



The Frankfurt Radio Big Band recorded a concerto by Jim McNeely based on Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite Of Spring*.

## Innovative Organizations of Sound & People

From Whiteman to Henderson, Ellington, Kenton, Fuller, Russell, Evans, Mingus, Thad Jones, Quincy Jones, Nestico, Brookmeyer, Bley, Schneider and onward, composers and arrangers have advanced jazz through innovative organizations of sound and people. A large ensemble is always a significant event, an opportunity for musicians to come together in a shared celebration of sonic art with their communities. It's still happening today, as these albums demonstrate.

Well-traveled lead trumpeter **Bijon Watson** teamed up with 30-year-old pianist/arranger extraordinaire **Steven Feifke** to lead an impressive ensemble in their self-titled debut, **Generation Gap Orchestra (Cellar; 57:15 ★★★★★)**, a meeting of talented musicians from younger to older and East to West, featuring Watson on lead, Kurt Elling, Alexa Tarantino, Sean Jones and John Fedchock among others. Feifke's colorful orchestration reveals a studious respect for traditional big band writing while generating a myriad of twists and turns in every arrangement. Clever treatments of jazz stalwarts like Joe Henderson's "Inner Urge" and Horace Silver's "Nica's Dream" pair with out-of-the-box surprises like Hugh Masakela's "Dollar's Moods" and "Remember Me" from the Pixar film *Coco*.

Ordering info: [cellarlive.com](http://cellarlive.com)

Trumpeter **Steven Bernstein's** band sounds bigger than the sum of the eight pieces of his seasoned New York cadre, the Millennial Territory Orchestra. Their new album, **Popular Culture (Community Music, Vol. 4) (Royal Potato Family; 28:44 ★★★★★)**, flows from sources that draw heavily on the smaller ensembles of Cotton Club-era Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus. There was an earthiness to both those composers that translates well to

Bernstein's chosen source material: Eddie Harris, the Grateful Dead, the Beatles and Bessie Smith, artists who connected with the greater public at large. Bernstein also includes a tune apiece from Ellington and Mingus, the latter's "Duke Ellington's Sound Of Love" arranged as if Mingus' muse himself might have given it a go. The writing is exquisite, with just the right mix of polish and irreverence.

Ordering info: [royalpotatofamily.com](http://royalpotatofamily.com)

Drummer **Steve Gadd** has led his own group, The Gadd Band, for decades now, with rotating personnel. He recently recalled one of his earlier iterations, featuring bassist Eddie Gomez and baritone saxophonist Ronnie Cuber, to record a set of funky covers and Gadd originals with the WDR Big Band. Former WDR Musical Director Michael Abene was tasked with the arrangements for their collaboration, **Center Stage (Leopard; 56:17 ★★★★★)**. The Grammy-winning arranger and producer made the decision to curtail his extensive compositional largess, saying, "Knowing the music and knowing the guys ... you got to figure out a way to stay out of the way." He succeeded in that more than was necessary, for the ensemble work is limited to mostly fanfare-type intros and codas, with simple interludes that loop continuously between the many solos, essentially reducing the multifaceted Cologne-based jazz orchestra to a giant backing horn section. Still, there is plenty of power and authority in those horn hits, befitting Abene's prior years as Maynard Ferguson's arranger. Gadd, Gomez and Cuber (who passed away this fall) are all in mighty form, albeit sounding somewhat restricted (despite Abene's good-faith attempt), like Batman in his versus-Superman armor-plated suit.

Ordering info: [jazz.centerstagestore.com](http://jazz.centerstagestore.com)

Free-jazz bass icon **William Parker** had a

unique approach with his large ensemble for a performance in New York back in 2002. He composed a score and individual parts, yet he made reading the notes completely optional for the players. The results, documented in the live album **Universal Tonality (Centering/AUM Fidelity; 1:50:03 ★★★★★)**, are intriguing, sometimes overextended and often chaotic, though one can discover an intense beauty amid the tumult. The 17-piece orchestra features many prominent creative improvisers, including trombonist Grachan Moncur III, violinist Billy Bang, Miya Masaoko on koto and drummer Gerald Cleaver, while Leena Conquest provides the narrative with her richly voiced interpretations of Parker's prose.

Ordering info: [aumfidelity.com](http://aumfidelity.com)

The aforementioned Steven Feifke studied his craft under **Jim McNeely**, and we can see how the teacher is truly the master here. **Rituals (Double Moon; 1:08:32 ★★★★★)** is the realization of McNeely's vision for Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite Of Spring)* through the lens of his chosen machination, a concerto for the Frankfurt Radio Big Band, with saxophonist Chris Potter as the soloist. A jazz version has been attempted many times before, but none as encapsulating of the complex harmonies and textures, the grandiosity and, yes — the terror — of the original. It's as if Stravinsky himself reorchestrated his magnum opus for big band, yet through McNeely it transitions undeniably to jazz, with its relentless yet grooving energy, supercharged by the band's urgent and flawless execution and Potter's characteristically incandescent improvising. Surely this is what Gunther Schuller had in mind when he espoused a "third stream" of music that was neither classical nor jazz. **DB**

Ordering info: [challengerecords.com](http://challengerecords.com)