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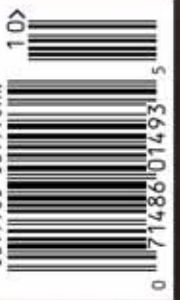
Where To Study  
Jazz 2019



**Tia Fuller**  
The Saxophonist as Role Model

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BY TED PANKEN

As the featured saxophone soloist in Beyoncé’s band between 2006 and 2010, Tia Fuller won fans around the globe. Today, she is one of the most respected artists in jazz, both as a bandleader and educator. The Berklee College of Music professor’s new Mack Avenue album, *Diamond Cut*, includes such high-profile collaborators as Terri Lyne Carrington, Jack DeJohnette and Dave Holland.



Cover photo of Tia Fuller and image above shot by Jimmy and Dena Katz at The Jazz Gallery in New York City on May 22. Info for this venue is at jazzgallery.nyc.

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*Where To Study Jazz 2019*

# The Radiance OF A DIAMOND

By Ted Panken    Photos by Jimmy & Dena Katz

**TIA FULLER KNOWS ABOUT BEING A ROAD WARRIOR. AS FEATURED SAXOPHONE SOLOIST IN BEYONCÉ'S ALL-WOMAN BAND BETWEEN 2006 AND 2010, SHE TRAVELED FROM ONE MEGA-VENUE TO ANOTHER IN HIGH STYLE, NOT INFREQUENTLY IN THE LEADER'S PRIVATE JET.**

**B**etween 2012 and 2015, she experienced the grind to which jazz musicians are more accustomed, traversing the European circuit by air, train and van with bassist/vocalist Esperanza Spalding's Radio Music Society, and Terri Lyne Carrington's Mosaic and Money Jungle projects, while also continuing to lead her own groups on periodic sojourns in support of her Mack Avenue leader albums. In 2013, when Berklee College of Music hired Fuller as an ensemble professor, a weekly commute to Boston from New Jersey entered her quotidian routine.

In late June—a day after she'd concluded a

month of shows across the United States with a new quartet performing repertoire from her fourth Mack Avenue album, *Diamond Cut*—Fuller made the Amtrak trip from Boston (now her home) to New York to talk with DownBeat about the Carrington-produced date.

If the day-trip was well within Fuller's comfort zone, the music contained therein is not: She eschews using a pianist, as she'd done on prior albums, instead framing her piquant, full-bodied alto saxophone sound with two all-star bass-drum tandems—Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette; James Genus and Bill Stewart—and guitarist Adam Rogers.



Tia Fuller



Fuller started the writing process in 2015 while traveling with the Mack Avenue Super Band, focusing on the spacious environment that John Patitucci's six-string electric and piccolo basses imparted to portions of *Angelic Warrior*, her 2012 release. "It's a sonic shift, which also expresses my feeling that I've evolved as a woman and as a musician," Fuller said. "Terri and I had an extensive conversation about it. She said, 'Tia, I'd like to see you align yourself with some of the masters in the community, so you'll play up to that level and be pushed.'"

How successfully Fuller fulfilled Carrington's mandate denotes her steadily ascending stature and maturity as a performer and implies her ability to convey within the educational arena the particulars of functioning at the highest levels of the music industry. Her students at Berklee benefit not only from Fuller's myriad tours and albums, but also her background in academia and the practical wisdom she's gained from conducting countless master classes. (Fuller, along with trumpeter Ingrid Jensen, will serve in September

as artists-in-residence at the 2018 Monterey Jazz Festival—a role involving performances, as well as clinics.)

Fuller's commitment to her educational mission was palpable as she described processing an offer for a full-time position at Berklee. "I had taken a very long break at the tail end of Beyoncé's tour," she said. "Then, within 24 hours of my receiving the call from Berklee, they called us all to come back out. Early on, I didn't want to teach. My parents were educators; I didn't want to do what they did. But I remember giving a saxophone lesson while I was serving in my TA position in graduate school, and the light bulb went off. Right then, I realized that to provide light and direction is a beautiful thing. When I'd rehearse with Beyoncé, I'd think, 'I'm not maximizing my potential—it's a great opportunity, but I want to teach.' I didn't want to do it in a public-school setting, though, because I wanted to be able to perform and to travel.

"It was almost a no-brainer. I'd done everything I needed to do. My only struggle was to

let go of the ego of, 'Oh, you're playing with Beyoncé.' Then it was like: OK, it's time for me to move fervently into this next direction, so I can step into my purpose—to bring to the next generation the experiences I've learned from Beyoncé, from being a bandleader and everything else, and be a light for others, whether on stage or in the classroom."

The decision to make the offer also seemed like a no-brainer to Ron Savage, a drummer who then was chair of Berklee's ensemble department and is now dean of the performance division. "I was always looking for excellent musicians who have a certain spirit in the way they relate to people and share with people, and who are interested in teaching," Savage said. He first heard Fuller play in 2011 at the Umbria Jazz Festival in Perugia, Italy, where Berklee conducts summer clinics. "As soon as Tia came to the mic to introduce her band and began to play, she set a strong tone of collaboration, collegiality and respect. In that moment, it hit me that she's a role model our students need to see, musically and otherwise."

During several Berklee workshops the following year, Savage observed how strongly the students responded to Fuller's teaching. "It's not typical for any musician to go from playing hardcore, straightahead jazz to playing with one of the world's biggest pop stars, and also have a master's degree," he said, mentioning Fuller's advanced degree in jazz pedagogy and performance from the University of Colorado at Boulder. "She's a complete package. I knew she'd have other offers, but I had no doubt we'd work it out."

Berklee's ensemble department comprises 450 bands playing 60 styles of music. Fuller was assigned the half-century-old Rainbow All-Star Ensemble and the Rainbow Big Band Ensemble legacy bands from Phil Wilson, and was asked if she had any new ensembles in mind. She suggested the Esperanza Spalding Radio Music Society, Christian McBride and Beyoncé.

"I wanted to bring something reflecting the A-list production skills I'd experienced and observed while touring and rehearsing with Beyoncé," Fuller said. "The rehearsals were 12 hours. We might play for three or four. The rest of the time, I'd watch and learn the choreography, see how many lights were on Beyoncé, how things were set up. We have all the tools here, all the departments."

In 2017, Fuller supervised a student-run production in which nine of the 10 original members of Beyoncé's all-female band merged with the ensemble. It included five dancers, five vocalists, two guitarists, three keyboardists, two bass players, two drummers, six horn players, strings, LED lighting and a smoke machine. "It was a full-on production from head to toe," Fuller said. On a student's suggestion, she upped the ante in 2017–'18 with a student-organized Bruno Mars tribute show that included 60 dancers and a drum line.

"The Beyoncé show was the groundbreaker,

but Bruno Mars taught us where we can actually go once we start doing it,” Savage said. “I thought they could do the show in Las Vegas the next day. There’s the inclusiveness of the band, of the singers and the dancers, drawn from the different demographics and communities on our campus. You also saw young women being featured and put in leadership roles—and Tia herself setting the standard.”

“On the first day of school, they’d learned almost all the music, with some choreography,” Fuller said. “The band is all men, so I interwove the #MeToo movement in certain sections. We talked about equality in the classroom, equali-

take it as an opportunity to educate.”

In this regard, she mentioned her father, Fred Fuller, who played bass in a family combo called Fuller Sound with her mother, Elthopia, a singer. They remained in the Denver area after having their children, and pursued careers as educators.

As a youngster, Fuller was a classical piano and flute student before becoming “infatuated” with the saxophone. She wore saxophone earrings and a saxophone necklace, and finally switched instruments at age 11. After high school, when Fuller was gigging with her parents, her father trained her in the mindset of “go in and be fearless, even when you are afraid,” Fuller said.

## ‘I STEPPED INTO MY PURPOSE: TO BE A LIGHT FOR OTHERS.’

ty in the performing arts for women, that young men should hold their brothers accountable for injustice or unrighteousness to women. I wanted the show to be not only an A-list production, but a platform to educate the students and the audience.”

Savage said that Fuller has established a new cultural stream at Berklee, both musically and institutionally. “She’s done some things no one has done before,” he said. “To me, what’s unique is that innovations at Berklee usually have come from former students or longtime faculty—established community members. Tia came with a vision and a strategy, a work ethic, and the patience to work through the institutional issues to become one of Berklee’s shining lights in a relatively short period of time.”

Fuller applied the same qualities Savage described to establishing herself on the New York scene after earning her master’s degree. “At jam sessions, I’d be waiting my turn, and someone would walk in front of me and start playing,” she recalled. “That happened a couple of times before I was like, ‘OK, I see what this is.’ When I started talking to club owners about booking gigs, often they wouldn’t take me seriously—or they would hit on me. Things like that helped mold me into maintaining my personality, while also being direct in how I exude my energy, setting up barriers of business versus pleasure.

“I don’t experience sexism in an environment where people know who I am or what I do. But I still have to ward off sexist comments. Every day I’m traveling, if I’m carrying my horn, someone says, ‘Oh, what’s that?’ ‘It’s a saxophone.’ ‘Do you actually play it?’ Whereas maybe I’d laugh it off 10 years ago, now I address it and call them out. I

“He would yell at me on the bandstand, ‘Play! Don’t be scared.’ Recently he told me, ‘I didn’t want you to grow up being afraid to play, so I pushed you, because I knew what you’d have to endure as a woman.’”

Fuller drew on those lessons after matriculating to Spelman College—a historically black women’s college in Atlanta—for undergraduate work on inspiration taken from the TV sitcom *A Different World*, whose plot revolved around a stand-in institution called Hillman. “I’d see the camaraderie and sisterhood of all these African-American women,” Fuller said. “I felt exploring the liberal arts college experience in that environment was more important than attending a conservatory.”

At Spelman, Fuller encountered alto saxophonist Joe Jennings, the founder of Spelman’s jazz studies program and director of the Spelman College Jazz Ensemble. “I walked into Mr. Jennings’ office on my first visit, and he had on his John Coltrane hat, which I took as an omen,” Fuller said. “I played Charlie Parker’s ‘Donna Lee,’ just the melody—I pretty much only knew my major scales. All he said was, ‘OK, you have potential.’ After talking to him, I knew he’d take me under his wing. Because of him, I started practicing six to eight hours a day. He would never say, ‘Tia, you sound good,’ but always, ‘You’re coming along’—even up to this day. He kept me grounded, and he wanted me to keep working.”

Jennings is one of the “Joes” who Fuller references on *Diamond Cut’s* “Joe’N Around.” The open-ended piece begins with the leader in a duo with DeJohnette. She postulates variations across the alto’s range on an abstract line transcribed from a Joe Lovano solo, before bringing

on Holland for a transition to a “more sassy” section that refracts Joe Henderson’s phrasing and intervallic sensibility. She concludes with a pattern learned from Jennings.

Fuller credited the involvement of Carrington—a two-time Grammy winner whose work as a producer includes acclaimed recordings by Spalding, Dianne Reeves, Nona Hendryx and Teena Marie—as crucial to her propensity to stretch and explore throughout the recording sessions. “To me, this album is the first time I had a producer I could trust, where I just had to show up,” she said. “When we were in the studio—or talking about who was going to be on what—I leaned on Terri’s perspective.”

Fuller might be understating how proactive she was in guiding the flow. Guitarist Rogers recalled the leader mentioning that a “slightly distorted, bluesy sound” she’d heard him deploy on an earlier album might work on one tune. “It was a good idea,” he said. Still, Rogers added, Fuller comported herself “in the great tradition of calling musicians whose playing she loves to bring their personalities to bear, and gave them music that made sense—so things didn’t need to be dissected and explained.”

“I wrote out the bass lines, heads and melodies,” Fuller said, adding that she knew her all-star collaborators “would fill in the gaps once they learned the germ of the structure.”

Carrington’s painstaking preparations established an immaculate playing field on which to operate. “Before you get to the studio, you make sure there aren’t surprises or problems,” she said. “Then, when you’re there, you’re the ears. After a take, you tell them to try it once more, or step away from the microphone, or play a little softer or stronger—they don’t have to go into the control room to hear it, which stops the momentum.

“Tia is steeped in the blues tradition,” Carrington continued. “She has a great understanding of jazz and her instrument’s lineage. She didn’t skip anything—she took the Point A to Point B approach, as opposed to Point A to Point F. Her technique is strong. Her energy is strong. Her material sounds familiar, but feels like her own thing. She has all the qualities of someone who is the truth in the music—the real deal.”

Throughout the program, Fuller responds in kind, presenting a master class in alto saxophone expression. She projects an array of attacks—husky and muscular, legato and sprightly, soaring, keening, songlike—that proceed over percolating rhythms drawn from the canons of West Africa and New Orleans, from swing and rock. M-Base-esque odd meters underpin and propel both “Fury Of Da’Mond” and the opening track, “In The Trenches,” on which she articulates her float-like-a-butterfly-sting-like-a-bee variations with crystalline brilliance atop Genus’ kinetic B-flat-minor bass vamp.

“I was literally in the basement of my house, trying to write, and it wasn’t coming,” Fuller said

of “In The Trenches.” “Personal things were interfering with trying to clear my mind and sink into it, as I did on my other albums. I felt spiritually in the trenches, trying to dig myself out, to create something and rise through the pressure to the top—which is how a diamond surfaces. That’s what the vamp represents, and it’s one meaning of the title. The other was to celebrate diamonds in the jazz community: legends like Jack and Dave and Terri.

“Now, once the diamond gets to the surface, the cut doesn’t relate to size or shape, but to the balance and proportion of light that it reflects.

That’s the brilliance of the diamond. All the people who have poured into me—my mentors, my peers, all my experiences—serve as the light, and now I’m able to reflect that light back out onto students.”

On the anthemic Buddy Johnson ballad “Save Your Love For Me,” Fuller sings through the horn with a pearl-like tone that Carrington described as “like a bird or a butterfly, soulful, sweet-sounding, but not necessarily like r&b.”

“Terri helped me with this,” Fuller said. “When we were on the road, she’d tell me, ‘Tia, you don’t have to bear down all the time—find

the sweet spot.’ I had the lyrics on the music stand, so I could embrace them and take ownership. I’d been reluctant to tap into some sweeter parts of my sound. That’s from the sitting-in I did earlier on in New York—the psychological dimension of being a woman in those situations, and wanting to play all your stuff, thinking, ‘You’ve got to dig in.’”

Another psychological aspect of womanhood informs “Queen’s Intuition,” a flowing waltz textured by DeJohnette’s painterly brushes. “I wanted to celebrate the process of listening to the inner voice, that ‘Aha!’ moment my mother described as ‘I can always feel something,’” Fuller said. “That happened to her during her forties, where I am now. I’m learning to trust that sense.”

“Crowns Of Gray,” a clarion ballad, celebrates “the royalty my parents have been in my life.” It begins, Fuller said, with the exact same interval as Cannonball Adderley’s famous version of “Stars Fell On Alabama.” “That’s the first song I transcribed when I got to Spelman,” she continued. “We toured for a week, and I played that exact solo every day. Here, I combined it with ‘Nancy With The Laughing Face,’ which I played duo with my dad.”

That she’s paid close attention to bassist and collaborator Holland’s music is evident on “The Coming”—a programmatic depiction of the African-American diasporic experience, which opens with a section inspired by a bass line he played underneath a Chris Potter saxophone solo on one of his quintet albums—and on the gorgeous “Tears Of Santa Barbara,” a soprano saxophone-bass duo introduced by Holland’s arco solo. “I wrote that specifically to feature Dave to play his melodies along with my melody,” Fuller said. “I was in Santa Barbara, behind the stage, right after sound check. I was crying about something. My way of working through it was to play that melody over and over again.”

In a conversation several years ago, Fuller spoke of transitional events in her life occurring at three-year intervals. Asked now what she sees as her next step, she mentioned a nascent project with drummer Nikki Glaspie, a Beyoncé bandmate who also plays with saxophonist Maceo Parker. “We’re brainstorming for possibilities, trying to get music together,” Fuller said.

More broadly, Fuller intends to coalesce her interests in hardcore jazz and social music. “I again want to reach beyond what I’ve already done,” she said. “What’s ironic is that I wanted to put my stamp on the jazz world, because I knew playing with Beyoncé could turn into, ‘OK, now she’s a pop saxophonist.’ But I’ve always loved both areas. My writing always contained elements of r&b and Latin and even classical. So, moving into this next realm and making a seamless transition to another genre, for lack of a better term, reflects my evolution as a complete human being and a musician.”

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