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**DOWNBEAT'S 2021 JAZZ FESTIVAL GUIDE**

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# Julian Lage

## A CLEAR-SIGHTED SQUINT

BY PHILLIP LUTZ • PHOTO BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

The acclaimed guitarist deftly side-stepped the challenges of our COVID year to deliver a brilliant Blue Note debut with his trio.



Clasping his hands to his chest, then raising them to the heavens, Julian Lage evoked echoes of the exuberant child he was a quarter-century ago, when, as an 8-year-old guitarist, he achieved a measure of fame as the subject of an Oscar-nominated documentary called *Jules at Eight*.

“I can’t say I feel any different than I did as a kid, which is maybe trippy,” he declared during a wide-ranging conversation in April, the Zoom box barely able to contain his loose-limbed gesticulations.

Exuberance may be Lage’s default mode, but he had every reason to feel in high spirits. Having ridden a continuous wave of acclaim since his days as a

child prodigy — among his many honors are three Grammy nominations — he was, at age 33, on the cusp of a new career milestone: the release of *Squint*, his first album on Blue Note.

Out June 11, the album — 11 tracks, nine of which are Lage originals — is a singularly modern take on Blue Note tradition, showcasing tunes that both reference classic styles and function as forward-facing vehicles for improvisation, his transcendent gift. Realized with a production team close to his heart, the album also underlines Lage’s skill at cultivating a creative ecosystem that allows him to express that gift in full.



Dave King (left), Jorge Roeder and Lage perform during a video shoot for *Squint*.

“This record is a culmination of a lot of stories that have been under way for a while,” he said.

Untangling the stories begins with a concert on the Ides of March in 2018. The occasion was the 80th birthday party of saxophonist Charles Lloyd at the Lobero Theater in Lage’s hometown of Santa Rosa, California. Lloyd had been signed to Blue Note by Don Was, the record company’s president. Was, a bassist, sat in with the band midway through the concert. Lage, who had played on and off with Lloyd since his prodigy days, was also part of the band.

Was had long been impressed by Lage’s work with Lloyd. His admiration grew at the Lobero and heightened further six months later at the Monterey Jazz Festival. There, Lage played a scintillating set with his trio, which included Jorge Roeder on bass and Eric Doob on drums. It was the first time Was had seen the trio in that kind of charged environment.

“I was absolutely blown away by it,” Was recalled in a phone interview. “They had an eternal groove and were completely in sync.”

Lage and Was talked at Monterey. That led to further conversations, which, Lage stressed, were not about signing the guitarist — until, that is, his contract with Mack Avenue lapsed. “He was so gracious about making it not about business,” Lage said. “It wasn’t like, ‘Julian, I pick you.’ It was like, ‘Let everyone else figure it out. We have a rapport. If it works, we’re going to make it happen.’ And am I glad it did.”

So, too, was Was: “I knew he’d be an asset. He really understood the ethos and spirit of the

label’s legacy. He was coming from that place, a modern version of it.”

As dazzling as the trio had been at Monterey, it was to undergo one change before the group moved into the studio. A month before the jazz festival, in August, Lage had booked a week at The Stone at the New School, the new home to John Zorn’s long-loved series of concerts. On one of the nights, Lage brought in a trio consisting of Roeder, with whom he’d had a working relationship for more than a decade, and drummer Dave King, whom he had known only in passing.

King, the drummer for The Bad Plus, hit it off with Lage and Roeder. “It was just kind of immediate,” Lage said. “The way we played together made a lot of sense. It felt complementary musically and personally, this kind of celebration of improvised music as the centerpiece of a band’s direction rather than, ‘We’re about songs and, oh yeah, we take solos.’”

King recalled, “That sort of ignited us to play together.”

In September, when it came time to record what would be Lage’s last album on Mack Avenue, *Love Hurts*, Lage enlisted King and Roeder. While the album is a trio effort, like Lage’s two previous discs — *Arclight* (released in 2016) and *Modern Lore* (2018), both with Scott Colley on bass and Kenny Wollesen on drums — *Love Hurts* adopts a somewhat freer approach in a collection largely of covers. Ornette Coleman’s “Tomorrow Is The Question” is a standout, presaging the breakout work that is *Squint*.

*Squint*, for its part, had to overcome obsta-

cles before it was made. After *Love Hurts* was released in February 2019, Lage, Roeder and King did some promising runs that culminated in a week at the Village Vanguard in January 2020. “That’s what it was all working toward,” Lage said. “Let’s write music, let’s throw it all out, let’s write some more, show it at the Vanguard, edit that, then go make a record.” They set a February date to record in New York. That date was pushed back to March when Roeder sustained an injury.

Then the pandemic hit. As virus rates rose in New York, the venue was shifted to Nashville and the date pushed to August. In anticipation, Lage and Margaret Glaspy, his wife and producer, rented a house in East Nashville. That was in June. “We thought that will give us time to move down there, set up shop, work, work, work, write, write, write, do the record,” Lage said.

“Frankly, the process wasn’t novel,” he added. “I just had the space and time to luxuriate in it. My thing has always been, you write for the record. You write 30 or 40 songs; you pick your favorite 10. And if you can’t work those into a place where they feel really great, you go into some of the other 30 and then you come back and you plug and play and just try make a nice narrative. So it’s a little bit of quantity over quality for me, and then it becomes about the quality and fine-tuning.”

But as August approached and the fine-tuning was finishing, the project again appeared imperiled. Virus rates were rising in Nashville. Lage said he was worried: “I called Don and said, ‘Should I scrap this now? Should this be a

solo guitar record? I want to make this record, but I don't want to put people at risk."

Was eased Lage's concerns. "I was certainly encouraging them to get together and play," he said. "People started becoming aware around that time that you could in fact safely make a record; just wear masks and don't have a lot of people hanging out. It would have been spirit-crushing for him to have all this music built up inside him and not be able to realize it."

Roeder and King traveled to Lage's Nashville house, where the trio spent a long day releasing pent-up energy in rehearsal. Roeder described the moment: "I felt our excitement to play and make something happen, something that I hadn't experienced in the longest [time]. I had not made music with other people for months."

After the rehearsal, Lage recalled, he sent Was the day's audio clip: "He said, 'You sound like you've been on the road six months straight. It's killing. Absolutely go.' The funny irony is, we went in the studio and recorded the first day. The music was more delicate. With 'lights, camera, action,' you lose some of that wild and woolly risk. I sent that first day to Don and his comment was, 'It's great, but you don't have to be polite on this one. Let there be bleed. Go to that thing you do when you're just in the house playing.'"

And that is what they did. Glaspy, with whom Lage had collaborated as a songwriter and performer periodically for more than a decade — they married in December — was tasked with keeping the musicians on the straight-and-narrow: "She'd be listening to the music and say, 'OK, cool, but please go for it. That was nice, that was lovely, very professional. But you don't listen to one another.' She'd say these things that only she could say because there's so much trust and respect."

It also fell to Glaspy, who was intimate with Lage's housebound predilections — which had only intensified during the pandemic — to make sure those predilections were reflected in the band's music. At home, she said, Lage was spending hours listening — gleaning phrasing ideas from musicians like Ornette Coleman and Jim Hall, but also from the cadences of speakers and writers like James Baldwin and Martin Luther King.

"It was fun," she said, "to watch him connect those dots and see how they played into his own playing. Not everybody knows he's fascinated by those things. But I have a special bird's-eye view of knowing what he's working on at home every single day and once he gets to the studio, kind of trying to sew those two environments together."

The album's other producer, guitarist Armand Hirsch, was, Lage said, also a trusted set of ears, particularly from the perspective of an instrumentalist: "I'd say, 'Is this referencing

the right guitar thing? I'm looking for an early George Barnes kind of thing through this kind of amp.' And he'd say, 'OK, make this kind of adjustment.' It's having people who support you and understand."

Along with engineer Mark Goodell, the team agreed that, to keep it real, all barriers — physical and psychological — had to be removed. The players moved as close to one another as possible while maintaining pandemic protocols. Baffling and headphones were banished. At the same time, Lage said: "I asked myself: 'Is there any blurriness that I can bring

back to the music?' I was trying to invite a little more irrational nature to it — things that on the one hand could be extremely melodic but also somewhat avant-garde, dealt with in a way that a lot of my heroes dealt with it."

The result captures the spirit and some of the language of those heroes, filtered through Lage's sensibility. "Familiar Flower," for instance, treads on treacherous terrain as it honors Coleman and his alumni group from the 1970s and '80s, Old and New Dreams. As the piece unfolds, the players, moving at a withering pace within an asymmetric rhythmic



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structure, begin to pull away from each other in a process of increasing abstraction, only to snap back together in a remarkable display of collective cool. The odd, angular stops in the head alone would drive lesser players to distraction.

Said King: “You realize, ‘Oh, my God, he wrote those, they’re not just him whipping away in there. Oh, God, I have to deal with that information.’”

Like “Familiar Flower,” the title track takes the players to unexpected places. The track references another Lage hero, drummer Billy Higgins, who played with Coleman in the 1950s, with a raft of Blue Note stars in the ’60s and with Lage a few times decades hence after an introduction by Lloyd. On it, Lage happens on a bit of free association, assigning notes to an unaccompanied Billy Higgins solo and, in translating them to guitar, triggering a connection with pianist Lennie Tristano’s “Line Up,” a seven-chorus spray of bouncing eighth notes.

“In a way,” he said, “it’s a celebration of Higgins and Tristano together in this imaginary world called swing.”

In their particular take on swing, “Squint” and, no less, “Familiar Flower,” serve as yardsticks separating the current trio’s sound from that of the former. “There might be a more collaborative sense of where the beat is, how the time is passed around,” Lage said. “If you’re looking at just the musical differences between *Arclight* and *Modern Lore* compared to *Love Hurts* and *Squint*, I think there is a celebration of maybe a more enigmatic sense of time.”

That sense of time as enigmatic, he added, might have developed with the previous trio. Time, in Lage’s musical universe, seems increasingly to be a mutable construct — and that, Lage said, is more a reflection of his growing association with Zorn’s school of free improvisation than of any personnel change. Lage has appeared live with Zorn — notably with Roeder and Wollesen in the saxophonist’s New Masada Quartet — and on a half-dozen Zorn albums since 2018.

Whatever is shaping Lage’s thinking, it is a thread that runs through much of the album. Even tunes underpinned by unassuming rhythmic references — “Twilight Surfer” and “Day And Age,” with their relaxed shuffles; “Saint Rose,” with its easy backbeat — are given to subtle metric twists, sharp harmonic turn-arounds and other tactics of disorientation that compel the kind of improvisational elasticity he craves.

“These are songs I needed to hear myself play,” he said. “These are songs that felt like they worked in tandem with the learning I was doing and am coming to do about the world. They were songs that felt appropriate. It’s music for an audience of one.”

Exercising his prerogative as a programmer, Lage reaches back to the lyrical side of the



A child prodigy, Lage was introduced to the world through Mark Becker’s award-winning short documentary *Jules at Eight* in 1996.

## ‘In a way, it’s a celebration of Higgins and Tristano together in this imaginary world called swing.’

— Lage on his tune ‘Familiar Flowers’

1960s for yet another song he needed to play: “Emily,” the oft-covered Johnny Mandel waltz. “There is a handful of tunes I learned as a young person that I’ve always wanted to put out in the world,” Lage said. “When it came time to put a record together, it felt like it was time to reintroduce it. It felt like what we were trying to say with this record is, ‘I’m in love with jazz, I’m in love with the culture of jazz.’”

“Emily” was recorded toward the end of four 10-hour, fully masked days in the Sound Emporium’s big, dry room — an experience, Lage said, that left everyone lightheaded. But its inclusion makes sense. With the heat turned down on the ballad, the record’s sonic strategy is exposed — and to great effect. The elimination of barriers reveals what might have seemed a light colloquy to have a raw quality reminiscent of another era, even as the improvisation is of today, or tomorrow.

The aesthetic, King said, is quintessential

Lage: “It’s got some historical perspective and some future kind of interplay.”

For all the album’s brilliant interplay, it may be Lage’s single solo offering, “Étude,” in which the essence of his improvisational gift becomes most apparent. The tune, written at the end of March 2020, kicked off the writing of the *Squint* book and opens the album.

In it, he calls to mind the spirited kid who reveled in his own facility — effortlessly and elegantly weaving open strings, double-stops and idiosyncratic contrapuntal gestures into a narrative map for this project and, perhaps, projects to come.

“It isn’t just pretty,” he said. “It has a certain kind of evocative beauty which I think is primarily based on the harmonic decisions. That became the North Star of the other music — can it be challenging for the instrument, because with that comes a certain kind of excitement and exhilaration.”

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