

Kamasi Washington's *The Epic*: A bold statement in jazz

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The Epic by Kamasi Washington, American jazz saxophonist (born 1981), is a compelling new release of jazz fusion that is finding a serious public response—with good reason. Washington's sound is unusually insistent and bold, yet full of warmth and depth. The recording spans three disks and 17 tracks, incorporating a wide range of influences within jazz, Afrobeat, funk, soul, hip hop and classical music.

Washington, from Inglewood, California, is the bandleader, tenor saxophonist, composer, arranger, and producer of the album. His modern version of a big band, called The Next Step, features trumpet, trombone, piano, keyboard, acoustic bass, electric bass, two drummers, a percussionist and a vocalist. These musicians have known and played with each other since high school and form a musical collective called the West Coast Get Down. Additionally, the album features a 32-piece string orchestra and a 20-voice choir.

The massive sound produced by this large ensemble is remarkably coherent, no doubt because of the long artistic and performing relationships of the musicians. All have their own careers, but they pooled their resources and took an entire month, canceling other commitments, to record continuously in 2011. In addition to *The Epic*'s three hours, seven other projects emerged, amounting to 190 songs and two terabytes of music.

Despite being recorded in 2011, many of those projects have been delayed due to the difficult demands that musicians generally face, including the responsibilities of other studio work, touring commitments and other roles within the industry.

Summarizing the music on *The Epic* is a challenge, given the size of the recording. It is full of extended compositions with changing time and key signatures. There is a sense of liveliness—improvisation and experimentation—as well as structure in the form of memorable melodies and rhythms. It seems to have a

track for every mood; there are moments of intensity and excess, as well as restrained beauty. In performance, the band makes these tracks anew, for example this live performance of *Re Run Home* is significantly different than the album version.

“Change of the Guard” opens the album in a bold, big band manner with a memorable melody, strings and tension. There is a tone of semi-controlled chaos, partially set by the drumming style, which recalls McCoy Tyner's early solo work or Charles Mingus's big band tracks.

On “The Magnificent 7,” a resonant bass line and deep strings produce an ominous beginning to one of the most exhilarating tracks on the album. A warm horn theme is underpinned with especially driving, shifting percussion from the two drummers, who never seem to let a 16th note pass without making a sound. An incredible momentum builds around Washington's saxophone solo, which grows more insistent and reaching. It captures the feeling of breaking free of something, fighting obstacles, or perhaps the urgency of a person calling for help. This is gripping music, and the tension dissipates and reappears through piano and bass solos.

In contrast to the dramatic pace of songs like that, there are more restrained tracks such as “Claire de lune,” a version of the renowned Claude Debussy piano suite that Washington has intriguingly reinterpreted for his band.

Several especially appealing songs feature the warm, gentle voice of vocalist Patrice Quinn. On the swaying “The Rhythm Changes,” she sings simple but effective lyrics about persistent love:

Our minds, our bodies, our feelings
They change, they alter, they leave us
Somehow, no matter what happens
I'm here
The time, the season, the weather,
The song, the music, the rhythm,
It seems, no matter what happens

I'm here

Towards the end of the album, "The Method" has Patrice Quinn and Dwight Tribble sing a modified version of Ossie Davis's eulogy delivered at the funeral of Malcolm X. The reverential tone applied to these lyrics then shifts to a more explosive passage without lyrics, followed by a sample of Malcolm X calling for equal treatment and understanding of Islam as a religion.

While this is a welcome call for tolerance at a time when Islamophobia is being deliberately stoked by political figures to serve reactionary purposes, one wonders what other subjects the group might treat with similar directness in future works.

That said, *The Epic* has a very unique place in contemporary music. Washington and his bandmates have close links to chart-topping hip hop performers—Washington played and arranged music on Kendrick Lamar's best-selling *To Pimp a Butterfly* and played producer in Flying Lotus's *Dead On*. He has also toured with Snoop Dog, Chaka Khan and several other big name acts. *The Epic*, though, does not suffer from any sort of "crossover" tracks that attempt to capitalize off these connections at the expense of the general feel of the album. Washington stuck to his own standards of creation, which successfully blends together many musical influences, like the irrepressible Afrobeat rhythm of "Re Run Home."

In an interview with *Pitchfork*, Washington said "People have been starving for intellectual fodder, but the best way to get people to close their eyes and not say anything is to tell them that they're not smart enough to comprehend."

This is a noteworthy sentiment. Washington takes his audience seriously. He appeals to their strengths and potential, rather than condescending to them or appealing to their worst instincts. His music is sensitive and intelligent.

The Epic has a potent, attention-grabbing energy. One also senses its connections to and appreciation for jazz history. Many young people today, particularly working class youth, no longer have the benefit of music classes in school and are cut off from that history.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* during his group's first-ever live performance in Chicago on September 9, Washington said "There is the issue of inner city kids not having the opportunity to learn to play, especially technically. Music is self-expression, and really hip hop came out of not having access to the instruments but finding expression through sampling the records.

Great teachers are really important. When music is not prioritized it gets less appreciation and understanding. Yet for people who have hardship in their lives, music really becomes important. For some people I know, if they weren't into music their path would be more destructive."

The bands two-and-a-half-hour long Chicago concert brought out the strengths of the album. The 700-person capacity venue was filled, and the opener, Makaya McCraven, was clearly energized by the large and lively crowd, stating "jazz is alive and well!" Indeed, how often does a jazz concert draw several hundred mostly young people on a Wednesday night?

In addition to Washington's material, the band played a deeply funky track from keyboardist Brandon Coleman's upcoming album. There was extensive improvisation during each song, and one could catch the musicians smiling and egging on each other's solos.

Kamasi Washington's father, Rickey Washington, a retired public school music teacher, alternated between running the merchandise table and performing flute and soprano sax on stage. It was moving to hear father and son perform "Henrietta Our Hero," a song about Kamasi's grandmother, with Patrice Quinn singing.

In a further comment to the WSWS, Kamasi said, "Greatness is sometimes very subjective. You look in your life and find that a lot of great people don't get praise. My grandmother didn't have a lot but she still did the best she could; she raised three amazing sons, who went on to become a teacher, a doctor and a lawyer."

Appreciation for overlooked achievements comes through in the song. The lyrics allow anyone to imagine a figure in his or her own life to be the subject; someone who made a significant impact on one's life without receiving (or asking for) the credit deserved. This humane quality and exceptional musicality was on display throughout the concert, and is evident throughout the album.



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