

*Steve Coleman:* The Most Influential Figure Since Coltrane?

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## Tia Fuller

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WITH AN  
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BACKING R&B'S  
BIGGEST STAR,  
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TIA FULLER IS  
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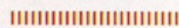




**D**etermination: It sparkles in Tia Fuller's deep-brown eyes; it radiates through her rich mocha skin; it flashes through her beaming smile. It also invigorates her voice both on the saxophone and in conversation.

We're sitting in Gobo, a chic vegetarian restaurant in New York City's West Village, on a frosty early January evening. Fuller rocks a svelte pinstripe blazer and matching pants with a red, laced blouse. When she talks, many of her words lean forward in an italicized fashion. Fuller hardly sounds harried, though; she also laughs constantly, emanating a magnetism that's inescapable. Without giving off any of the negative attributes associated with the word "diva," Fuller emits diva energy in the best sense of the word: She's direct, she knows what she wants, and she knows how to get it.

It doesn't hurt that since 2007 she's been touring with the biggest diva in the R&B world, Beyoncé. Fresh off a massive worldwide tour that included Egypt, Japan, Europe and the Philippines, Fuller is constantly in contact with R&B, pop and hip-hop A-listers, a situation that can prove financially seductive for jazz artists. Fuller denies that there's been any temptation spurred by Beyoncé to move fully into the pop world. And while she can talk endlessly about the artistic benefits gained from playing with pop superstars, Fuller continues to stake her claim in the jazz world. "I want to establish myself as a jazz artist first," declares the 34-year-old alto and soprano saxophonist, flutist, composer and bandleader. "About 10 years ago, when I first moved out to Cherry Hill, N.J., I promised myself [I would] really focus on jazz and establish myself as a jazz artist. Being, of course, a female in jazz, a lot of people would like to take my career in different directions. I'm using this record in continuing to establish myself as [a jazz artist]."



**W**hen Fuller says "this record," she's referring to *Decisive Steps* (Mack Avenue), her vivacious third disc. Both the title and the album's searing, no-nonsense jazz content affirm Fuller's modus operandi. And while that title might appear at first to be a play on John Coltrane's classic "Giant Steps," it actually comes from the lyrics of "Life Brings," a bonus track available exclusively on iTunes. The song contains the life-affirming verses, *Live your life in faith, not fear/ Abundant life in this new year/Pursuit of dreams, decisive steps/Will bring you to your victory yet.* "Those lyrics really captured the kind of direction that I'm trying to take in my life," Fuller says.

"It's a guide that I want to send to the rest of the world about moving through life in faith, not fear, and really taking strategic and specific, aggressive steps toward where you want to go," she continues. "Even during those times when I had bad days and [wasn't] feeling as inspired,



I can say, 'OK, it's time to take some decisive steps and move forward with intent and purpose.'"

"Life Brings" also features singer Asaph Womack and tap dancer Maurice Chestnut. Picking up on some of the visual razzle-dazzle gained from her tenure with Beyoncé, Fuller has an idea for a large-scale live presentation of "Life Brings" that would include dancers, video and an orchestra. Even during her smaller gigs, she tries to incorporate a few of Beyoncé's dancers. "That component just expands the jazz audience," Fuller explains. "If there's somebody there who has never heard jazz before, hopefully the music will capture them. But if not, then I think a combination of the music and the visual will."

Fuller argues that her experiences with Beyoncé have broadened her perspective regarding the music industry and the art of presentation. "Yes, the music is important," Fuller assures. "But also the physical aspect of how I look onstage, the presentation of a show, the set list of a show and how it flows, the lighting of the show. All of that is not what the average jazz musician will think about."

After one listen to *Decisive Steps'* opening title track, however, it becomes clear that Fuller's visual insights haven't diminished her focus on music. On alto, Fuller wields a silvery tone and is prone to serpen-

tine improvisations that zig, zag, jab and soar with brisk fluidity. "I'm really rhythmic," she explains. "I like playing with drummers. I like being melodic, too, but I'm extremely rhythmic." Case in point: the hyperkinetic interaction she ignites with drummer Kim Thompson, another member of Beyoncé's all-female band, on that bristling title track, which also features Miriam Sullivan's propulsive basslines and knuckle-busting piano accompaniment from Fuller's older sister, Shamie Royston.



The enormous group rapport displayed throughout *Decisive Steps* reveals a quartet that Fuller's been engaged with for nearly 10 years. Thompson and Sullivan make up the core of the group; Rachel Eckroth originally filled the piano chair, but was replaced by Miki Hayama, who was replaced by Royston (who's married to drummer Rudy Royston). "We've not only played together for a long time, we're extremely close," Fuller says. "I think, all of us being women, we share a bond socially and spiritually that comes out through the performances."

Fuller continues to expound on the unique joys of being a female instrumentalist: "I think as women, we have a special connection as instrumentalists. We have a certain innate connection because we are creators of life; we're able to give life. We have wombs, we're extremely intuitive, we're more emotional in general than men. But the fact that we have this physical element—our womb—that's able to nurture and produce life, that, to me, conceptually is amazing once we get onstage. I don't want to say that that connection isn't shared with men, but it's just different. I will play with men. There's definitely a bond there, but it just comes from a different place biologically. I wouldn't say that's better or worse. It's just very different."

Indeed, *Decisive Steps* isn't entirely a women-only affair. In addition to rap dancer Maurice Chestnut, it features trumpeter Sean Jones on several cuts as well as bassist Christian McBride and vibraphonist Warren Wolf.

Of the aforementioned men, Fuller has exhibited her greatest bond with Jones. She made unforgettable appearances on his discs *Eternal Journey* (2004), *Gemini* (2005) and *Roots* (2006), all on Mack Avenue. And, in turn, he also appeared on her 2007 disc, *Healing Space*. When the two play, they concoct a soulful chemistry that's on par with the best alto sax-and-trumpet pairings of bop-rooted jazz, such as Benny Golson and Art Farmer, Cannonball and Nat Adderley, Donald Harrison and Terence Blanchard, and Bobby Watson and Terrell Stafford. "It's really amazing having a connection with a good person who's also a friend, because, again, it comes out in the music," says Fuller. "Sonically we're able to blend with each other's sound to a point where both of us can't tell the difference between our horns."

"We both have a strong understanding of the human spirit and how that moves through music," adds Jones, who first met Fuller in 2002 at a comedy show. "We sort of play with the same vibration; we've always had that. It's sort of hard to describe. It's just something that is. You just go with it. Instead of trying to analyze it, we just made it our business to play together."



Fuller is a modernist who incorporates touches of funk, gospel and R&B into her sound. Nevertheless, it's all articulated through a language that is rooted in postbop. Her searing improvisations sometimes veer toward the avant-garde, where her virtuosic flights can resemble that of Kenny Garrett. When describing how she builds her solos, Fuller waxes psychological. "I consciously go to the practice room and work on it," she explains. "Subconsciously, I get it down to a point where it's innate, when it almost becomes mechanical. Then it's super-

conscious, when I step to the stage and I forget about it. I try to let my cars do 90 percent of the work. The facility is just there to get it out. I want to be so technically proficient to be able to immediately tap into whatever I hear. That's what the masters like John Coltrane and Sonny Stitt had—that high level of proficiency."

When it comes to talking about her childhood in Aurora, Colo., it seems as if Fuller's been training for "that high level of proficiency" all her life. She grew up the middle child of three, with older sister Shamie and a younger brother, Ashton Fuller. Their parents, Fred and Elthopia Fuller, are retired educators. Her mother taught English, and her father taught physical education and was an assistant principal. "People used to call our family the Huxtables," Fuller giggles. "I was blessed to have a beautiful childhood. We had family trips together, we had a nice house to grow up in, we rode bikes to the park, and we had a dog."

If the Fullers exuded characteristics of an idealized black American family like the Huxtables, they also shared some commonalities with another TV family: the Partridges. In their case, they called themselves Fuller Sound. Tia's mother sang and her father played bass. Eventually Shamie and Tia were incorporated into the fold; Ashton, who is 11 years younger than Tia, was too young to play.

Tia's mother started her on piano when she was 3; she played it until she was 13, even though she realized at that time that piano wasn't her calling. "I even flunked the [piano] book a couple of times when I was 6 or 7," she laughs.

While still playing the piano, Fuller picked up the flute when she was 9. When she arrived at Aurora Hills Middle School, Fuller wanted to join the jazz band, but noticed that there weren't too many flutists. Her band teacher encouraged her to play the saxophone because it had a lot of the same fingerings. Inspiration to change her main instrument came quickly, though she continues to play flute as a secondary ax today. "To me, [the alto] was more empowering than the flute, because I could play louder as a kid," she laughs. "I instantly fell in love with it."

Music played an integral role in Fuller's teenage years, but it wasn't all consuming. She was also a cheerleader, and remembers wanting to become an ice skater, veterinarian and an ophthalmologist during her high school years. "She was a very friendly girl, involved with a lot of school activities," Elthopia Fuller says of her daughter. "She also mentored a lot of kids with their school studies." It was during her senior year in high school, when she played a solo on "I Hear a Rhapsody," that a serious dedication to jazz sparked.

Fuller attributes her robust sound on sax to the high climate of Colorado. "Because of the altitude, it broadened my lung capacity," she insists. "I remember when I moved [east], it was so easy to play. Everything felt so effortless. Every time I go back home, I'm breathing really hard."

"She's always been a very powerful player," adds her father, Fred Fuller. "I noticed this when she was playing at the nightclubs with me. She would play stronger than other people. She was very articulate and mature at that age. Her sound was just so strong."

Instead of going to high-profile music institutions such as Berklee or the Manhattan School, Fuller chose Spelman College. "I remember watching *A Different World* and wanting the black college experience," she says. "I grew up in a suburban area that was mainly white with maybe a few Asian people."

So between 1994 and 1998, Fuller attended Spelman, exhibiting an indefatigable practice regime that sometimes stretched toward eight hours per day. She recalls both driving her roommates crazy and staying in the practice rooms until midnight. "I got in really well with the janitors because they would always let me in [after-hours]," she laughs. "But I took that time to really learn the horn and the tunes."

Fuller earned a bachelor's in music from Spelman, graduating

Magna Cum Laude. For her master's degree, she earned a full scholarship to the University of Colorado, where she became the first graduate of its jazz pedagogy performance program. She laughs, saying that she was the program's guinea pig, but praises it because it helped her hone her teaching skills. "I was teaching theory and a couple of jazz combos. I was also directing big bands," she says.

After graduating from Colorado, Fuller took a year off before deciding to take a bite out of the Big Apple in 2001. She couldn't have arrived at a more unfortunate time, just two days before September 11. She remembers hanging out with fellow saxophonist Javon Jackson in her Jersey City apartment after the attacks, contemplating her future. Her bed and furniture hadn't yet arrived from Colorado. She called her mom for advice.

"As any mother would be, I was worried and didn't want her to stay out there," Elthopia Fuller recalls, "but I told her to put her trust and faith in God. I'm glad that she did, because she would not be where she is today if she would have come back to Colorado."

"I ended up staying because I felt that it was meant for me to be here," Tia adds. "Almost immediately I started working within the first two weeks that I was here." Her first gig was at a fish fry in Cherry Hill, N.J., which led to a weekly gig at Live at Instant Coffee, where

WBGO-FM, she promoted the project herself at gigs, and she shopped for a label, eventually attracting the attention of Mack Avenue. "When you do your own CD, people see that as you taking initiative, because it encompasses so many different things," she says. "Of course, you have to have the music together, but it's also getting the band together, paying the band, then the business aspects of taking care of the artwork. Every small detail, I learned hands-on."



Considering Fuller's enormous musicality and unflinching work ethic, it comes as no surprise that she ended up working with Beyoncé, currently

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the hardest-working woman in show business. "Tia is a very strong-willed individual," says her father. "From playing with Beyoncé, it has really helped her professionally, but it also made her focus even more on what she's trying to do as a solo artist."

"Unlike the listener, who just gets to enjoy the end product of the journey, I was on the journey with her. I've gotten a chance to see how that journey came to fruition sonically," adds Jones. "Just her living her life and being true to herself, even in the midst of all of her successes and trying times, you hear that in the

music that she puts out. She's very honest about it. She's not afraid to let the listener into her soul. A lot of people are afraid to do that. They spend a lot of their time masking themselves. She actually spends most of her time opening herself up to the world."

And just as Beyoncé has influenced Fuller in terms of stage presentation, Fuller has influenced the R&B diva musically. "I'm working on her doing a jazz set, because we actually got her to scat on the *I Am... Yours* DVD. It's during a prelude before 'Déjà Vu'; she's scatting 'Ornithology,'" Fuller says.

Two years prior, Fuller gave Beyoncé an Ella Fitzgerald disc for her birthday. When it came time to persuade her to scat, Fuller referred her to that disc. "She's really amazing because she learned how to scat in one day," says the saxophonist. "She came in and didn't know anything about it. We were trying to teach her syllables. She came back the next day and had it down."

Fuller hopes to lure Beyoncé even further into the jazz realm. "Eventually I'd like to feature her music with jazz arrangements," she says. So does that mean that a pop solo record is in the near future for Fuller? "Who knows what will happen in the future," she says. "I'm not completely opposed to doing a pop album, but right now, that's not my focus." **JT**



**FAB FOUR:**  
Tia Fuller Quartet: Miriam Sullivan,  
Shami Royston, Fuller and Kim  
Thompson (from left)

she earned \$80 a week. She also played at the Emmanuel Pentecostal Church. Meanwhile she was taking the PATH train into New York, sitting in at whatever jazz gigs she could find.

She landed a part-time teaching gig at St. Anthony's Catholic School. While being committed to jazz, she continued to play wedding and church gigs. "It expanded my repertoire," she says. "I couldn't play a whole lot of bebop lines in church. I had to modify that. I had to check other things out, even some smooth jazz."



**W**hile continuing to develop by playing with established artists such as Ralph Peterson Jr., T.S. Monk, Jon Faddis and Rufus Reid, Fuller revealed yet another side of her moxie by self-releasing her debut disc, *Pillar of Strength*, which was produced and financed by her mother. "That was my first [album], which taught me a lot about the art of recording and different things that you have to prepare yourself for," Fuller says.

Indeed, she used a hip-hop-ish hustle to promote *Pillar of Strength*. She took it to Tower Records for consignment, she gave it to Newark's