



**Myra Melford Trio  
Alive In The  
House Of Saints  
Part 1**

Bob Blumenthal, March 2001

# Alive In The House Of Saints

**Listening**, eight years after it was created, to this primary chapter in the recorded legacy of Myra Melford's first trio evokes a rush of feelings. There are warm memories of in-person encounters with Melford, Lindsey Horner and Reggie Nicholson; and satisfaction regarding how the ideas Melford articulated here as both pianist and composer have metamorphosed into the triumphs of her subsequent music. What is absent is the uncertainty one often feels when contemplating the recent past, that feeling of needing more time to take the full measure of a musical statement. Melford has made it easy for us, through the clarity of both these now-historic performances and her subsequent efforts, to hear the present works as both glorious ends in themselves and the foundations of her ongoing creations.

**Melford** formed the trio in 1990, and immediately began the touring and recording that made her and it among the most positive signs of musical health in the early 1990s. What set the trio immediately apart was its ability to merge a strong blues feeling with notions of rhythmic and structural complexity associated with the exploratory end of the jazz-trio spectrum. The music conveyed a strength and unguarded emotionalism that burst forth in dynamic arcs, with a sense of shape and completeness that made the trio's collective creations anything but random. Even as the band broke new ground, it was clearly a

product of the jazz tradition. However odd the meter or angular the thematic material, the music always had a propulsion that all sides of current debates on jazz aesthetics could identify and celebrate as swing.

**This** particular synthesis came naturally to Melford, who, after exposure to the blues from her earliest days as a piano student in Chicago, proceeded to expand her scope to encompass more open and exploratory notions. Intellectual curiosity took Melford beyond music, to literature and dance and poetry and even architecture; and her compositional studies with Henry Threadgill suggested ways to apply these diverse influences in performance situations. What resulted was combustible and propulsive, filled with gospel-like intensity, a barrelhouse sense of celebration, and the provocative determination to make it all new.

**It was** Melford's good fortune to find two stellar partners for this endeavor. In Lindsey Horner, she had a bassist both centered and inquisitive, with a huge sound and a vivid melodic imagination. His work here recalls that of the similarly unheralded Cameron Brown with the George Adams/Don Pullen Quartet. Drummer Reggie Nicholson brought directly relevant experience to bear from his years with Amina Claudine Myers, who conjured some of the same moods in her own trio music. In retrospect, Adams/Pullen, Myers and Melford were all creating in a contemporary blues idiom that might be called avant-groove, a music that made you move and think.

**In the years** when it served as Melford's primary performing ensemble, this trio issued three recordings: The 1990 *Jump* (Enemy), which includes the original versions of «Jump,» «Some Kind of Blues» and «Frank Lloyd Wright Goes West to Rest»; *Now & Now* (Enemy) from 1991, where «Between Now and Then» and «Now & Now» were first heard; and the initial release of six of the present performances under the title *Alive In The House Of Saints*. Melford's trio had lived with these pieces by the time these live versions were taped, and both the individual compositions and the overall group concept had clearly evolved in directions anticipated by the initial studio recordings. Melford would make similar use of two compositions that appeared here for the first time, «Evening Might Still» and «That the Peace,» as well as a third version of «Frank Lloyd Wright...» when Dave Douglas and Marty Ehrlich were added to the trio to form the Extended Ensemble that recorded *Even The Sounds Shine* for hatART a year later.

**Notwithstanding** the strengths of both the earlier and later versions, the present performances strike me as definitive. They give Melford, Horner and Nicholson the necessary space to make statements unconstrained by typical recording-studio considerations, and reveal the trio as a self-sufficient unit that could mesmerize an audience. All save the final two tracks on the second disc are taken from one evening's performance at The Club. They are presented in the order of performance, and as such provide a dynamic portrait of a trio that, in its time, had few peers among working bands.

**Melford** has moved forward in recent years with different groups and diverse, often unconventional instrumentations. Her quintet *The Same River Twice* includes trumpet, saxophone/clarinet, cello and drums as well as her piano, while her current trio *Crush* employs Stomu Takeishi on electric and acoustic bass guitars rather than a bass violin. Melford is also part of the cooperative trio *Equal Interest* with saxophonist/flutist Joseph Jarman and violinist Leroy Jenkins, and a duo with Marty Ehrlich. Her music has also incorporated a broader range of influences, often reflecting the interest in meditation and Buddhism that led Melford to spend the first months of 2001 in India.

**Yet** the blues still shine amidst the newer sounds of Melford's music. Her duo performances with Ehrlich, for example, invariably end with Otis Spann's «Don't You Know.» Those roots were never more clear than in these trio performances, the brilliant initial plateau of a musician still in ascendance.



*Upcoming Part 2 on hatOLOGY 708*

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*Bob Blumenthal*

## Myra Melford Trio Alive In The House Of Saints Part 1

Myra Melford *piano*

Lindsey Horner *bass*

Reggie Nicholson *drums*

- |                                  |  |       |
|----------------------------------|--|-------|
| 1                                | <b>Evening Might Still</b>                                   | 11:16 |
|                                  | ISRC CH 131.0100300  |       |
| 2                                | <b>Now &amp; Now 1*</b>                                      | 6:50  |
|                                  | ISRC CH 131.0100301  |       |
| 3                                | <b>Between Now &amp; Then*</b>                               | 15:54 |
|                                  | ISRC CH 131.0100302  |       |
| 4                                | <b>Parts I &amp; II Frank Lloyd Wright Goes West To Rest</b> | 18:50 |
|                                  | ISRC CH 131.0100303  |       |
| Total Time DDD <sup>24</sup> Bit |  | 52:50 |

All titles composed by Myra Melford.  
All (except titles with \*) Tuhtah Publishing SUIISA.

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