



Mohammed Fairouz | John Griffin | Luke Gullickson | Ben Hjertmann | David Maslanka
Mark Olivieri | William Price | Joel Puckett | David Rakowski | Ethan Wickman

American Vernacular | New Music for Solo Piano

The idea was simple, really. I envisioned an album of new works for piano inspired by “American” elements; the particular influences didn’t really matter to me. Familiar musical idioms, historical events, people, places, literature, and so forth — everything was fair game as far as I was concerned.

I then approached several composers with this idea and let them know that I was interested in reaching a wide audience, especially those that might not traditionally listen to “classical” piano music. The idea was not to make a popular crossover album, but rather to engage audiences with new music that also drew from something familiar.

Each composer was given only the theme — “*American Vernacular*” — and free reign to steer that theme in whatever direction he felt inspired to take it. The result is an album of music with a diversity of stylistic approaches and influences that is quintessentially American. I hope you enjoy it.

— Nicholas Phillips

About the Pianist |

Nicholas Phillips maintains an active concert schedule, having played in venues across the United States and abroad. His previous albums, *Portals and Passages* and *Boris Papandopulo: Piano Music*, both garnered critical acclaim, with his playing described as “razor-sharp yet wonderfully spirited” (*American Record Guide*) and filled with “bejeweled accuracy” (*Fanfare*). He has been called “an able and persuasive advocate” of new music (*The New York Times*) and his passion for working with composers and engaging audiences through new music led to the conception of this *American Vernacular* album. Phillips is currently Associate Professor of Piano at the University of Wisconsin — Eau Claire.

| www.nicholasphillips.net |



About the works |

BACK PORCH REQUIEM FOR JOHN FAHEY

When asked to contribute to this project, I immediately thought to incorporate the steel-string guitar fingerpicking styles I've loved since the fateful moment in high school when I heard Mississippi John Hurt's 1928 recording of "Stack O' Lee" on the radio. So I took some time to revisit Hurt's music, as well as that of another guitarist crucial to my musical conception, John Fahey. As it turns out, Fahey, who died in 2001, wrote a piece in 1968 called Requiem for John Hurt. It seemed a perfect gesture that I should continue the chain.

This piece features textural and rhythmic structures derived from Hurt's and Fahey's guitar playing and translated to the piano, making expansive use of the keyboard's large register. The "back porch" element nods to Fahey's music in particular, which represents for me a meeting place between the woody sound of the steel-string guitar and the complex atmospheres of classical music. Though most back porches don't sport a piano, I hope that somewhere in this music there resides a certain lustrous humidity and the low chirping of cicadas.

— Luke Gullickson

BELOVED

This piece grows out of my current mode of "remembrance" pieces. These include Requiem for wind ensemble, A Solemn Music for solo marimba, and Remember Me for cello and 19 players. Each of these pieces has the quality of resolution of deep issues of past trauma or grief, both my own, and some element of huge world traumas such as Hiroshima or the Holocaust. Beloved feels both personal, and larger than personal. It has the quality of one side of a conversation — what you have to say to your beloved, especially one departed.

— David Maslanka

BILL-YTUDE

\ˈbɪl-ə-ˈtʃʊd n 1: a composition built on a technical foundation formed by Billy Joel's piano licks
2: a state of mind or feeling experienced when playing Billy Joel's piano licks

I built my piano [and musical] ground floor upon the stones laid by Billy Joel and Elton John. To this very day, when I hear Falling of the Rain or Laura, I can't help but picture 16 year old Joel Puckett banging away on an out of tune upright.

The Cold Spring Harbor and Streetlife Serenader albums introduced me to the rockabilly piano fills from the 50s and early 60s. These rockabilly fills are all over those albums and I learned quickly that I could throw one into almost any tune and get some smiles. My version of this type of fill takes center-stage in this etude and when the figure combines with some flying octaves that would make Liszt blush, it quickly moves into late night, totally badass piano thumping country. Something tells me my 16-year-old self would approve.

— Joel Puckett

HOTFINGERS

A unique study of rhythm, form, and style, David Rakowski's Hotfingers: Three Vernacular Nondances (2012) traces vernacular strains within an

organic network that unifies stark rhythms with pensive lyricism. Not unlike the sets of mathematical equations for which the composition's preliminary material is named, the unassuming rhythmic profile of "Superfractalistic" becomes steadily complicated by increasingly denser textures. These quickly emerge as a controlling aspect for the musical surface of the immediate movement, and, ultimately, for the long-range character of the work at large. "Fractals are apparently able to describe the unpredictability of the dripping of water faucets," offers the composer, "but I was thinking more the gutter pipe near our bedroom window when a rainstorm starts — slow irregular dripping, then faster, then more regular, then just a constant stream." As the score gains momentum and speed — complete with a directive for the performer to "Rockout hard" — this fractal imperative reaches its inevitable breaking point, yielding to a "Pochissimo meno mosso" that brings the episode to a sudden close. The additive nature of this opening movement carries into the second, paying homage to that most influential of all American vernacular music genres: the blues. Prominent plays on the definitive minor third, diminished fifth, and minor seventh intervals from the so-called "blues scale" underpin a whimsical dimension newly prospected in "Growing Season Blues" and gracefully dovetailed with the work's running interest in rhythmic nuance. The final movement, "Écoutez et Répétez," recalls the agitated pulsation of the first at a notably quicker tempo. The thematic threads binding these three movements together entreat the listener to consider those matters of large-scale formal coherence that cut across the entire piece, stressing the composer's perceptive gift for highlighting the variety of ways in which otherwise seemingly disparate elements of melody, gesture, and style may be assembled into a revealing, edifying whole.

— Ryan Patrick Jones

OCCIDENTAL PSALMODY

My extended family is part of that great 19th century diaspora of European immigrants to the western United States. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins were scattered from the thirsty red rock country of eastern Utah in the shadow of the Rockies, all the way to the California coast. Foremost in my memories of summer vacations are long road trips from my Southern California home to visit relatives—either to the Bay Area of Northern California, or hundreds of miles across the Great Basin to Utah. These experiences impressed upon my memory that the world—at least the world as I knew it—was one of endless topographical expanse: from ocean, to desert, to mountains, and back again. Mine was a country of majestic emptiness bounded at either end by Pacific sunsets and looming Rocky mountain shadows.

Owing to the concept of the American Vernacular project, some depiction of ocean and mountains was inevitable for me. The work opens with a slowly accelerating cycle of ascending fifths intended to evoke the ocean. The interval choice here is significant as its inherent symmetry conjures an ambiguous, arbitrary starting point and progression. After a couple of these 'swells,' a simple melody emerges over an insistent pedal tone. The melody recurs in several key points throughout the work—sometimes plaintively suggesting the vastness of the sea, and at other times in a long, driving crescendo that summons the soaring shadow of looming peaks across the desert horizon. The principal drama of the work is the interplay between these two extremes, and how the melody remains salient despite its surrounding, shifting, landscape. If traditional 'psalmody' denotes musical worship based upon the Psalms of David, "Occidental Psalmody" connotes my reverence for the sweeping swath of the American West—not embodied in cowboy songs or Native American lore—but as I recall it across the spiritual contours of cellular memory.

— Ethan Wickman

ON THE DRAWING OF CONSTELLATIONS

The constellations tell us not about the stars but about those who gaze at them. The stars in any given constellation are light years apart, and are unrelated except that they are linked by our perception. The title refers neither to astrology nor astronomy in the traditional sense, but rather to the creative act of connecting the stars into symbols, animals, or other objects. Like the stars, the individual pitches in this piece are rather isolated, and yet, they are bound together in time and space, and given meaning by our perception. Some of the harmonic relationships are universal, whereas others are more obscure and will be perceived differently by every listener.

— Ben Hjertmann

PIANO MINIATURE #10 "Liberace"

Liberace has always been a musical hero of mine and a really fascinating person to boot. This little character piece captures some of the flamboyance of the great gay pianist. It was written as a celebration for another great gay pianist (and a very different one), Steven Blier on his wedding.

PIANO MINIATURE #12

My 12th Piano Miniature is a little song without words. The tempo and unadorned lyricism is partly inspired by my love for the early Tin Pan Alley tear-jerker ballads. The secret unsung lyrics are from a poem by Seamus Heaney. This miniature was my first gentle reaction to his death and is dedicated to Seamus in gratitude for his generosity and friendship toward me.

PIANO MINIATURE #13

"America never was America to me"

On the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech, I wrote an elegy for an unarmed black teenager who was shot and killed by a man who was suspicious of his appearance. The fact that Trayvon Martin was gunned down and his killer legally acquitted of his murder in 2013 has, not secretly, been a cause for grief among people of color in the United States today. In the days that followed, on my regular daily walks thorough the streets of Manhattan the words of Langston Hughes' poem, Let America Be America Again, rang through my head. I'd memorized the poem as a kid and its darkest lines seemed particularly poignant today:

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")
Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek —
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

With the sounds of street-life, these verses intermingled with the percussive sounds of anger. I sat down a few days later and, over the course of a few hours, these sounds became my 13th Piano Miniature. The work is dedicated, respectfully, to the memory of Trayvon Martin and takes its title from the most hopeful lines in Langston Hughes' poem:

O, yes, I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath —
America will be! -

— Mohammed Fairouz

PLAYIN' AND PRAYIN'

This piece represents two "southern" styles of music: the hoedown and the church hymn. The piece contrasts up-tempo, "fun" social dance tunes with the traditional choral songs featured in Christian worship services. In the brief introduction, the performer plucks out a whole-tone version of a familiar banjo tune on the strings of the piano before jumping into the hoedown melody. This is not a typical hoedown as it contains several unusual changes of meter and asymmetrical rhythms. The middle section features a modified four-part chorale that incorporates a more extended harmonic language as well as several arpeggios in the high registers. The hoedown returns to bring the composition to a rousing conclusion.

— John Griffin

A SOUTHERN PRELUDE

What does it mean to be "Southern"? Does the term refer to a specific region and how the land shapes our world-view and how the world views us? Or does it refer to the people and our social norms, and how we react to events in our lives? Personally, I would like to think that being "Southern" means that you have to be a good storyteller. Not that it has to be a good story, mind you, but you have to be able to tell the tale well. Whether it's a long and winding account of some dark family-lore, or just a juicy piece of gossip, in my experience, all good stories have one thing in common — they digress. Digressions provide for a wonderfully intricate narrative, one that is interwoven with various threads that establish complex associations, no matter how tenuous and distant, and make the story oh-so more interesting to a careful listener.

— William Price

SPECTACULAR VERNACULARS

Growing up with three older siblings, I was exposed to rock music from Chuck Berry to Joe Jackson. The music I heard at any time in our house was a schizophrenic mix of everything from the Clash and Cars, to the Carpenters and the Cure. In addition, I would often find myself at the piano transcribing James Brown tunes and working out Miles Davis solos, while occasionally pretending to be John Lennon. Following my graduate work at Ithaca College, I spent ten years as Composer-In Residence/Dance Musician at the College at Brockport. These experiences—as a young admirer of rock music and dance musician—shaped, in many ways, the music I write and my compositional philosophy. I learned how to improvise and write quickly in many different styles as well as utilized my love of rock and roll and my background in jazz to play music that supported and, hopefully, inspired dancers to move. As a dance musician, I was asked to play diverse styles of music from Bill Monroe and Earl Scruggs to Mozart, Bach, and Parliament Funkadelic. As a result, my compositions have become increasingly more eclectic as they fuse the various styles with which I was improvising.

The three pieces in this set are hommages to musicians that have been extremely influential on my approach to composition and on the way I think about music: Alberto Ginastera, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Ahmad Jamal, and De La Soul. Like the improvisations I played for dance students, each piece is not limited to one musical style, but weaves in and out of various musical rhetorics such as funk, tango, blues, and jazz.

— Mark Olivier

About the Composers |

MOHAMMED FAIROUZ, born in 1985, is one of the most frequently performed, commissioned, and recorded composers of his generation. Hailed by The New York Times as “an important new artistic voice” and by BBC World News as “one of the most talented composers of his generation,” Fairouz integrates Middle-Eastern modes into Western structures, to deeply expressive effect. His output encompasses virtually every genre, including opera, symphonies, ensemble works, chamber and solo pieces, choral settings, and more than a dozen song cycles. Commissions have come from Rachel Barton Pine, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Borromeo String Quartet, Imani Winds, New York Festival of Song, Da Capo Chamber Players, Cantus, and many others. Recent premieres include his first opera, *Sumeida’s Song*, and his fourth symphony, *In the Shadow of No Towers*, both greeted with critical acclaim. | www.mohammedfairouz.com

JOHN GRIFFIN is a professor of music at Western Michigan University and Associate Director of Music at St. Catherine of Siena Church in Portage, Michigan. Griffin earned his Ph.D. in music composition from the University of Iowa, studying with David Gompfer. He received his BM and MM in music from WMU, where he studied composition with Richard Adams, C. Curtis-Smith, and Robert Ricci, and piano with Lori Sims. As a pianist, he has performed with the new music ensembles *Opus 21* and *Birds on a Wire*, and currently serves as the accompanist for the Kalamazoo Singers choral group. Griffin is a Finalist of the International Music Prize for Excellence in Composition 2011 and semi-finalist for the American Prize in Composition. His compositions have been performed at numerous festivals and conferences, including College Music Society International Conferences in Croatia (2009), South Korea (2011), and Argentina (2013). | www.johncgriffin.com

LUKE GULLICKSON creates musical folk puzzles inspired by places and landscapes. He plays piano and guitar with composer-performer trio **Grant Wallace Band**, whose unique sound the New York Times described as “spidery original bluegrass songs, featuring ambiguous harmonies and high-lonesome yelps.” Luke has also released several solo records under the name *Golconda*. His music has received fellowships and residency awards from the Banff Centre for the Arts, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the UCross Foundation, and Joshua Tree National Park. Luke has an MM in composition from the University of Texas at Austin, and has also worked as a theater music director in Colorado and as a wilderness guide in New Mexico. When not wandering various corners of the American West, he lives in Chicago. | www.lukegullickson.com

BEN HJERTMANN is a composer and vocalist based in Chicago. He composes and performs in the **Grant Wallace Band** and **Kong Must Dead**. Hjertmann received a doctorate in composition from Northwestern University in 2013. His final project was a self-produced album called *Angelswort*, an intense fairytale garnished in numerology, mysticism, and fauxlore. | www.hjertmann.com

DAVID MASLANKA was born in New Bedford, MA in 1943, attended Oberlin Conservatory and Michigan State University, and taught for many years in New York State and City. Since 1990 he has been a freelance composer, living in Missoula, MT. | www.davidmaslanka.com

MARK OLIVIERI (b. 1972) is an Assistant Professor of Music at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He has played and composed for luminaries like the José Limón, Sean Curran, Doug Varone, Martha Graham, and Shapiro and Smith Dance Companies. He is the founder and Artistic Director of the Vision of Sound New Music and Dance Concert Series, which pairs composers and choreographers together in the creation of new collaborative works. Olivieri lives in Canandaigua, N.Y. with his wife Alaina and their five children. They own a minivan. | www.markolivieri.com

WILLIAM PRICE has had his music performed in South America, Asia, and throughout the United States and Europe. His works have been featured prominently at such events as the World Saxophone Congress, the International Trumpet Guild Conference, the Música Viva Festival in Lisbon, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts Chamber Music Festival in Singapore, and the New York City Electroacoustic Music Festival. Price’s music has received awards and commissions from numerous organizations, including the Music Teachers National Association, ASCAP, the Percussive Arts Society, the Southeastern Composers League, and the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Dr. Price received his MM and DMA in Composition from Louisiana State University, and currently serves as Associate Professor of Music at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) where he teaches courses in music theory and composition. | www.williampricecomposer.com

JOEL PUCKETT, named as one of National Public Radio’s listeners’ favorite composers under the age of 40, is also one of the most performed composers of his generation. His flute concerto, *The Shadow of Sirius*, has seen more than 100 performances all over the world and commercially recorded multiple times. Audiophile Audition wrote, “The music ... contains a density within a clarity, polyphony within the simple and — most importantly — is a beautiful and seemingly spiritual work.” He has written concertos for some of the great instrumental soloists working today including Anthony McGill, Demarre McGill, Craig Morris, Marina Piccinini and Amy Porter. Joel has received numerous awards from organizations such as the American Composers Forum, BMI, Chorus America and the American Bandmasters Association. Currently on the classroom faculty at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, he holds advanced degrees from the University of Michigan. His music is represented worldwide by Bill Holab music. | www.joelpuckett.com

DAVID RAKOWSKI grew up in St. Albans, Vermont and studied at New England Conservatory, Princeton, and Tanglewood, and studied Robert Ceely, John Heiss, Milton Babbitt, Paul Lansky, and Luciano Berio. He has received a large number of awards and fellowships, including the Elise L. Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and the Rome Prize, and he has twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music (for pieces commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and the US Marine Band). He has composed seven concertos, five symphonies, 100 piano etudes, 30 piano preludes, five song cycles, and a large amount of wind ensemble music, chamber music, and vocal music for various combinations, as well as music for children. His music has been commissioned, recorded, and performed widely and is published by C.F. Peters. He is the Walter W. Naumburg Professor of Composition at Brandeis University, having also taught at New England Conservatory, Harvard, Columbia, and Stanford. | www.ziodavino.blogspot.com

ETHAN WICKMAN has been called “A composer of facility and imagination, the kind to whom both performers and audiences respond” (The New York Times), and his music has been performed in venues around the world. He has received grants, prizes, and commissions from Barlow, Meet the Composer, the American Composers Forum, the Wisconsin Music Teachers Association, the Utah Arts Festival, and a Harvey Phillips Award from the International Tuba Euphonium Association. His orchestral work *Night Prayers Ascending* won the Jacob Druckman Prize at the Aspen Music Festival, and was a finalist in the 25th Annual ASCAP Rudolf Nissim Orchestral Composition Competition. He is the recipient of fellowships from the Aspen Music Festival, the Norfolk Contemporary Music Workshop/Yale Summer School of Music, the Wellesley Composers Conference, the American Composers Orchestra/Earshot New Music Readings, an Encore grant from the American Composers Forum, and Fulbright (Madrid, Spain). He is Assistant Professor of Music Composition and Theory at the University of Texas at San Antonio | www.ethanwickman.com

| Scores |

I hope this recording inspires you all, especially fellow pianists, to seek out the music. All scores are available for purchase.

Beloved is published by Maslanka Press.
Bill-itude is published by Bill Holab Music.
Hotfingers is published by C.F. Peters.
Piano Miniatures No. 10, 12, and 13 are published by Songs of Peer, Ltd (ASCAP).

All other works are available directly from the composers through their websites.

Acknowledgements |

I am grateful for the many people who made this CD possible, and am especially thankful for: Mohammed Fairouz, John Griffin, Luke Gullickson, Ben Hjertmann, David Maslanka, Mark Olivieri, William Price, Joel Puckett, David Rakowski, and Ethan Wickman — were it not for your wonderful music, this album would not exist; Jim and Ann Phillips, Robert Griffin, Mike and Sarah Mattner, and Kiyoshi Tamagawa, for their incredibly generous financial contributions; the many people - friends, family, and strangers - who donated to my Kickstarter campaign...you all made this possible; my wife, Casey Snyder, for everything she does, and my beautiful children, Nathan, Emma, and Hannah, who fill my days with joy, and give purpose to it all; Matthew Zimmerman, of Wild Sound Studios — you are incredible; Amanda Matos, for her amazing work (and patience with me!) in designing the album; Ryan Jones, who provided the liner notes to *Hotfingers*; Myrna Cooke, for commissioning *Piano Miniatures #12 and #13*; the Wisconsin Music Teachers Association and the Music Teachers National Association, who commissioned *On the Drawing of Constellations*; the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Foundation, Academic Affairs Division, and College of Arts & Sciences, for generous assistance in the commissioning and recording process.

Credits |

Audio Engineer | Matthew Zimmerman

Recorded at | Wild Sound Recording Studio, Minneapolis, MN

Piano | Steinway B

CD Design | Amanda Matos

CD Duplication | Sooper Dooper Print and Digital Media, Madison, WI

Artist Photo | Rachel Schimelman, R|S Design



| **American Vernacular** |
New Music for Solo Piano

Nicholas Phillips, *piano*

| www.nicholasphillips.net |



Total Time = 76:50

FCR 144

DDD

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

www.newfocusrecordings.com

©© 2014 Nicholas Phillips. All Rights Reserved.

WARNING: COPYRIGHT SUBSISTS IN ALL RECORDINGS ISSUED UNDER THIS LABEL.

- 1-3 **Spectacular Vernaculars** by Mark Olivieri
 - I. Buenas Noches, Buenos Aires: hommage à Alberto Ginastera | 3:23
 - II. Stella by Sunlight: hommage à Billie Holiday | 2:49
 - III. Stakes is Higher: hommage à Ahmad Jamal and De La Soul | 3:58
- 4 **Occidental Psalmody** by Ethan Wickman | 8:31
- 5 **On the Drawing of Constellations** by Ben Hjertmann | 6:46
- 6 **Bill-ytude** by Joel Puckett | 4:45
- 7 **Piano Miniature #10 "Liberace"** by Mohammed Fairouz | 1:10
- 8 **Piano Miniature #12** | 3:26
- 9 **Piano Miniature #13 "America never was America to me"** | 3:48
- 10 **Beloved** by David Maslanka | 5:38
- 11 **Back Porch Requiem for John Fahey** by Luke Gullickson | 7:55
- 12 **Playin' and Prayin'** by John Griffin | 6:48
- 13 **A Southern Prelude** by William Price | 7:00
- 14-16 **Hotfingers** by David Rakowski
 - I. Superfractalistic | 2:55
 - II. Growing Season Blues | 4:13
 - III. Écoutez et Répétez | 3:08

| World Premiere Recordings |