "They don't swing" to me. But he called me and said, "Wayne, I want you write something for me, with strings and horns. When you get to the strings, make sure you put a window in there, so I can get out of there."

Did you write that piece?

I was going to work on it, but then they had the whole thing in Montreux, with all the guys. [Davis performed Gil Evans-era material at the 1991 Montreux Jazz Festival, shortly before

his death.] He wanted to do something with *Turandot* and a couple of other things.

What do you think of the new documentary, *Zero Gravity*? Does it give you a picture of who Wayne Shorter is and was? Or is it a portrait in flux?

I think it's a vehicle that somebody might want to jump onto, or wish they had. Or they might see something in themselves that they disregarded and might want to take up the fight. It could be like a movie of their own lives where they are the director, producer and actor of the destiny of their lives.

It's almost like the black ladies who were working at NASA [portrayed in the film *Hidden Figures*]. Nobody knew about that. A lot of people didn't know that when the government was after [boxer] Joe Louis, [Frank] Sinatra went to Joe Louis and gave him a blank check, said, "Fill in what you want."

Did you have a strong concept of how you wanted the quartet to sound from the beginning, or has it been a work in evolutionary progress?

Yeah, it's another thing like, 'Let's see where it's going.' We've never rehearsed. No rehearsal.

That's your secret?

Most people, when they're playing together, have their time to solo, solo, solo. If somebody comes in while you're doing your solo, it's thought of as an interruption. There have been many fights—I don't know about fist fights, but fights backstage—with people saying, "What were you doing? You cut me off..." or stuff like that. Or it's held within, not saying anything but holding this

anger or something like that, because when they were doing something, someone else was doing something, and they didn't get a chance to speak with their instrument.

When we think of an interruption, it's not an interruption: It's an opportunity.

There is an element of "free-jazz" thinking at work in this band. Has the search for freedom been a constant throughout your musical life?

Yeah. A lot of the titles of things we play are like "Zero Gravity," but it's "Zero Gravity 1," "Zero Gravity 2." ... We listen to the pieces and say, "There it is—right there."

That's why the documentary is called *Zero Gravity*. It just means not being attached to anything too long that holds you hostage to yourself. I still say, "Take along stuff you can use from the past, a flashlight to shine into the darkness of the unknown."

Your recent work seems like a "thinking big" period, with *Gaia*, *The Unfolding*, this project and the opera. Was there something that triggered this more expansive energy for you?

Actually, when I was 18 or 19, I started working on an opera. I abandoned it, because I went to finish school and was in the Army. But this opera was called *The Singing Lesson*. It's about a family down in Greenwich Village, and there's a brother hanging out with a motorcycle gang and stuff like that. When I stopped working on it, here comes *West Side Story*, with gangs.

I still have the pages and I look at it sometimes. But I was thinking in that way when I was 18 or 19.

But you never had the opportunity back then?

The people who wanted to get in there with it ... there were no sponsors or nothing like that. When I first heard this bebop, I knew—in Newark, New Jersey, at least—that this was going to be a long trip, a *looong* trip. People were still listening to Bobby "Blue" Bland, Big Ivy Joe Turner, my man the "Blueberry Hill" guy [Fats Domino] and Elvis.

You were a cartoonist as a kid. Does *Emanon* harken back to that experience for you?

Yeah, I created a comic book, science fiction. It was called "Other Worlds." I was 14 or 15, 1949. Some people see it and say, "Hey, you should put this out there." We'll see. Neil deGrasse Tyson came here, when Herbie and I were here. It's in the documentary. He saw the book and said, "Hey, you've got a spacecraft commandeered by a woman. How old were you in 1949?"

The superhero *Emanon* is called a "rogue philosopher." That would seem an apt description of you. You're a philosopher working outside the norm.

Yeah, and it's a philosophy with no name, too.

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Emanon reflects the many dimensions of Shorter.

The Making of *Emanon*

Wayne Shorter's *Emanon* is one of the more innovative releases of 2018, and it started with alchemy between the artist and a record company executive.

Blue Note President Don Was, who signed (technically, re-signed) Shorter to the label for which the saxophonist recorded classic '60s albums, is also an abiding fan. "To say that he's a treasure is such an understatement," Was said. "It's an incredible opportunity to be able to actually sit and talk with a guy who can tell you about sessions for Blue Note with Art Blakey, and yet he's still doing vital new music that doesn't sound like anything anybody else is doing."

The seeds of *Emanon* were planted with Shorter's desire to document his orchestral compositions. Was

remembered seeing Shorter's teenaged sci-fi comic book "Other Worlds." Recognizing Shorter's fascination with visual culture, he posed the idea of including a graphic novel with the album package. Impressed with Randy DuBurke's graphic novel adaptation of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Was commented, "I just knew he would connect with Wayne." After meeting in Europe two years ago, "They concocted this thing. Then, it just seemed like, 'All right, let's also do quartet versions of the same music.' It was just to try to do something special and different, that reflected the dimensions of Wayne, and I think we got that."

Shorter's longtime pianist/bandmate Danilo Pérez fondly remembers the London dates, the source of the album's band recordings. "We were happy to be back after a break we had," Pérez recalled. "The atmosphere was fantastic, and we were all really excited to play in London once again."

As for Shorter's Blue Note boss and future album options, Was insists that the saxophonist has complete artistic freedom: "Wayne Shorter has license to do whatever he wants to do. Any idea he has, we'll help him realize it and get it out there. That's his contract. [It's] just a paragraph: 'Do whatever you want.'" —Josef Woodard