

MAKAYA McCRAVEN

EXTENDED BIO (2000 words)

Makaya McCraven is a *beat scientist*. The cutting edge drummer, producer, and sonic collagist is a multi-talented force whose inventive creative process & intuitive style of performance defy categorization.

Called “a sound visionary” (jazzinchicago.org) who is “not your everyday jazz drummer” (thewordisbond.com), McCraven brilliantly moves between genres and pushes the boundaries of jazz and rhythm to create forms of his own.

“You are listening to one incredible musician. His style and sound is unique, a heady, skillful, sophisticated and boldly uncompromising mix of jazz and hip hop...” (UK Vibe)

His breakthrough album *In the Moment* was released with International Anthem Recording Co. (IARC) in January of 2015 and quickly named “Album of the Week” on BBC 6 Radio by influential DJ Gilles Peterson. By the end of the year it was a “Best of 2015” selection for Los Angeles Times, Pop Matters, NPR Music’s Jazz Critics Poll, and Apple Music. In 2016, *In The Moment* was hailed by Turntable Lab as “one of the most important recordings to date in the modern Jazz world.” *In The Moment* was a dramatic statement by McCraven, where he debuted a unique brand of “organic beat music” that quickly launched him into the vanguard of not only Internationally-known jazz artists, but also a niche genre of next-wave composer-producers blurring the boundaries of jazz & electronic music.

“While Teo Macero’s work with Miles [Davis] might seem the obvious reference point, *In The Moment* is closer in spirit to Madlib and J Dilla.” (WIRE Magazine)

French-born but raised in the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts by expatriate musician parents, McCraven went on to develop his chops in Chicago and now represents a rising generation of globally-minded, genre-bending music makers as an artist as well as band leader. Through his unique, rarified performances and collaborations he unapologetically affirms our right to re-think and re-write the rules, any rules, and affirms other artists in their own exploratory evolutions.

“No longer are we seeing jazz musicians experimenting with a new genre (hip hop) that they find interesting (or vice versa). Now what we’re seeing are jazz musicians who were heavily influenced by hip hop in their most formative years, just as much as they were influenced by jazz or any other genre. This creates a different kind of music. These cats aren’t ‘blending’ jazz and hip hop; for them, these genres are inseparable. They can’t play one without playing the other.” (thewordisbond.com)

Born in Paris, France in 1983 to jazz drummer Stephen McCraven (Sam Rivers, Archie Shepp) and Hungarian singer Agnes Zsigmondi, McCraven was exposed to broad ranges of influences from a young age. At age 3, in 1986 his family moved to the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts, a time and place that afforded him the mentorship of his parents' community of friends and collaborators, which included jazz luminaries Marion Brown, Archie Shepp and Yusef Lateef.

His earliest gig memories include playing alongside students in his father's drum ensemble, the CMSS Bashers, at age five and in middle school forming a band with friends to backup his mother's Jewish folk songs. In high school, McCraven cofounded Cold Duck Complex, a jazz hip hop band that developed a strong following in the American Northeast, opening for acts like Wu-Tang Clan, Rhazael, Digable Planets, The Pharcyde, Mixmaster Mike, and The Wailers.

"I grew up studying jazz as a way to be masterful at my craft as a drummer. But as a young person, I was listening to A Tribe Called Quest, Busta Rhymes, Nas, and Biggie just like everybody else. That was just our generation." (Chicago Magazine)

McCraven stayed close to home (and his working band) to study music at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, but prioritized the development of his professional music career, and never completed his degree (although he was part of the University Jazz Orchestra and earned various Downbeat student awards). In 2007 he made a move to Chicago, where he immersed himself in the city's gigging and creative music scenes. He took on as many gigs as he could, whether small, big, or bizarre, and gave music workshops to students from elementary to university level. While music has been in his blood from a young age, he's been steadily humble & hungry, sure to always be distilling his various learnings and influences into an identity and groove of his own.

"People think music is just a gift and it's born out of nothing—that it's in your genes. No: Musicians work hard. You practice for hours and hours and hours. For me, with my parents being musicians, it wasn't that they genetically bestowed on me the gift of music, but that they were willing to let me put many, many hours of my life into it." (In These Times)

Through years of hard work and deepening kinships with artists from both ends (straight ahead & avant garde) of Chicago's jazz scene, by 2012 he had "established himself as one of the city's most versatile and in-demand drummers" (Chicago Reader) doing regular sideman gigs for Bobby Broom, Corey Wilkes, Willie Pickens, Occidental Brothers, Marquis Hill, Jeff Parker, and others. All the while he'd been developing a new kind of statement with the announcement and release of his leader debut *Split Decision* (Chicago Sessions, 2012), about which Dan Bilawsky wrote:

"This is no take on standards with sparkling cocktail party élan or loose, amorphous three-way conversation. This is music made by a 21st century man who sees no need to suppress his hip hop chops or rock spirit in an effort to fit in and be dubbed a jazz

drummer. McCraven marries his love for music other than jazz with a more jazz-oriented spirit built around in-the-moment, improvisational cunning and driving grooves throughout this program of original music." (All About Jazz)

Imbued with a new confidence, McCraven began work with IARC, performing alongside Marquis Hill & Matt Ulery twice as part of their "Trio in Curio" series. The shows' success prompted a new IARC collaboration at The Bedford with McCraven at the helm as artist-in-residence. The new series, called "Spontaneous Composition", was an incubator for McCraven to improvise with new collaborators weekly and develop concepts for an unnamed future album. From January 2013 to early 2014, every session of the series was recorded for reference, but rather than merely reviewing the improvisations for compositional inspiration, McCraven began tinkering with the stereo mixes in Ableton, doing what he referred to as "fixing" the music - editing, looping, pitching, layering, and ultimately producing the tracks that were released on his 2015 breakthrough album *In The Moment* (IARC).

The critical and communal reception of *In The Moment* led to greater breakthroughs in the live setting for McCraven, including a historic co-headlining Chicago performance with Kamasi Washington in Fall of 2015 and a major showing at the New York City Winter Jazz Festival in January of 2016, where he was named a "Top 5 Artist to Watch" by both NPR and Billboard, and garnered glowing reviews from the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and Downbeat Magazine. Afterwards he signed with European booking agency Good Music Company and spent most of 2016 touring the European circuit, capped off by a London Jazz Festival set broadcast live on Boiler Room TV in November of 2016.

Right upon return from that London show, McCraven did a special Chicago performance at Danny's Tavern in support of touring Belgian DJ LeFtO. Joined by fellow Chicago-based IARC artists Junius Paul, Nick Mazzarella, and Ben LaMar Gay, McCraven captured an inspired set of high-energy improvisation to 4-track tape, and used those recordings to post-produce and create his first DJ-style mixtape *Highly Rare* (IARC). Originally released cassette only, the lo-fi free-jazz-meets-hip-hop mixtape eventually made it onto vinyl & digital formats, and at the end of the year was lauded as one of the "Best Albums of 2017" by The New York Times, UK's EZH Mag, and Gilles Peterson, in addition to highly favorable reviews by PASTE Magazine, Stereogum, and Pitchfork.

The latter end of McCraven's 2017 was also highlighted by an October stint in London, where he headlined IARC's 'CHICAGOxLONDON' showcase, and over the course of two nights improvised, performed & recorded with a handful of leading-edge UK-based musicians (including Joe Armon-Jones, Theon Cross, Nubya Garcia, Soweto Kinch, and Kamaal Williams). The recordings from those shows made source material for another mixtape that McCraven would produce and release on IARC in June of 2018, called *Where*

We Come From (CHICAGOxLONDON Mixtape). In the words of Will Schube, for his feature in *Passion of the Weiss*:

“While *Where We Come From* follows in the footsteps of McCraven’s previous releases, he moves far outside his Chicago circle on the release, taking a performance from London in October 2017 and using it as the structure from which he builds the tape... The result is unlike anything else coming out of the Chicago jazz or rap scene, an exploration of the different iterations jazz has introduced globally, and how these sounds are more similar than we often realize.

Makaya McCraven is a Chicago staple, owing some of his rise to the city’s fervent jazz community, but with *Where We Come From*, McCraven and his band have transcended locale. Jazz belongs to the world, it exists wherever we come from.”

McCraven has toured nationally and internationally, and produced 4 critically acclaimed releases as a lead artist in the last 4 years. Yet despite the performances and accolades, McCraven’s focus remains on both creating music and moving the culture forward.

“As a person of mixed race, nationality, and ethnicity I want my identity and contributions to paint a world not bound by genre, race or national boundaries but unified through a love of music culture and community. Tethered by legacies of the past but looking towards a new, more universal future.”

Makaya McCraven continues the development of his “organic beat music” as well as the work of (what Schube described as) “transcending locale” on his most recent release *Universal Beings*. A 2xLP album that was recorded at 4 sessions in New York, Chicago, London & Los Angeles, *Universal Beings* features an A-list of “new” jazz players from those hotbed cities: Brandee Younger, Tomeka Reid, Dezron Douglas, Joel Ross, Shabaka Hutchings, Junius Paul, Nubya Garcia, Daniel Casimir, Ashley Henry, Josh Johnson, Jeff Parker, Anna Butters, Carlos Niño and Miguel-Atwood Ferguson.