

The Grasso-Ravita Jazz Ensemble is a project dedicated to the writing of original music and the continuance of the jazz tradition. The Ensemble challenges themselves to define a more personal language within jazz by bringing together a stellar group of musicians, at the national and regional level, to rehearse and perform. It was immediately evident that the chemistry of this group was a rare and significant creative opportunity. The Grasso-Ravita Jazz Ensemble includes Benny Russell (tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone), Skip Grasso (guitar), Phil Ravita (acoustic bass and electric 6 string bass), Greg Small (piano), and Nuc Vega (drums).

The Ensemble's debut CD, *Jagged Spaces*, is a nine-song disc of original compositions. The CD opens with Skip Grasso's "Jagged Spaces," a singable melody with fluent and unpredictable soprano, guitar, piano, and drums solos. It serves as a fine introduction to the group. The relaxed jazz waltz "Her Life Incomplete," "Songhai" (highlighted by Benny Russell's tenor solo which is both soulful and explorative), and the minor-toned straight ahead blues "Blue Sunshine" (which has a particularly speedy and inspired bass solo by Ravita) keep the momentum flowing. "All About Cynthia" is a warm tender ballad while "Latin For Leandro" has a sense of urgency in its theme, leading to inspired guitar, tenor, and bass solos. The last two pieces, "The Homecoming" and "Chasing Shadows," conclude the project with optimistic and quietly joyful playing.

Produced by Skip Grasso and Phil Ravita, *Jagged Spaces* will release on January 15, 2021. In the summer of 2020 the selections from the disc received radio play in the Baltimore Area on WEAA 88.9 FM's "In the Tradition" hosted by George "Doc" Manning's as well as in Washington D.C on "The Jazz/Blues Mashup" hosted by Howard Hernstadt on WERA-FM. 96.7. The Ensemble performed a live-stream concert at An Die Musik in Baltimore on August 2, 2020 of Jazz, Latin, Fusion, and original music.

Benny Russell directed the jazz orchestra called the New York Association, an ensemble that featured such noted jazz artists as trumpeters Cecil Bridgewater and Tom Harrell, saxophonist John Purcell, trombonists Steve Turre and Robin Eubanks, pianist Onaje Allan Gumbs, and drummer Mike Clark. Since then, Russell has been steadily building an impressive list of credits. Besides arranging and performing for off-Broadway shows like Beehive. Benny's worked with Otis Rush, Harry Belafonte, Mino Cinelu, Craig Harris, Jimmy Owens, Junior Cook, Mor Thium and a host of others. Russell can also be heard on The Cosby Show and A Different World. In 1995 Russell chaired the jazz division at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music, where he also taught jazz history. In February 2005, Russell was commissioned to write a Jazz score for Zora Neale Hurson's play "Cold Keener". Presently, he is signed to Arabesque Records and is working on his second release entitled Miracles which features James Spaulding, Cecil Bridgewater.

Skip Grasso has worked as a freelance jazz guitarist throughout the Baltimore/ Washington Area performing in a very wide variety of situations which include everything from solo guitar to big bands. Skip can be heard on the recordings The Don Junker Big Band: Junkyard Dog and the Hank Levy Alumni Band: *An Odd-Time Was Had by All*. He has taught guitar as an adjunct professor at Mount Saint Mary's University, and continues to teach privately. Besides receiving a Master of Music from the University of North Texas, he was fortunate to study with numerous renowned educators and musicians including jazz guru Charlie Banacos, guitarist Paul Bollenback, the legendary guitarist Danny Gatton and Dr. Asher Zlotnik. Skip also had two books of guitar transcriptions published Vital Blues Guitar: Freddie King and Vital Blues Guitar: Gatmouth Brown.

Philip Ravita is an Eden Bass Amplifier and a Remic Microphone artist. He is also a member of the New York, Washington D. C., and Baltimore Musician Unions. Philip Ravita performs in the house band member in Jam sessions in the Washington DC and Baltimore Area. He is principal bass with The Baltimore Philharmonia and is chairperson of their board of directors. He teaches music at the university level. Dr. Ravita has adjudicated for Blues Alley's *Big Band Jam*, has received awards for his jazz

compositions from Billboard Magazine. His compositions have received favorable reviews and published in the Baltimore Real Book and on the Jazzscapes I and II published by the Baltimore Jazz Alliance. He has performed as a part of the Free Fall Baltimore Series and at local colleges. He has also done commercial work, recording for recent Super Bowl commercials and the APAP conference in New York, and Seminars for the Jazz Education Network. He has also received Jazz2u grants from the Jazz Education Network.

Greg Small is a pianist, trumpeter, and educator in the Baltimore-Washington music community. As a pianist, Greg has performed at the East Coast Jazz Festival, Baltimore-Washington Jazz Festival, IAJE Regional Jazz Festival, Free Fall Baltimore, and the Concordia Chamber Players Concert Series. Recent performing credits include Emmy-winning Richard Chisholm's latest documentary, "Gun Show," the Silver Spring Jazz Festival (with the Songbook Jazz Quintet, opening for headliner Branford Marsalis), and Jazz in the Garden at the National Gallery of Art (with Swingtopia). Having accompanied renowned artists including Chris Gekker, Chris Vadala, Darryl Brenzel, Linda Mabbs, and Lena Seikaly, Greg continues to build on his experience. As a trumpeter, Greg has also maintained an active presence, performing with the National Wind Ensemble, Washington Brass Quintet, Summer Opera Theater Company. He has also performed as a student at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute as well as being featured as a soloist on Shepherd University's concert tour of Ireland, performing the Haydn Trumpet Concerto. Greg holds degrees from the University of Maryland, College Park (MM Jazz Studies, Piano Concentration), Towson University (BS Psychology), and Shepherd University (BA, Trumpet Performance). A highly in-demand educator, he also maintains a teaching studio of 55 to 60 students in both piano and trumpet through Music and Arts (Ellicott City and Laurel), as well as his own private teaching.

Nucleo Vega is an accomplished performer, educator, and author. He has a master's in jazz performance and a bachelor's in music education. Nuc has written numerous transcriptions encompassing all genres of music with a focus on Afro-Cuban, Big Band, Bop and Post-Bop drumming. *Understanding Groove*, Nuc's first book, was a finalist for Drum! Magazine's Best Drum Book of the Year. The book explores the nuances between jazz, rock, funk, and Latin drumming. Nuc is endorsed by Vic Firth and Bosphorus Cymbals. His drum set approach to Melodic Jazz Drumming and *Understanding Groove* Book/DVD earned him a drum set clinician spot at PAS Day of Percussion MD/DE. Most recently, Nuc's drum solo over Mongo Santamaria's, "Afro-Blue," was featured on the homepage of Bosphoruscymbals.com.

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