

Press Bio for *Passage* (2019)

Credit: Evan Haga

“I’m chasing after the lofty goal of being able to play everything,” says pianist and composer **Dave Meder**, the youngest professor currently employed at the University of North Texas College of Music, a semifinalist in the 2018 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition, and a finalist for the prestigious 2019 Cole Porter Fellowship of the American Pianists Association. “There are certain pianists who really embody the concept of ‘everything.’ I think everybody is after that, to a certain point.”

It’s true that many jazz musicians strive to become complete artists. But it’s also true that few ever develop the comprehensive skill set and all-embracing vision that Meder showcases on *Passage*, his OutsideIn Music debut featuring the generation-defining saxophonists Chris Potter and Miguel Zenón. Even fewer get there by age 28.

Meder’s backstory, which covers a vast swath of American musical experience, makes the versatile beauty of his new album less surprising, if no less astonishing. Born and raised in Florida, his early tutelage included both rigorous classical training and exploratory, self-directed jazz instruction. During his undergraduate years, intensive studies with Marcus Roberts helped him attain a strikingly authentic handle on historical jazz styles (case in point: *Passage*’s delightful bonus track, “Garnerin’ a Bit.”) But Meder’s purview has always been a broadminded and curious one, and after earning undergraduate degrees in music, political science and Spanish from Florida State University, he headed to New York to immerse himself in the state-of-the-art side of the postmodernism he sought. In the city, his teachers and mentors included Kenny Barron, Dave Douglas, Ari Hoenig, Mark Turner, Jean-Michel Pilc and Fred Hersch, and, from the classical world, Julian Martin and Philip Lasser. He earned an Artist Diploma from The Juilliard School as well as his MM from New York University. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, and professionally in New York, Meder’s progression was also bolstered by a musical life in the church.

All of which makes *Passage* a sort of artistic reconciliation that unfolds before our ears. Here one can witness a tremendously gifted musician and composer mold his influences into a personal identity defined by the grand sweep of its possibilities. (For a touchstone, look no further than Meder’s pianistic hero Jaki Byard.) “I’ve been studying so many different approaches to jazz, and music in general, to a fault,” Meder admits. “I wanted to finally put something out there. Oftentimes it’s just one concept that dominates an album. But for the past ten years, I haven’t had one singular concept that’s guided my vision, so having that kind of album wasn’t an option for me. With *Passage*, I try to focus on the breadth of my playing and composing.”

Indeed, the 11 tracks that make up *Passage* reflect the sort of programming you might encounter in a Meder live set—diverse in its dynamics, temperaments and stylistic elements, yet boasting consistently stellar musicianship that makes for a fluid front-to-back listen. At heart it’s a fantastic piano-trio record, with a rhythm tandem—bassist Tamir Shmerling and drummer Kush Abadey—that shares Meder’s wide-ranging capabilities. The title track finds its core inspiration in Philip Glass etudes and the orchestral work of John Adams, with a poignant melody moving atop minimalistic repeated figures. “Work” serves Meder’s penchant for finding lesser-known Monk pearls; Meder and company dial back

the tempo while upping the weight and bombast in their performance. “For Wayne” is an homage to Wayne Shorter’s mastery of short forms—his unparalleled “ability to pack all of this incredible harmonic and melodic content into a very small package,” Meder says. The pianist makes a point to include a hymn in each set when he performs, to represent the impact the church has had on his music, and *Passage* harbors a rendition of “The Old Rugged Cross” that moves from introspection to grooving transcendence and back again. In addition to playing in church while growing up in Florida, Meder spent three years as the music director and pianist at Fordham Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Bronx. To this day, the church’s influence keeps Meder’s accomplished playing grounded in a spirit that eclipses chops and theory. “In the context of all the brainy stuff I was working on in school,” he says, “[the church] forced me to make some kind of soulful connection to all of it.”

Another programming idea borrowed from Meder’s live sets occurs in the closer, a gorgeous solo read of “For You, For Me, For Evermore,” a Gershwin gem most famously covered by Ella Fitzgerald but still ripe for fresh interpretations. “Oftentimes I like to end sets with ballads,” Meder says. “Traditional wisdom is to end on a high note, but I think ending with something quiet and reflective can send people off in a better way. So, it’s something I hope to do on my future albums too—no complicated improvisation, just a melody that leaves people feeling the right way.”

Other highlights include (of course) his collaborations with Zenón and Potter. “This Road,” a duo performance featuring Zenón, showcases their stunningly intuitive, intimate rapport; it feels a bit like eavesdropping on one of the sessions Meder had with the MacArthur “genius grant”-winning saxophonist in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, where they both lived. Potter, whom Meder met at NYU, guests on “Elegy,” one of the first original compositions Meder ever undertook, back in high school, and a piece whose evolution has followed the pianist as he’s traversed the various stages of his career. Meder, with empathetic support from Abadey and bassist Marty Jaffe, exchanges energy and ideas with the most influential jazz saxophonist of the past quarter-century. “Rather than having solo after solo, we share one solo space. We dance back and forth, playing off each other’s ideas, and we build the piece together to this very cathartic moment,” Meder says. “It was surreal to be able to not just sit there and accompany Chris, but to also create something together with him as a soloist.”

Meder is himself at a fascinating and most fortunate crux in his narrative. Just as he’s embarking on his career as a bandleader and recording artist, he also recently began his employment as the Assistant Professor of Jazz Piano at the University of North Texas, a venerated position once held by jazz-education pioneer Dan Haerle. While Meder clearly had the bona fides the university was looking for—his C.V. includes a win in the 2013 Jacksonville Jazz Piano Competition and spots in the Betty Carter Jazz Ahead Program and the Ravinia Music Festival’s Steans Institute, not to mention educational experience at NYU and Juilliard—he wasn’t necessarily seeking out a distinguished teaching post. But the joy he’s felt working with students, like his genre-bending performing and composing, is part of a panoramic musical identity that should be celebrated rather than pared down.

“When musicians move to New York, they don’t ever think they’re going to leave,” he says. “And I was definitely one of those wide-eyed young musicians moving to New York thinking I would spend the rest of my life there. But I really enjoyed working with the students while I was down in Texas for an interview, and when they offered me the job it just seemed like a no-brainer. I’m very happy to be here.”