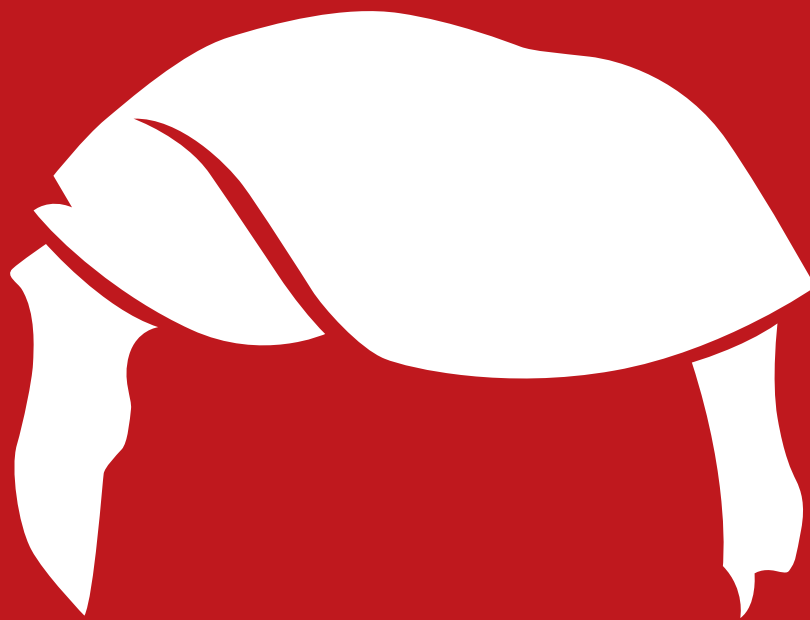


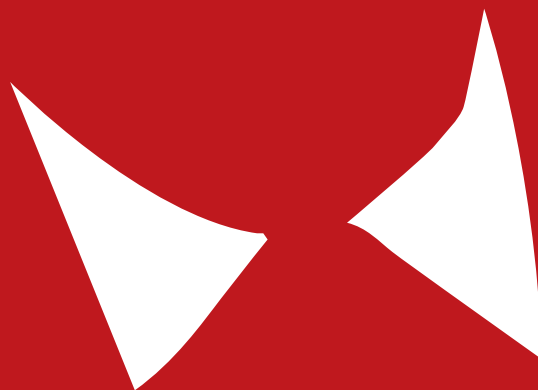
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## JAZZ IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION WITH WADADA LEO SMITH, TERENCE BLANCHARD, TERRI LYNE CARRINGTON, VIJAY IYER  
ALEXIS CUADRADO, SARA SERPA, ROY NATHANSON AND QUIANA LYNELL. MODERATED BY LARRY BLUMENFELD





# JAZZ IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ABOUT  
LIFE AND **ART** IN **AMERICA** TODAY.  
MODERATED BY LARRY BLUMENFELD





Ever since Donald Trump was elected president, the politics that divide Americans have grown increasingly harder to bear and more difficult to ignore. Especially as amplified within the social-media echo chamber that helped deliver Trump to the White House in the first place, the issues now dominating the news — racism, sexual harassment, gun violence, the grossly uneven distribution of this nation's wealth, the prospect of building a wall and turning away immigrants — now bubble over with angry urgency. Not since the 1960s and '70s has the jazz community been as focused as it is now on issues of politics and social justice. How do jazz musicians address these topics? What can they say and do in the face of unrest?

Each of the eight musicians who took part in the following panel discussion have, through their work and their words, projected a need to speak out. One notable musician acknowledged the importance of the issues at hand yet declined my invitation to participate. "Let's not honor or give more power

to this man's name," he wrote to me. His point is well taken and yet our purpose wasn't to further empower Trump. The idea was to sit together in a room for a couple hours and discuss the challenges of creating and presenting thoughtful art during a precarious moment in the United States. When we met in January, the nine of us strained the capacity of a friend's dining room table in Harlem and represented some of the diversity present in today's jazz community.

At 76, trumpeter and composer **Wadada Leo Smith** is both an elder statesman and bold innovator whose acclaimed project *Ten Freedom Summers* summarized the history of the Civil Rights Movement while addressing its ongoing nature. Across from Smith sat **Quiana Lynell**, 37, who, as winner of the 2017 Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition, will soon record her Concord Records debut. Trumpeter **Terence Blanchard's** achievements span jazz, film and opera, and increasingly reflect political themes; he has just begun work on *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, an opera based on the memoir of *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow.

Photo by John Rogers



Drummer **Terri Lyne Carrington** joined us a day after stepping up to a podium at the 2018 Jazz Congress to accept the Bruce Lundvall Visionary Award, given annually in recognition of “extraordinary leadership and vision in making a difference for the artists, the music, and the audience.” Bassist **Alexis Cuadrado**, who was born in Barcelona, Spain, is working on a new project, *(Un)Documented*, a musical essay based on the stories of six undocumented Hispanic immigrants living in the United States. **Vijay Iyer**’s work as a pianist and composer has topped critics’ polls and earned a MacArthur Fellowship; his catalog includes a trilogy of albums that explored post-9/11 life, considered from many perspectives, including that of his Indian-American identity. **Roy Nathanson**, who co-founded the Jazz Passengers, has reflected a New York City radical tradition through his work as saxophonist, composer, bandleader, poet, actor and teacher. Vocalist **Sara Serpa**, who was born in Lisbon, Portugal, excused herself from our table early; she was headed to a sound check for the Winter Jazz Fest premiere of *Recognition*, a multi-media piece that explores both her family history and the relationship between her native country and its former colony, Angola.

The following is an edited and condensed version of our conversation.

**BLUMENFELD:** We’re here to consider how this country has changed since the 2016 election, and what that means for all of you as artists. So maybe one place to start is: How did you feel and what did you do in the aftermath of the election?

**CUADRADO:** Right after the election, I felt like I had been in a bubble for eight years. I woke up at 5 a.m. the next day, and then I woke up my wife. We asked each other, “What do we do now?

What do we tell the kids?” They had been asking, “Donald Trump is not going to win, right?” My wife is half Mexican. My kids wanted to know what was going to happen to their Mexican friends in school, to their Muslim friends. My initial reaction was we have to start doing something right now.

I was born in Barcelona, Spain, which had one of the last fascist regimes in Europe. And I’m a musician. I grabbed a bass, and I recorded myself playing “We Shall Not Be Moved.” I posted it on Facebook. I can’t remember what I wrote in that post — something like, “We get up, we fight, we resist.” It was an honest moment, and it got a lot of response. I recall thinking about my family, my older siblings, my parents and grandparents, fighting against injustice in Spain. And since then, I’ve been more determined that whatever I create helps to build awareness of issues that matter to me, especially immigration or equal rights.

**SMITH:** But didn’t you do that before?

**CUADRADO:** I suppose, but now I’m more motivated.

**SMITH:** Well, something like social justice was important before the election, too, wasn’t it?

**CUADRADO:** You’re right. That’s why I said that for eight years I’ve been in a bubble, I’ve been comfortable. But the bubble burst in that moment of the election.

**SMITH:** The man that was there before, Obama, he didn’t create that bubble. I think we created that bubble. During Obama’s time in office, this vile hatred was very much part of the environment for eight years. So the times haven’t changed because one man got elected. There’s been a long struggle for what’s right and a long tradition of what’s wrong, and I think we have taken our eye off the ball for too long.



**“AS A PERSON TRYING TO FIGHT THE TIDES THAT ARE PUSHING US AROUND AND TRYING TO FIND MY OWN FOOTING, I FIND MYSELF TURNING OFF. YOU KNOW, I CAN ONLY TAKE SO MUCH OF THE TRUMPNESS. BUT IT DEFINITELY AFFECTS EVERYTHING I DO.”** Quiana Lynell

**"I LISTENED TO DUKE  
ELLINGTON AND JOHN  
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THEN WATER DOWN WHO I  
AM AND WHAT I THINK."**

**-Terence Blanchard**





**THE ENTIRE SYSTEM IS ABOUT PRESERVING INEQUALITY, NOT ABOUT REDRESSING IT. WHAT WE FIND OURSELVES REPEATING COMPULSIVELY IS A SORT OF DESIRE FOR EQUALITY THAT THE SYSTEM CANNOT PROVIDE. IT'S NOT MADE THAT WAY.** Vijay Iyer

**BLANCHARD:** After the election, the two words that kept coming to my mind were apathy and complacency. I think a lot of people in this country felt like they didn't know how to fight and some people felt, *let's let the radicals fight*. What we began to see was that you have to be involved and active. You can't sit there and think that just because something seems ridiculous — which is how I felt about a Trump presidency — it couldn't happen. What Trump represents, what he said in his campaign, isn't new. It started a long time ago. Reagan used racism in the South as a platform for his political agenda. Now we have to go back and deal with our own values and the foundations of things we were taught. The Republican party likes to talk about people like my parents — people who play by the rules, work hard and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That's what my parents taught me as a kid. But there's a difference between what Republicans preach and what they practice.

**SMITH:** Well, you have to have some bootstraps in order to pull them up, now, don't you? The real issue when it comes to elections is that we have two major parties which really are not different. They're the same party with two polarities. The two-party system means that white power will rule forever. And there's no such thing as white people. That's a political term — not a scientific or anthropological term — that was established when these people came from Europe and decided they wanted to dominate this nation.

The first step toward reconstructing the society we desire to live in has to do with getting rid of this idea that we have to vote for one or the other party. I will not vote for the lesser of two evils. I did not vote for Hillary Clinton. I did not vote for Donald Trump. The last time I voted for the lesser of two evils was in Chicago, and the people I voted for killed Fred Hampton [civil rights activist and chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party] less than 30 days after they were in office.



**BLANCHARD:** With Trump, we romanticized this whole notion of a playboy who made a lot of money and lived a fabulous life. And that turned into this.

**NATHANSON:** We've bought into idealizing entrepreneurs. In the campaign, there was not a sentence about workers. Workers are considered chumps. Even artists are considered chumps. Some of us at this table are considered chumps. There is a deep immersion in celebrity throughout all our culture, including the culture of jazz. I was a radical at Columbia University decades ago, and the idea of collectives — including the AACM [Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, founded in Chicago in 1965] — is the opposite of celebrity culture, of entrepreneur culture. That's what we need more of now.

**IVER:** Alexis talked about what he did the day after the election. The day after the election, I played a concert with this man sitting next to me, Wadada Leo Smith. I can't *tell* you how grounding it was. I was as shocked as anybody. But I have known Wadada a long time, and I've gained a sense of what he's lived through, what he's witnessed in his lifetime, growing up in Mississippi and then living in Chicago, growing up near where Emmett Till was killed, experiencing the Chicago that killed Fred Hampton. Oppression is not new. And this music has stood up against oppression as long as it's existed. In fact, all music has done that. And we have to keep reminding ourselves of that.

**BLUMENFELD:** I'm interested to know how everyone reminds themselves of the point Vijay just made — and what creative responses are possible?



**“MAKING COMMUNITIES IS A  
THING, IT’S OUR THING. WE  
HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT.”**

**Roy Nathanson**

**CUADRADO:** Yes, my question to all of us is “What can we do?”

**IVER:** We have to ask: What do we mean by “we”? What we can say about the U.S. is that it’s predicated on difference. It’s *made* out of difference. The entire system is about preserving inequality, not about redressing it. What we find ourselves repeating compulsively is a sort of desire for equality that the system cannot provide. It’s not made that way. It’s made out of division and oppression and constructed through this process of what’s called “racial capitalism.” Making money off of difference. Using a system of white supremacy to preserve this hierarchy. Trump is just a manifestation of this reality that’s baked into the fabric of the United States. He’s not an aberration.

Many of us circulate in this system that’s called “jazz” — that’s how I see it, as the name of this business that we’re in. This discussion is going to be in a magazine called *JAZZIZ*. But jazz does not refer to any specific aesthetic idea or music or practice. So what this is made of is mostly white men talking about and selling and manipulating symbols and ideas and images, and creating value and deeming what’s valuable and what isn’t. Many of us have benefitted from this system at

various moments, but we have to see it for what it is — part of the same problem that gave us Trump. It’s not different or separate.

**CARRINGTON:** I’m fascinated with this conversation. You guys speak eloquently about politics. I don’t have a lot to say about Donald Trump. I’m kind of guilty, as Alexis said, of living a bit in the bubble and then one day waking up mad as hell. And, like Vijay said, we’ve benefitted from this system. But then one day you come out of your bubble because you spend so much time practicing and working on music and, yeah, it *is* like a privilege. A long time ago, only privileged people could study and work in the arts. I’m fascinated, too, about how we all talk about the things that affect us.

Black women have both racism and sexism to be concerned about. Dealing with racism has been part of my whole life. But as a woman in the jazz field, I pushed away that part of my identity. Racism was always the first conversation, always the priority. But I’m not able to prioritize that more so than sexism any more. Black women have spoken against sexism for many years, long before the “Me Too” campaign, since the blues. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, they were talking about sexism, but it



wasn't until decades later that this movement became more popular, when white women decided to speak out. So those things are all intertwined for me, personally. I started this new musical project called "Social Science." All the themes are related to something that I'm concerned about or other band members are concerned about.

**SERPA:** Ultimately, with this rising tide of conversation about sexual harassment and gender discrimination, I started thinking with other musicians, mostly women, and we decided to create an open letter and website addressing these things in our own community. It's so easy to feel powerless. Having a sense of community is important: What do we stand for, and how can we as a small community fight for these things? The open letter represents different generations, nationalities, races. It's been great to have this dialogue and communication about how we feel. It's called "We Have Voice," at WeHaveVoice.org. It would be great for all of you who haven't read or signed the letter to take a look.

**BLUMENFELD:** Sara, I know tonight you will premiere a new work that has to do with your family's history as well as your native country's history. Does that relate to what we're experiencing here?

**SERPA:** I can't offer any political analysis of the United States. I am a woman and I am an immigrant. I've been here for 13 years. And just like others have pointed out, when this man became president, I started thinking a lot about certain things. Mainly about privilege — the privilege of knowing or not knowing. I had the privilege of not thinking about certain things. And then I started thinking much more about them. I started thinking about visibility. Certain things that were not visible to me became very visible. Hate speech and violent tendencies

that I knew existed became public, promoted by the media in a way that I haven't experienced before in my life.

I want to acknowledge that I'm European. I'm from Portugal. I started thinking about my own country. All these questions that rise up among musicians on our scene, among our community, about racism — I haven't seen those questions arising in Portugal. Yet it is a country that colonized and promoted slave trade. I started thinking about how history was taught to me. Portuguese were heroes. We come from a small country. We conquered the world, discovered so much. I had been living in several bubbles, really. And now, suddenly, the values that I stand for don't match the truth behind this history that was taught to me.

So, I think I became a better listener. I started trying to listen more — not just to music, but to other people's ideas and stories. I became an *active* listener, not so self-centered and more understanding of the struggles of others. Following this path of realization, I initiated this project about colonialization and Portugal. Both of my parents were born in Africa and my grandfather was born in Africa. There was this mythical image of Africa, but I never thought about it, and I started investigating it. It was the most depressing thing to realize that the history that was taught to me was packed with lies and there was so much destruction and death. This is how this self-realization and questioning led me to create this project.

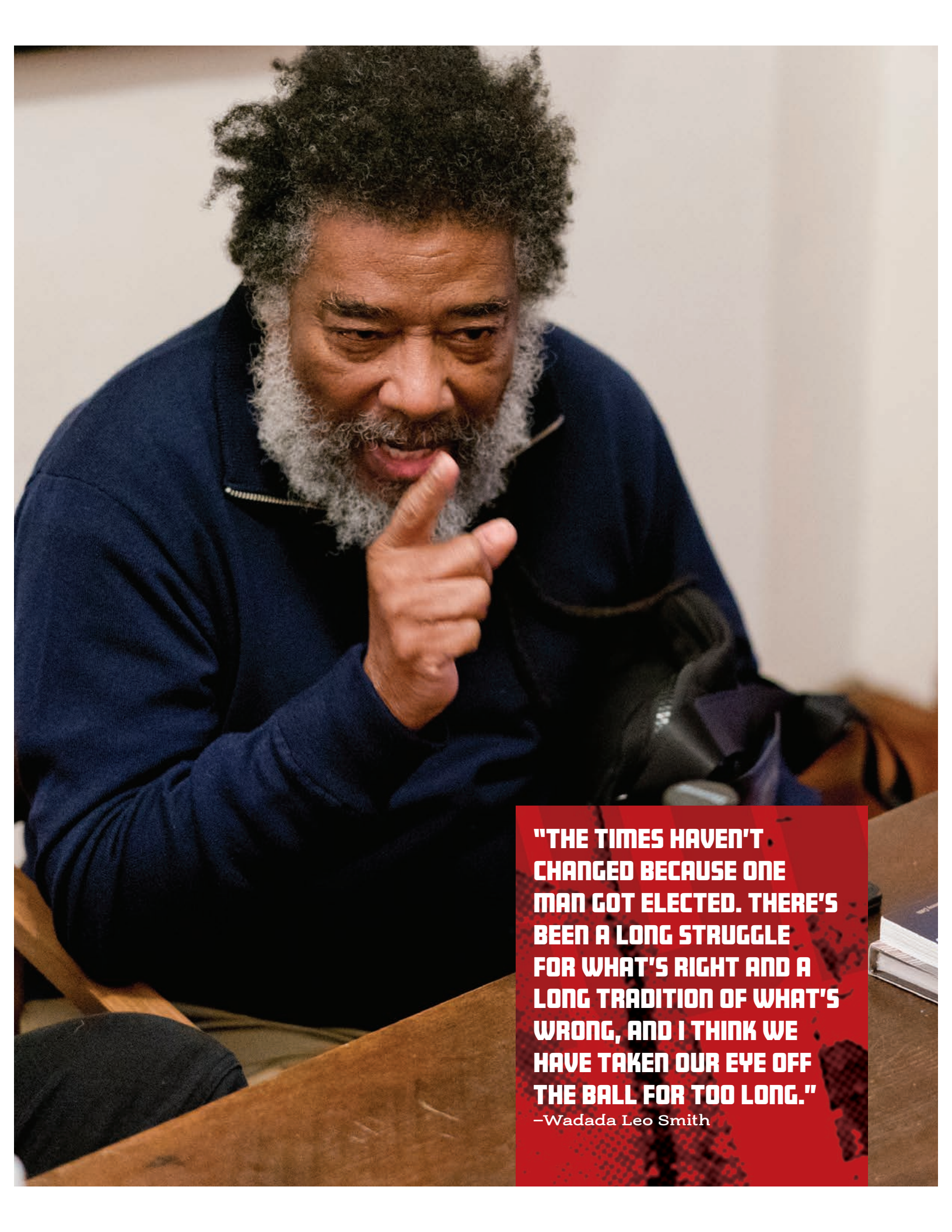
**CARRINGTON:** Sara, when you started studying jazz in Portugal, did you study the history of African-Americans?

**SERPA:** It is so clear to me now that there was no reference to any of the social movements that surrounded jazz. It was just music. People talked about scales and chords, without addressing what propelled this music.

**I RECALL THINKING ABOUT MY FAMILY, MY OLDER SIBLINGS, MY PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS, FIGHTING AGAINST INJUSTICE IN SPAIN. AND SINCE THEN, I'VE BEEN MORE DETERMINED THAT WHATEVER I CREATE HELPS TO BUILD AWARENESS OF ISSUES THAT MATTER TO ME, ESPECIALLY IMMIGRATION OR EQUAL RIGHTS.** Alexis Cuadrado





A photograph of Wadada Leo Smith, an older man with a large, curly grey beard and hair, wearing a dark blue zip-up jacket. He is seated at a wooden table, gesturing with his right hand as if speaking. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. A red rectangular box with white text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

**"THE TIMES HAVEN'T  
CHANGED BECAUSE ONE  
MAN GOT ELECTED. THERE'S  
BEEN A LONG STRUGGLE  
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LONG TRADITION OF WHAT'S  
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**—Wadada Leo Smith**



**I STARTED THINKING ABOUT VISIBILITY. CERTAIN THINGS THAT WERE NOT VISIBLE TO ME BECAME VERY VISIBLE. HATE SPEECH AND VIOLENT TENDENCIES THAT I KNEW EXISTED BECAME PUBLIC, PROMOTED BY THE MEDIA IN A WAY THAT I HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED BEFORE IN MY LIFE.** Sara Serpa

**CARRINGTON:** If you had, you probably would have come to this correlation about your own history a lot sooner.

**BLANCHARD:** I'm glad Sara talked about hate and violence being promoted in new ways. Technology and social media have allowed us to get a glimpse of things we wouldn't normally see. People have been emboldened to take the veil off their shit. Nobody is hiding the fact that they have bigoted tendencies. They wear it like a uniform now. And now we're back to this point of hate: We don't want certain people here. We're back to the age of the robber barons. And it is insidious. One reason is that we don't value our educational system. A lot of the problems in this country boil down to education, but nobody wants to talk about it.

**SMITH:** The truth is, there has not been a serious curriculum change in this country since the 1800s. Specialized education — African-American studies, for instance — is not a real part of this structure. It's not a fixture. It will evaporate or get removed. So the education we deal with now is essentially the same as it was in 1800s, when they trained people who are different than mainstream to be servants.

**CARRINGTON:** I've found some amazing statistics when it comes to education. Black women as a group are, percentage-wise, right now the most educated group in America, and a lot of people don't know that, don't talk about that. So if black women are the most educated right now, we need to be heard.

**IVER:** As educators, which many of us are or have been, we have more impact than we think. We're making decisions about how knowledge is passed on and to whom and why. So we're organizing the settings in which that is happening. And that's

where we make change. I direct the Banff program [at Canada's Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity] every summer. Over five years we've gone from 5 percent women to 40 percent women. That was transformative. When you have a critical mass of a different sensibility in the room, then the conversation changes. And that's the kind of work we all can be doing all the time.

**LYNELL:** As I sit here and I absorb the information flowing around this table, I can only speak from my generation and growing up in this technological age. Hearing the word "bubble" resonates with me a lot. As a person trying to fight the tides that are pushing us around and trying to find my own footing, I find myself turning off. You know, I can only take so much of the Trumpness. But it definitely affects everything I do. I feel like we haven't addressed Larry's question about, artistically, is it coming out? And the answer for me is: All the time, every time, it's coming out. I try to find a way to not make too many statements, or maybe to tone it down. I don't want to make everybody mad, and I don't want to seem like this angry black woman every time I'm on the stage. But I'm angry a lot lately. And when I'm writing, I keep writing this angry stuff, and then I ask myself, "Why do I have to feel this angry?"

I'm trying to make the right impression with my first record, and I don't want to be shunned or caricatured. You want to be successful and productive, but you also have to say stuff that might make people uncomfortable. And then you realize, maybe that's what I'm supposed to do. You can't make everybody happy. And right now, maybe people need to be uncomfortable. I'll talk about gun violence or I'll talk about violence against black men or I'll talk about women's rights, and at some moment you're going to be uncomfortable. I hope you do some thinking and maybe research a little bit after you leave my performance. But it's hard. How can I make you uncomfortable but then also bring you back to love? My thing is, we all want love and we want to show love. When you come into my space — and it's my space for that 90 minutes — we're going to love each other a little bit more than you did before you walked in here.



**BLANCHARD:** One thing I find fascinating is that people love John Coltrane. And why do they love John Coltrane? Because he spoke his truth. And John Coltrane tried to deal with what Quiana just spoke about — love. I just did this opera *Champion*, dealing with a boxer who was abused for being gay. At the end of the day, we're all trying to be loved. What if we could just realize that we are all different and accept those differences instead of using them as ways to prop ourselves up? We all deserve love. We all have the capacity to give love. I could love somebody that I disagree with on political issues and policies. Now, that's one thing that must be at the forefront of what we do as artists.

The album I just recorded is basically about brothers being shot by police. My band went to four cities that were marked by police shooting black men. In each city, we tried to have some civic engagement. One thing I talked about was that love wins out every time. This is a core principle that I was taught as a child. I talked earlier about complacency: When people think they are invisible or have no power, when they feel cut off from love, they get complacent. We need to empower people. One thing I get sick and tired of, actually, is panels like this: We're sitting around a table with a bunch of people who get it. How do we broaden this conversation? One way is through our art. The art is what brought us to our own consciousness.

**BLUMENFELD:** I just sat through a panel about politics at the Jazz Congress. A woman got up, a festival producer, and she asked the panelists why musicians feel the need to talk about their political views. She thought they should simply play their music.

**SMITH:** That's not new, either. They did the same thing to Duke Ellington when he did "Black Brown and Beige" at Carnegie Hall. "Don't speak about this, don't say that."

**BLANCHARD:** Sometimes I have gotten in trouble. When Bush was in office, I would make sad jokes about "weapons of mass destruction." I'm going through it now, too. When I played a show in Madison, Wisconsin, I talked about gun violence. A guy walked up to me after and told me, "Fuck you and your human rights bullshit." I listened to Duke Ellington and John Coltrane, I toured with Art Blakey. I'm not going to stand on the shoulders of these guys who struggled to better their communities and then water down who I am and what I think.

**LYNELL:** It's been common that people will love our culture but still not like us. They'll respect your work but still maybe not see you as a person. That's not our problem.

**CUADRADO** [to Blanchard]: What shocks me is why does a white dude have to confront you about your opinions? Why can't he

just leave? If you go to a restaurant and you don't like the food, you leave or don't come back.

**BLANCHARD:** Thing is, he *liked* the food. He just didn't like the cook.

**IVER:** That's how this thing operates. If you do a political project you get fewer gigs, you get fewer reviews. No one wants to touch that stuff. That happened with the project I did about veterans of color from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan [*Holding It Down: The Veterans' Dreams Project*]. It was completely shunned by the jazz community. People acted like it didn't exist. I talked to [guitarist] Matt Stevens, who worked with Christian Scott. He said the more political Christian got, the more the fees and number of gigs went down. Which doesn't mean that politics can't exist in this business, but when it exists it is in a contentious relationship.

**BLANCHARD:** But let me also say this. An elderly white man gave me a great compliment at my show in Cleveland recently. The music I was playing was really aggressive. He told me, "I thought you were going to play this beautiful music like on *A Tale of God's Will*. Instead, you sounded so angry. But when you got up and told me what the music was about, I had to check myself. I had to think: If the guy that made that other music is that angry, then something must be going on." To me, that's what art is supposed to do.

**IVER:** Exactly. It's supposed to make him check himself.

**NATHANSON:** I've been teaching at a remarkable public high school. And I'm playing tonight with a student band called Onyx Collective. Instead of going to jazz schools and trying to be stars, these students formed a collective. They're making their own community. Making communities is a thing, it's our thing. We have to remember that.

**IVER:** We keep asking ourselves what we can do, but maybe the question is really, "What can music do?" It creates an experience of simultaneity that bonds everybody that's in the room together. It gives us a community of trust, of shared humanity. That is ephemeral, it's fleeting, but it's something that holds the power of what we do. And it's what we do all around the world for all kinds of audiences, even those who see us as not like them — who see us as different or less than themselves. Suddenly, they're forced to confront the fact that we might be part of the same species. That's the work that all of our predecessors in this music have done. They insisted on being heard as human beings. And that's what this music has always been about. There's nothing new about it. ■