Chris Greene Quartet

You could call it jazz.

The phrase “Space is the place” has long had multiple meanings for Chris Greene. These are, of course, the immortal words of jazz visionary Sun Ra, whose expansive influence shines bright on the tenor saxophonist. Space as a musical concept figures into Greene’s uncluttered playing and arranging as well.

And SPACE is the name of the Evanston, Illinois club that is Greene’s home away from home. In fact, the Evanston native lives only five minutes away. Having it so close has been a great comfort during the stressful days of the pandemic.
"It's our favorite club, a great place to play," he says. For him, the state of the art venue is also a great place to record. Though much of PlayHarder, his latest stellar effort with his longstanding quartet, was recorded there before the coronavirus struck, the high spirits and vibrancy of the performance – and the interaction with his devoted fans – speaks volumes on how important live shows are for artist and audience alike.

"We did a few streaming performances, but together as a group, not one of those synced remote recordings where we all played our parts separately. We're the kind of band that leaves fingerprints on each other's playing, especially when we play live - that's when we're at our best. When it's been possible, we've played some rooms with limited capacity, and we've also played a lot of backyard parties. People have been so happy to hear us. A lot of them forgot how much live music meant to them."

It will come as no surprise to fans of the super-eclectic Chris Greene Quartet, featuring pianist Damian Espinosa, bassist Marc Piane and drummer Steve Corley, that Play Harder draws from a wealth of sources. This is a band shifts easily from blues and swing to funk and hip-hop to rock and reggae. Previous albums have featured tunes by Madonna, John Coltrane, Sting, Charles Mingus and lounge music maestro Martin Denny.

On Play Harder, Greene and company turn their attention to classic Duke Ellington, country legend Hank Williams and fusion/smooth jazz great George Duke. The quartet recorded speedy versions of Ellington's "Caravan" and Williams' "You Win Again" early in its existence. This time, the band takes time to reflect on and deepen their interpretations.

"Caravan," featuring Greene on soprano, opens on a moody note and unfolds in spacious, clear-eyed fashion before intensifying with the leader's joyfully intense playing. "You Win Again" is a wonderful vehicle for Espinosa, whose soulful playing channels Ray Charles's crossover version on Modern Sounds in Country Music. Greene mostly plays things close to the vest on tenor. "I cut loose a little in the end, but there was no call for flamboyance," he says. "It was better to be in the moment."

Duke's soaring, Weather Report-ish "Omi (Fresh Water)," from the late keyboardist's breakthrough album, Reach for It, is a great showcase for Greene's sweet-toned soprano. The performance opens with a lightly textured percussion solo by Corley, whose flexibility in handling time schemes, Greene says, is "like if Jack DeJohnette and Questlove had a baby."

Play Harder also boasts some strong originals. "Samba fu Maga" is a Brazilian-style original by Greene. And "Divers" is a ripping postbop workout written by Piane, whom Greene characterizes as "a combination of Ray Brown and Paul Chambers."

Before launching into "Divers," Greene jokingly warns the audience that it might be too intense for some audience members, advising sensitive listeners to take a bathroom break. In including spoken introductions, Play Harder harkens back to time when that was a standard feature of live albums. One of his big influences, Cannonball Adderley, was great at that.

Chris Greene was born on August 28, 1973 in Evanston, Illinois. His parents were big music fans, but there was only a smattering of jazz in the household. His mother blasted Motown at her monthly card parties. His father played a lot of and funk, soul and disco. Young Chris absorbed all manner of pop styles watching MTV.

He took up the saxophone at age 10, and began studying it seriously when he was 16, "playing the hell out of a blues pentatonic scale." He mainly played alto saxophone in the well-regarded Evanston High School Wind and Jazz Ensemble, as well as with local bands including a rock unit called Truth. "They were into Sting and I was eager to be their Branford [Marsalis]," he said. Years later, he played in a Dave Matthews cover band.

He didn't know much about improvisation at first. "When I soloed it was with more nerve than skill," he said. As a self-styled "Joe Jazz Visionary," he had no great affinity for "older people's music. Cannonball [Adderley] was okay, but he was no Grover Washington, Jr." As devoted a follower of John Coltrane as he would become, he initially couldn't stand him. "The only Coltrane album my father had was Om, which I thought was absolutely terrible, the worst thing I ever heard."

That spacey album so turned off Greene to Trane that when someone later told him to listen to Miles Davis' Kind of Blue and he saw that Coltrane was on it, he hesitated to put it on. "All I could think of was that Om guy," he said with a laugh. Eventually, he was "blown away" by Coltrane's playing on "My Favorite Things," which has had a strong influence on his efforts on soprano saxophone.

At Indiana University, Greene studied under revered music educator David Baker and the much-admired jazz studies department chair Thomas Walsh. "It was a great experience for me," he says. "I was a kid with a lot of natural talent, but with a lack of discipline. I learned how to practice, how to break things down, how to solve problems."

Returning to Chicago in 1994, he continued his education by reaching out to established artists including genius innovator Steve Coleman. "He was hard-headed in his determination to play music his way," says Greene. "It was a huge eye-opener for me how he put things together."

Greene also got a major boost from Coleman's mentor, Chicago tenor legend Von Freeman, as a performer at one of his famous jam sessions. "He didn't know me from Adam, but he was very encouraging. He said, 'Hey, I hear what you're trying to do. Keep at it.' That meant so much."

Partly as a personal challenge to catch up with a mother lode of modern jazz history, Greene began concentrating on tenor saxophone. He formed New Perspective, a band that released two albums (On the Verge, 1998, and Jazz, 2004), and played in a wide assortment of jazz, soul, pop and prog-rock groups. Among the notable artists he has hooked up with over the years are Common, the Temptations, Brazilian soul star Ed Motta and Andrew Bird.

https://chrisgreenejazz.com/chris-greene-quartet-epk
In 2005, Greene formed his quartet, which originally included Tyrone Blair on drums (Corley took over on traps in 2011). Described by AllAboutJazz as "a post-bop maverick intent on shaking things up for the mainstream," the saxophonist has been committed from the get-go to the pleasure principle. Whether the group is hugging tradition or engaging in experimentation, it radiates a deep sense of well-being.

With Play Harder, the Chris Greene Quartet has released nine albums, including three volumes in its live Playtime mixtape series; the double album Music Appreciation, which notably includes the Yellow Light Orchestra's cover of Martin Denny's "Firecracker;" Boundary Issues, which featured three guest artists, saxophonist Marqueal Jordan, percussionist JoVia Armstrong and guitarist Isaiah Sharkey, and the live PlaySPACE.

"I have a hard time staying in place," Greene says. "I don't know my place, I guess, which is why I'm always stepping outside of the so-called boundaries. With the music I like, I just can't help thinking, what would it be like if I did this, or this?"

Greene also has crossed over into television (he was featured on the FOX-TV series Empire and theater (he composed the score for the Chicago Children's Theatre's production of Bud, Not Buddy, an adaptation of Christopher Paul Curtis' Newberry Medal-winning book).

As with other artists, the pandemic has opened up time for Greene to work on various projects, and get to what he calls a "backlog of things to work out." He has gotten back to composing, using his added free time to closely study the music of Stanley Turrentine and Wayne Shorter, taking apart their unique styles and transcribing solos. "It's kind of been like my Sonny Rollins 'bridge' period," he says, referring to the long hiatus during which the tenor legend practiced on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York.

At the end of "You Win Again," Greene includes a brief audio clip of Maya Angelou speaking on the perils of excessive praise. If you "pick that up," she says, you also have to pick up people saying "you're nothing, you've lost it."

With his consistency over such a long stretch of time, and his quartet's being chosen as Chicago's Best Jazz Band in a Chicago Reader poll, Greene has shown no signs of letting positive feedback go to his head. A people's artist who has generously offered free downloads to fans. he knows the key to longevity is to keep doing what the album title says: Play Harder.

Even in these difficult times, you can count on the Chris Greene Quartet doing just that — whenever and wherever the opportunities to do so arise.

Music

1. The Crossover Appeal (Uno Mas) 10:51
2. Institutional Samba 9:54
3. Future Emperor of Evanston 12:15
4. Stompin' at the Savoy 9:20

Press photos

Live Video

https://chrisgreenejazz.com/chris-greene-quartet-epk
Press / Reviews

"...a hearty tone and sharp wit...a proud descendant of such 60s soul-jazz saxophonists as Gene Ammons and Eddie Harris."
- DownBeat Magazine

“Chris Greene is a Chicago jazz treasure.”
- Rick Kogan, Chicago Tribune

Best Jazz Entertainer (2018)
- Chicago Music Awards

"Best Jazz Band"
Chicago Reader “Best of Chicago” Readers’ Poll (2017)

Stage plot & tech rider

Stage plot for Chris Greene Quartet 16.3 KB

Upcoming shows