



Album Notes Michelle Mercer 2024

I want to live like Geoffrey Keezer plays the piano. Finding inspiration in panoramic sources, bringing them all home with improvisation. Seizing upon both virtuosity and freedom to say what should be said, begrudging the moment nothing. Collaborating with intention, bridging differences with beauty and meaning. Daring to make dreams real.

Making dreams come true in music comes as naturally to Geoffrey as it did to this album's two tribute subjects, Chick Corea and Wayne Shorter. "Play what you wish for," Wayne often said. "True mastery of an instrument comes from years of practice, but true artistry comes from the soul," said Chick. These recently passed master innovators and romantic warriors are Geoffrey's two biggest musical influences. "Besides their obvious greatness as musicians," Geoffrey says, "I also really loved the way they were as human beings. Always positive, childlike, endlessly inquisitive, and they never stopped evolving."

Joining Geoffrey at Birdland in September 2023 were fellow jazz superstars Clarence Penn and John Patitucci. Clarence and Geoffrey are longtime collaborators of the same generation: Geoffrey calls Clarence a "real orchestrator at the drum kit" who can "generate a lot of intensity and groove without playing loud"—qualities we hear throughout this live album. John is a veteran bassist of Chick and Wayne's groups who "knows their music better than anyone," Geoffrey says. "John listens so well and contributes just incredible music every second." The esteem is mutual. "Geoffrey has a rare virtuosic ability that is combined with a deep love and respect for the music of these two masters," says John.

For Chick, Wayne, and Geoffrey's distinctive brand of visionary agency, it helps to start young and in a musical family. Like Chick, Geoffrey was playing the piano by age four. Geoffrey grew up attending jazz camps where his musician father taught; one of his early babysitters was keyboardist Lyle Mays. By kindergarten, Geoffrey's favorite three records were Weather Report's *Black Market*, Chick Corea's *The Leprechaun*, and Oscar Brown Jr.'s *Sin and Soul*.

Live at Birdland's deepest history comes with *The Leprechaun's* "Imp's Welcome," which Chick recorded as a multitracked synthesizer fantasia. At six, Geoffrey was so obsessed with

analog synthesizers that he learned to program an Arp 2600 at the university where his Dad taught. "So for show and tell in kindergarten," Geoffrey remembers, "I built a toy synthesizer out of some plywood, spools, thimbles, and rubber bands, drew sliders and patch cables with a magic marker and wrote things on it like oscillator and mixer and ring modulator. I brought my contraption into school, put on the record of 'Imp's Welcome' and pretended to play along with it." Here the piano trio brings childlike imagination to the tune, with a quote from Wayne Shorter's "Witch Hunt" connecting tribute fairylands.

Chick became a good friend to Geoffrey over the years. His loss suffuses the 1988 "Eternal Child," which begins with John's masterful *arco* bass playing. Chick's widow Gayle has said this affecting tune came to Chick in the middle of the night and left him crying as he put it on the page; the performance here both sings and sobs. Geoffrey's most faithful homage to Chick as a pianist comes on "High Wire-The Aerialist." His lyricism is built on quickly shifting phrases that leave ample space for Clarence and John to swing and soar.

A lifelong fan and student of Wayne's music, Geoffrey joined the Wayne Shorter Quartet for three gigs in 2009, subbing for an injured Danilo Perez. The Geoffrey Keezer Trio's overarching celebration of Wayne is philosophical: Like Wayne's quartet, these musicians mix structure with freedom, composing music spontaneously in an approach Wayne dubbed "zero gravity." Wayne's 1987 "Flagships," originally written as a kind of concerto for soprano sax and synths, gets a rare piano trio treatment here. Geoffrey's intro flaunts his almost unparalleled piano technique, which has earned him comparisons to Art Tatum and Vladimir Horowitz; the trio has fun playing up the original's suggestions of a sci-fi film score. Geoffrey notes that the 1988 "Joy Ryder" is an outlier in Wayne's canon, a study in two-part counterpoint rather than the dense harmony Wayne typically favored. When Geoffrey played this tune with Wayne's quartet, Wayne told him the second through fifth notes of the melody say "Think for yourself!" This trio heeds that directive with a tempo between the original recording's mid-tempo funk and the Wayne Shorter Quartet's runaway energy.

For Wayne's "Dance Cadaverous" from 1966's *Speak No Evil*, Geoffrey "wanted to get closer to the harmony that Herbie Hancock plays on the original recording than the way people generally play it now. For example, the first chord, B minor, is really more like a G minor chord superimposed over B minor. It's much more of a question mark and more mysterious." Geoffrey is still quoting "Joy Ryder" at the start of the tune, mixing and mingling Wayne's entire body of work as the spirit moves him.

Chick and Wayne both encouraged Geoffrey to compose—Chick even got annoyed with Geoffrey when he hadn't written for a while. Two of Geoffrey's tunes feature here. He wrote

and recorded "Song of the Canopy" in 1993 as a member of Art Farmer's band, influenced by another favorite composer, Donald Brown. That a tune Geoffrey wrote at 23 stands up to the compositions of Chick and Wayne here is all the commendation it needs. *Live at Birdland* closes with Geoffrey's F# minor blues "Madame Grenouille." We hear the ghost of Ellington's *Money Jungle* trio date as the musicians push and challenge each other to greater intensity. Clarence instigates, John charges forward and back, and Geoffrey is loose, technically stunning, and quote-happy to the end, referencing Monk's "Bemsha Swing" in a tune whose melody otherwise suggests Coltrane.

Like the classic recordings *Coltrane "Live" at the Village Vanguard* and *Duke Ellington at Fargo, 1940 Live*, the Geoffrey Keezer Trio's *Live at Birdland* is far more than a good night at the club. The otherworldly inspiration of Chick and Wayne and the highly attuned rapport of such consummate musicians make it a jazz lover's dream come true. A dream we can bring to life anytime we hit play.

Michelle Mercer

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In the shadow of Pikes Peak