

by Larry Appelbaum



## SACHAL VASANDANI

IN SEARCH OF THE APEX

With three albums under his belt, the most recent of which is last year's *Hi-Fly*, Sachal Vasandani continues his transition from rising star to established headliner. Like many singers of his generation, the 34-year-old has studied and assimilated the past while keeping up with current developments inside and outside of jazz.

During this Before & After session, conducted in September when Vasandani was in Washington, D.C., to perform at Bohemian Caverns, he chose to listen to each track in its entirety before offering reactions and sharing insights. Still, he couldn't stifle his occasional yehs and grunts of appreciation.

### 1. Gregory Porter

"God Bless the Child" (from *Be Good*, Motéma). Porter, vocal. Recorded in 2011.

**BEFORE:** The song is so powerful. Somehow I kept thinking of the sunrise. [I'd like to] listen to it at dawn, so I could feel the power of the message just before the energy of the day. I think this is Gregory—his is one of those voices that bridge the gap between theory and logic, that lets you get to another place. The human voice, alone, recorded well, singing a song that is timeless. How powerful would it be to see the first rays of sunlight and have that voice fill up your room and let your day be guided by that message?

Tell me about Gregory.

He's beautiful in every way. I have a very deep respect for a lot of what he does. His messages, I feel, are pure and simple and honest, and his writing reflects that, his songs reflect that. There's an arrow-like precision to the heart of the matter. I admire and love that.

### 2. Kurt Elling

"Pleasant Valley Sunday" (from *1619 Broadway: The Brill Building Project*, Concord Jazz). Elling, vocal; Laurence Hobgood, piano; John McLean, guitar; Clark Sommers, bass; Kendrick Scott, drums; Elling, Hobgood, arrangement. Recorded in 2012.

**BEFORE:** That was a lot to take in. I can't focus on an emotion on this one, unfortunately. As a singer, I'm going toward the lyric, but it's maybe a bit over my head. I think this is Kurt, but I'm not sure because I haven't heard this before. I love that there's so much that can be used: drum fills, delays, odd spaces for lyrics, background vocals, effects on the voices, distortion on guitar. Sounds like it might be Kendrick on drums. I'm experimenting with some of these tools, too. And this is not a typical love song.

I've always applauded Kurt Elling for finding this new strain. When I'm at a complete loss as to what to write about, it's someone like Kurt, or Mark Murphy, or even Jon Hendricks, who can supply a wistful new way of looking at an old box. This is an example of how so many things are coming together but I'm not seeing the apex of the pyramid. I'm seeing a foundation that is now wider, because we have so many elements that I've just described. But we're not going up to a place that congeals into an emotional strong point. I need an apex to feel something.

This has really interesting, and upon repeated listening, maybe epic, moments. But what I'm looking for as an artist, and even more as a listener, is something that makes me feel something. It's a challenge, but it can be and is being done. And it is inspirational to me, as someone who comes from an acoustic background with a foundation in tradition, to see someone use these elements to serve the same musical goals.

**AFTER:** Musicians have introduced me to everything from Moroccan beats to Logic Pro 9. That track for me is like a kid in a candy store. Is this from his new project? It's very interesting. I'd love to hear the whole record.

### 3. Randy Crawford & Joe Sample

"One Day I'll Fly Away" (from *LIVE*, PRA). Crawford, vocal; Sample, piano; Nicklas Sample, bass; Steve Gadd, drums. Recorded in 2008.

**BEFORE:** That voice has a very special quality to it, and the song is really nice as well. I love hearing live records, hearing how someone would perform in a live setting. I'm not sure who the singer is. At times I thought Natalie Cole or Dee Dee Bridgewater. For a second I thought it was one of those singers who would go to a place, but it never did. It kind of stayed with the melody, which was comforting, you know? There are other times when I love to hear a singer take it and let the band follow them on a journey to another spectrum. Being as this was the first time I've heard the song, I was just enjoying the ride.

**You said the voice had a special quality to it. How would you describe it?**

There's a radiance on certain vowels [*demonstrates by singing the phrase "Fly away"*]. I love that. There's a certain timbre that exists in a sphere that I don't personally live in but sometimes wish I did. It's a certain resonance. I love hearing those vowels.

**AFTER:** Oh, cool. I don't know her. That's great. Beautiful voice. Love it.

#### 4. Jon Hendricks

"A Good Git-Together" (from *A Good Git-Together*, Pacific Jazz). Hendricks, vocal; Pony Poindexter, alto saxophone; Wes Montgomery, guitar; Gildo Mahones, piano; Monk Montgomery, electric bass; Walter Bolden, drums. Recorded in 1959.

**BEFORE:** [*smiles throughout, shouts at the coda*] Yeah, so much fun. I was just wondering, though: He sings, "[Ain't nothin' else] to do but swing," but they never went to spang-a-lang, much less into 4. Jon was doing his thing at such a high level, and he's gettin' his and it sounds great, but I wonder why they didn't go into 4?

His voice has *the* quality: lightness and swing and texture and history. He's got it still, at 91. So hearing him sing those lyrics is a real slap in the face, the real shit. I don't always like other people singing his lyrics, like Show Choir X at some university, because that can be super sad. But Jon singing his lyrics? Oh my God, every time, especially when he's singing about something he's passionate about. At the end, he puts a little fire under the band. I've heard him do that, and it's electrifying. Jon Hendricks is the man.

#### 5. Robert Glasper Experiment

"Afro Blue" (from *Black Radio*, Blue Note). Erykah Badu, vocal; Robert Glasper, keyboards; Casey Benjamin, flute; Derrick Hodge, bass; Chris Dave, drums. Recorded in 2011.

**BEFORE:** There's a place that this song takes me to and I start to feel something, especially at this tempo. It's fun; it's actually kind of light. It would be more sexual or sensual at a slower tempo, but I'm still in that sensuality zone. For me, every time I hear a voice like this, you could sing a manifesto of death. But with Erykah's voice, I'm still somehow turned on. Her voice does that to me. She doesn't shy away from politics or braggadocio or whatever, but it's still so cool. She can sing a lot of different stuff. ... Her voice has that space. And with this project, they've captured that really effectively.

There's a lot going on here, and maybe it's because I'm familiar with this song, but compared to that [Elling track] with a lot going on, they've stacked it in a way where it gets closer to the apex I was talking about. They're using a lot of tools, too, but in slightly different ways. This is repetitive, but that's part of the ethos. And they do take me to a place.

**Can you say where that place is?**

It's at the corner of pride and sensuality. I feel stronger listening to this music sometimes, or maybe more boastful. I come back to music that either makes me feel whole or more sexual. That's just the kind of stuff I like. And yeah, like most people in the world, I could listen to Chris Dave play the drums all day. I really am a fan.

**"IT'S NOT LIGHTLY THAT I SAY JOE WILLIAMS AND ELLA FITZGERALD ARE MY TWO FAVORITE SINGERS."**

#### 6. Joe Williams & Count Basie with Ella Fitzgerald

"Party Blues" (from *Metronome All-Stars 1956*, Verve). Williams, Fitzgerald, vocals; Count Basie, piano; Joe Newman, Thad Jones, trumpets; Henry Coker, trombone; Frank Wess, tenor saxophone; Freddie Green, guitar; Eddie Jones, bass; Sonny Payne, drums. Recorded in 1956.

**BEFORE:** Yeah! Good times. It's great that you played this particular track, because when I was about 13, the first stuff I absorbed was some big-band stuff. From there I got into Basie small-group recordings. I hadn't gotten too much into bebop yet but there was a lot of swing in my mix, and Joe and Ella were the first two who got me excited about singing. This is a great recording because of the way they interact with the band. They demonstrated the connection between vocalists and instrumentalists, and they showed there are some singers who could swing the band under the table. They understood the language this music is based on. It's not lightly that I say Joe and Ella are my two favorite singers.

#### 7. Dave Douglas Quintet

"Be Still My Soul" (from *Be Still*, Greenleaf). Douglas, trumpet; Aoife O'Donovan, vocal; Jon Irabagon, tenor saxophone; Matt Mitchell, piano; Linda Oh, bass; Rudy Royston, drums; Jean Sibelius, composer. Recorded in 2012.

**BEFORE:** That's Sibelius. What a nice voice. I don't know this recording, but it sounds familiar in a lot of ways. I will say this: When we look back at this period in jazz, this will be an example of what a lot of jazz is marked by, a kind of tentative balance between collective vision and a huge embrace of individuality. Sometimes it works and sometimes it comes so close.

**Do you think it works here?**

At times. This is such a compelling and fabled melody, and she sings it with the reverence of someone at church, which is where I've sung it. And that is beautiful, absolutely. It takes me to someplace, and then a lot of the playing comes in. I'm not talking about the actual notes being played, I'm talking about all of it at once: the [reharmonization], a couple of solos addressing the melody in their own way through the horns, the mix. And then I think back to what we started with, which was just the voice alone. Now, I'm going to just put this out there: If we're free of all the chains that bind us here in the jazz community, would I like to hear what I've just heard, or would I like to hear that same voice singing it a cappella? Probably a cappella. It would probably be more powerful, with more of an emphasis on the lyric. It would grab me in the gut more, and make me feel at peace with the lyric.

But I don't know where to put this, and I'm not disparaging the performance. It's really great on all counts—really nice solos. When it adds up and you have a glimmer of what's beyond the horizon, you want that. Some of the older recordings we've listened to, it's like, "Yes, you're in there." The space is not questioned. Maybe it's because I live in this time, or maybe it's because there is such an emphasis on individual musicianship juxtaposed with what I'll call "popular" songs. "Be Still My Soul" may be from the 19th century, but it's a popular hymn, and it doesn't feel like a period piece. So my mind goes to possibility. I hear a great voice singing a timeless anthem and I ask, "What else is going on there that adds to that?"

**And what's the answer to your question?**

I'm just putting it out there. This is a lot of what's going on now in jazz, at times and across spectrums, to great success. Or maybe we're reaching a corner. I've done it, too. Everyone's ears are craving simple, popular melodies.

**AFTER:** I like it. Beautiful voice. I don't know the singer.

### 8. Theo Bleckmann

"Saxophone Song" (from *Hello Earth! The Music of Kate Bush, Winter & Winter*). Bleckmann, vocal; Henry Hey, keyboard; Skúli Sverrisson, bass; Caleb Burhans, violin, guitar; John Hollenbeck, drums. Recorded in 2011.

**BEFORE:** That's exciting music. I think, with all the different sections and ways to play it, there's also something that runs through it. I'd have to listen to it again, but I think it's the lyric. Not to get too deep into the psyche, but there seems to be a clarity of vision from the singer to the musicians, and they embrace the adventure that's ahead; they play with that kind of confidence. The lyric is interesting, and it's new for me. I'm happy to go on the journey. I'm not sure if it's Theo's project, but it would make sense if it is. He can pull you into his world. It's pretty fucking cool.

We were talking about film earlier. It's as if a screenwriter said to the whole crew, "This is the world we will be inhabiting. Here's how it's asymmetrical. Here it is, get hip to it. Learn it, believe in it and then we'll film it." That doesn't always happen with that kind of clarity. I think singers, and I've had this experience, we have this beautiful idea in our heads but we don't always get that idea across because of our own failures or people's inability to channel themselves for the next adventure. In this case, everybody read the same screenplay, everybody high-fived, then they went out and filmed it. It's very moving.

**AFTER:** Cool. I'm not really that familiar with Kate Bush. I should be.

### 9. Luciana Souza

"I Get Along Without You Very Well" (from *The Book of Chet, Sunnyside*). Souza, vocal; Larry Koonse, guitar; David Piltch, bass; Jay Bellerose, drums. Recorded in 2012.

**BEFORE:** I love these tempos but I rarely handle them with such grace. There's so much space, and the band is doing such a great job creating that space. It's phenomenal, actually. Then the singer enters and tells a story; in this case the story's got irony and sadness. It's the perfect tempo for this song, so the arrangement's all there. I'm moved. There are moments when it all came into focus for me, and those were pretty spectacular. As far as the singer, I feel it's somebody I know.

**AFTER:** Oh, wow. That's not who I thought it was.

**What's the challenge of singing at that tempo?**

Focus and time. Time has to be impeccable even if it's conversational. Whatever images you have in your mind that are swirling up in you to help you tell the story, there's a chance they can be replaced by whatever temporal bullshit enters your mind. But you have to focus and stay with that image, even during your silence, and not lose yourself. The key for me is to keep it conversational so you keep it natural. When I'm singing I can get caught up in a lot of technical things; my mind can wander. But when I'm speaking, there's a focus that I have, and also my phrasing loosens up and becomes more natural. This is a beautiful song. I haven't heard this new record yet. I'm excited to get it. I'm glad you're playing a lot of new stuff I haven't gotten my paws on yet.

### 10. Nguyễn Lê

"I Wish" (from *Songs of Freedom, ACT*). Lê, guitars; David Linx, lead vocal; Illya Amar, vibraphone, electronics; Linley Marthe, bass and vocals; Stéphane Galland, drums; Himiko Paganotti, Ousman, Danedjo, Prabhu Edouard, vocals. Recorded in 2010.

**BEFORE:** [listens to the entire piece, then laughs] You know, that's like in high school after the session or whatever we did, we went to the Colonial, a '50s-type diner [in Naperville, outside of Chicago]. They were well known for their desserts, their ice cream dishes. And this reminds me of the kid in the corner who would always order the banana split with the triple whipped cream and the cherry on top. And my eyes get wide checking out the banana split. It's cool. So this is fun, like a banana split is fun. It's got a lot of stuff on it. There's a time and a place for this. You feel like you're going wild with it. These guys do that ethos real well.

**Did it take you somewhere?**

I felt like I was at a zoo, or at that table at the Colonial. I wouldn't have been surprised if they had a herd of elephants run through the track. But somehow it all came together. There was a strong groove and the groove never died, except for that little triplet. And I like the taste of the vibraphone in it. That was unexpected. For all that was going on, and there was a lot, it seemed to serve a common purpose.

Taste-wise, do you like indie art films or do you like *Men in Black 17*? This is more like the latter for me, but I've seen some Hollywood movies. I like blockbusters in the summer and I go to festivals with a beer and dance the night away like everybody else. So I think it's great.

**AFTER:** Rudresh [Mahanthappa] told me about him; he was playing with him. So yeah, it makes sense that there was a focused vision. I don't know anything else about him. I've never heard his music. The Stevie Wonder cover kept me listening. I asked myself why they were covering it and it was because they were having fun, so why not?

### 11. Marcus Miller

"Tightrope" (from *Renaissance, Concord*). Miller, bass; Dr. John, vocal; Alex Han, alto saxophone; Kris Bowers, piano; Adam Agati, guitar; Louis Cato, drums. Recorded in 2012.

**BEFORE:** Fun times. Bass solo, ridiculous. Groove, strong. It's even got the claps going. I would be having so much fun at the live show.

Is this Marcus? Yeah. It's fun; it's a party. Not many people would take a cover and, except for the first 30 seconds, do it exactly, including the rap, and just leave out the vocal. And I'm a huge fan of Janelle Monáe. ["Tightrope" was the first single off of Monáe's 2010 studio debut.] I love the way she sings this particular song. So at first I thought, "What are we doing?" It's like a music-minus-one vibe. But the truth is, we're after fun. So many times when we're getting ready to do a gig or a studio session, we lose that spirit. Sometimes it's deep, it's gotta be deep. I knew it was somebody whose musical skill is exceedingly high because of the way they play the pocket, which is as good or even better than the original. But I took that for granted for a second, the musicianship. It's people who know how to play time, so why shouldn't it be party time when I listen to this?

**AFTER:** Dr. John? Killer. It's soulful. You get that flavor, for sure. He's the rapper? [laughs] That's hilarious. Like I said, it's a fun time, and Dr. John makes it that much more fun. I was grooving on it and having a good time.

**12. King & Moore**  
 "Sermonette" (from *Cliff Dance*, Justice).  
 Nancy King, vocal; Glen Moore, bass.  
 Recorded in 1994.

**BEFORE:** Wow. It's classy and gritty at the same time: soulful, unique, swinging with shades of influences that are beyond jazz but serve as a shining example of what can be done. I'm all in. There's only one singer who I think can really pull that stuff off, but her voice doesn't sound the same, so I'm reluctant to play the guessing game. But it's such a joy to hear that track. There's so much personality, and there's always a place for that. You can't help but admire the uniqueness of the phrasing and the vowels. You can feel the history, and yet there's something very present about it. It's not Nancy King, is it?

**AFTER:** She's an all-star. Just a soulful motherfucker, you know? I love her.

**13. José James**  
 "Trouble" (from *No Beginning, No End*, Blue Note). James, vocal; Robert Gasper, keyboards; Pino Palladino, bass; Chris Dave, drums; Hindi Zahra, Emily King, vocals. Recorded in 2011. Single released in 2012; album to be released Jan. 22, 2013.

**BEFORE:** Good times, another great one. I think what makes this track special is that it's got a great groove and it's original, and yet there's a familiar element to it. There are shades of things we've heard and loved before.

**Such as?**

D'Angelo, Jill Scott. But he's got his own thing, his own phrasing, and it's on display with a really great pocket. I could listen to that pocket for a very long time and feel pretty good about life. And we're entering a world that I love to listen to, that makes me feel proud and sensual. José is good at bringing out sensuality, you know? I think we need that in our lives. This song is a journey and I enjoy going on it. He's a really focused, sincere performer and artist. I'm just happy to listen to his music. **JT**

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