

## INTERVIEW



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# MARTIN WIND

BY KEN DRYDEN

Over the past quarter-century, bassist Martin Wind has established himself as a versatile player and composer with an extensive discography as a leader and sideman. A native of Germany, Wind honed his craft as a young man on the continent then began to gain wider exposure through his work with pianist Bill Mays. Most of Wind's albums have been issued by various European labels, even though he has long been a U.S. resident. His most recent album, *My Astorian Queen (Laika)*, comes out this month. He also serves dual role as a professor of both jazz and classical studies. Wind's warm arco playing rivals any bassist active and he is a valued player in any setting.

**The New York City Jazz Record:** Did you grow up in a musical family?

**Martin Wind:** My father was an amateur flute player, but nobody was playing an instrument around the house. In high school I started to play guitar. When I was 15 years old, the big band director asked me if I wanted to fill the electric bass position. I thought, "Sure, I'm not going to become a bass player because of that" but that's exactly what happened. I found my voice that way, or the bass came to me. I played the electric bass for a couple of years. I took lessons with a classical bassist from the local orchestra and he kept working on me to finally pick up a 'real instrument'. When I was 17, I finally started playing upright bass.

**TNYCJR:** Were you playing strictly classical music on the upright bass or were you playing jazz too?

**MW:** After two or three months, I brought the big bass into band and never looked back. We had a pretty good school orchestra, so from the time I learned to play scales and find my way around the fingerboard and get a decent sound with the bow, I was playing with the orchestra and the big band. That duality has been with me for my entire career and I think that it's something that sets me apart.

**TNYCJR:** You use your bow a lot more than most. Do you attribute that to your classical studies?

**MW:** Absolutely! I graduated from high school when I was 19, because back then you went to school for 13 years in Germany and military service was mandatory, so I played in the navy band for two years and prepared myself for conservatory auditions because the entry level is so incredibly high. It's tuition-free and open to people from other European countries and the entire world. Everybody who comes there can really play so I used those two years to get ready. I passed the audition and did a six-year program. I have a diploma as an orchestra musician and that's where I truly learned how to play the instrument.

**TNYCJR:** Your professor, Wolfgang Beutler, really left a lasting impression on you.

**MW:** He was phenomenal. We're still in touch. I got to see him in late 2018. He was an influence on so many levels. He was very influenced by Pablo Casals, the great cellist from Barcelona. His left-hand technique was completely different from the usual classical training. He was from Romania. He studied with a very famous teacher and bassist there so he had a very different bowing technique too, which worked out perfect for me. He was not interested in producing as many successful orchestra bassists as possible. His main goal was to turn us into independent, thinking artists, musicians who would find their own solutions and have their own way of finding interpretations. As a result, he was incredibly open-minded. He had no problem with me being a jazz player as well. He supported it wherever he could. I owe him so much.

**TNYCJR:** How did you learn about NYU's jazz program?

**MW:** When I was about to join the navy band, they founded a national youth jazz orchestra in Germany. They auditioned and tried to put together an orchestra of the most talented young jazz musicians up to the age of 22 or 23. I was one of two bass players. That was a huge step for me, being exposed to the level of all those talented players. Till Brönner and Peter Weniger were part of that illustrious club. A lot of those players ended up in the excellent radio big bands like the WDR and NDR. We met twice a year for workshops and concerts and that's how I got introduced to Mike Richmond. Mike came over as the bass teacher there and when I told him about my plans to come to New York, he hooked me up with NYU because he was already teaching there. In 1995, I hadn't heard that NYU had a jazz department, it was under everybody's radar, even though all these great players were teaching there: Joe Lovano, Jim McNeely, Kenny Werner came on later, Dave Liebman used to be there, Todd Coolman did his doctorate there. Since it was not a well-developed program when I got there, I was immediately the best player on my instrument. I ended up in the jazz orchestra right away, working with Jim McNeely and Tom Boras, and made it into the rhythm section that backed up all of the great artists brought in for master classes. I was in New York for maybe two weeks and backing up Joe Lovano, Randy Brecker and Mike Mainieri. I thought, "Wow, that's what I came to New York for." Even though it was a master class setting, it was an important first step.

**TNYCJR:** Did you start getting calls to fill as a bassist around this time?

**MW:** I started subbing in a band led by Bob Parsons, who was a teacher there. Since Tom Boras was on sabbatical when I arrived, it was Bob Parsons who sat down at the piano and auditioned me. After three choruses, he said, "I think we're done here." At that time, he led the after-hours session band at the Blue

Note. Frank Kimbrough was the pianist. So I played in those session bands a lot and met many people that way. Those were all important steps for me to establish myself on the New York scene.

**TNYCJR:** Since you had Jim McNeely, Mike Holober and Kenny Werner as teachers, all gifted composers, how did each of them have an impact on your writing?

**MW:** I had heard Jim McNeely during the seven years I lived in Cologne, six of which I spent in the conservatory. We had the WDR band there and I knew most of the players by the second or third year.

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\*...And while the trio illuminates the covers, Janeway's compositions sound like classics... A compelling and polished product." (Dan McClennaghan, All About Jazz)

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Some of my friends and I would show up at the rehearsals and check out the writers and soloists. So I had experienced his writing but didn't get involved with him until I was a student at NYU. He put up sign-up sheets that said, "I will be in on Tuesday from 3 to 6" and you could put your name in there and do whatever you wanted with him, play duo or talk about arranging or composition. I couldn't believe that other students there didn't take advantage of it more. I put my name in whenever I saw an open space. We ended up playing duo a lot, which was fantastic. At the same time he taught arguably the best college class that I ever took. It was called Jazz Orchestra. He would talk about his compositional techniques, how he comes up with new harmonic and rhythmic material. I still have a whole binder with stuff that would last me with inspiration for the rest of my days. When he wasn't there, he brought in first-class subs like Ed Neumeister or Richard Shemaria. They would play some of their pieces for large ensemble and talk about their approaches. It was a phenomenal class and he's one of the great writers and teachers.

When I studied with Mike Holoher, it was about how to write for sections in a big band. I only studied with him one semester but we focused on a narrow area. It was incredibly helpful.

Kenny Werner was completely different. I studied composition with him privately and the first lesson was by far the most important one. I could have walked away from lessons after that. What he asked the guitarist and me to do for the first few minutes was to "sit down, grab an empty sheet of music paper and a pencil and for the next five to seven minutes, I want you to keep the pencil moving. Don't think about what you're writing, don't try to make sense of it, don't try to react to anything you've written before. You can write notes, rhythm, chords" and that's what we did. He showed us techniques to generate material with what was on the page. It could be a three- or four-note motif. He might say, "I like the intervals, what would happen if we put those in the bass? Here are some chord qualities, how about we assign those chord qualities to those three or four notes?" Then he would play through it and say, "What if I played it backwards? How about taking every other chord down a half-step? That's nicer." With that playful, random way, we would find things that resonated with us. Some things that resonated with him didn't resonate with me and it's still your writing, even though the material was generated in a random fashion. That one exercise completely liberated my writing.

**TNYCJR:** When you lead dates, you seem open to others' originals and arrangements. I recall that you also didn't solo on several songs in your CD *Light Blue*.

**MW:** I feel that the concept of the album is mine. I'm bringing in some of the arrangements or my own tunes, I feel that there is already enough of me represented in that piece, I don't necessarily have to play a solo. I really try to see the whole picture, not just me trying to produce myself. [Drummer] Matt Wilson is such an incredible influence on so many different levels, to see his dedication as a bandleader and his approach to music. He always says in every workshop we do together, "Serve the song. Just take care of the song and you'll be fine." It's such a simple message, but if you just keep that in mind, you will not play a solo on every song. What else does the song need right now? Not what do I need from the song. Those are the questions that lead to good taste and good music.

**TNYCJR:** Which other musicians do you consider influences or helped you focus in the right direction?

**MW:** The most important influences on my instrument

are Ray Brown and Ron Carter. They are two pillars for modern jazz bass playing and I'm very fortunate that I got to meet both of them and I'm still in touch with the "Maestro". I'm standing on their shoulders. Somebody who comes out of Ray Brown is John Clayton, who has been one of my mentors for 30 years. I've never taken an official lesson with him but he's been so influential, so helpful, especially leading by example. He does so many things so well, he is a great arranger, great composer, he's a phenomenal educator. When I looked at him, I wanted to be as perfect and rounded a musician as he is. That was how I got into writing for orchestra, big band and believe that I could do these things.

**TNYCJR:** When you write for small ensembles, are you writing for particular musicians or does the composition come first?

**MW:** It depends. There's a track on the new album (*My Astorian Queen*), "Solitude", which I wrote in the pandemic after the lockdown, April 2020. A friend had sent me some photos from the Flensburg Fjord, the area where I grew up. It comes in from the Baltic Sea, beautiful beaches and landscape. You see Denmark in the background. I was inspired by those images. I was feeling a little blue and couldn't visit my family. My folks are still over there. I wrote this piece while being influenced by all those emotions. One of the trademarks of a really good piece is that you can apply it to many different musical situations. It will work in a duo, arranged for orchestra, with a quartet, a horn player, with a guitarist playing the melody, and that doesn't happen too often. Some pieces you write, record and move on while others will stay with you for a long time and keep coming back. I think that's one of those pieces. I obviously had Scott Robinson on bass saxophone in mind for my arrangement of "Broadway". I don't know how many concerts I've played with my quartet or his group and all other kinds of groupings too. What continues to amaze me is that it doesn't matter which style he plays because he has a huge variety of expressions from really free to traditional and he always sounds like Scott Robinson. It's so easy to say that but difficult to accomplish that.

**TNYCJR:** How did you meet pianist Bill Mays?

**MW:** Bill and I both appeared at the North Sea Jazz Festival, I believe it was 1991. I was playing with a pianist from Belgium, Jack van Poll. We had a guest vocalist, Silvia Droste, who was the grand dame of jazz singing in Germany. Bill was with Ray Drummond and heard me. Right after the festival he was asked to tour with an American trombonist living in Hamburg, Jerry Tilitz. He asked, "In case you've not asked a bassist yet, I just heard this young German guy at the North Sea Jazz Festival and why don't you ask him to play this tour with us?" We ended up driving together and really hooked up. We still refer to it as the "tour from hell". We'd play in Munich one night and Hamburg the next night, which is like Chicago, then New York City. We started playing trio concerts together in Germany with the late drummer Keith Copeland. I recorded my very first album with those two, *Gone With The Wind*. That was his idea, by the way. At the end of the CD there's a very short, uptempo arrangement of "Gone With The Wind", referring to us getting a speeding ticket on the German Autobahn. They actually sent us the photo of us chatting away, sitting in the car, laughing and zooming through the radar gun. We established a friendship through that. He would fax me long pages full of tunes that he wanted me to learn and really kick my behind, get on my case and challenge me. It was wonderful. Nobody had done that before. When I got the scholarship to come to New York, something called the German Academic Exchange Service, that I had to audition for, which required a

degree finished in Germany, I contacted him and we started playing in New York. In 1995, I came over to see if I would even like it here. Bill organized a week at the Knickerbocker Bar & Grill and a trio concert at the C.O.T.A. Festival in Delaware Water Gap. I was staying with him, playing some gigs. I arrived on Sep. 1st. He and his then-wife organized a blind date. We went to the Mezzo Grill on Fifth Avenue and they asked one of his wife's co-workers at New York Hospital if she would join us. So on my second day in New York, I met my future wife. That's the Astorian Queen. I was here for five weeks and she came to Germany right after I flew back. In November, I was a semi-finalist in the Thelonious Monk Bass Competition, so we met again in Washington, DC. In 1996, I moved here.

**TNYCJR:** I know it was great reuniting with Bill, Matt and Scott for this project. When did you record it?

**MW:** We played one warm-up concert on Jul. 4th at the Deer Head Inn in Delaware Water Gap. We had a packed house, a beautiful audience. It was wonderful to reunite with these special musicians. After the concert, we drove to French Town and recorded the album on Jul. 5th at Maggie's Farm.

**TNYCJR:** Tell me a little about the album.

**MW:** When we met, Maria, my wife of 24 years, had this cute little apartment in Astoria, Queens, more or less right under the Amtrak train. When I visited her there the first time and the train came by, the cabinets and everything was shaking. I couldn't believe it but it's amazing what you can get used to. So I wrote this piece for her in the summer of '96 when she turned 30. I recorded it and sent her the recording, because, in the meantime, she had broken up with me. It was for her and the times we spent there in Astoria, where our first son was born. When I think about pieces that have something to do with these 25 years in New York, this one had to be on the album.

There are a couple of other older pieces. "Out in PA" refers to Pennsylvania. Mays owned a place in the Poconos. That's one of the things Maria and I did together, spending time with Bill Mays and his then-wife Thalia. I was mesmerized by the vibe and atmosphere there. It's pristine and something I'd never experienced before. I think of it as one of the central pieces. I used a shout chorus that I'd written for a small big band at the Jazz Baltica festival. We recorded Bill's "Peace Waltz". I was listening to it before I ever met him, I wanted to include it and do it as a duo because of how much he means to me. When we played it on Jul. 4th, it was something else to play this piece after all these years. The opener is a Thad Jones piece ["Mean What You Say"] and it refers to my subbing in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, an experience you can only have in New York City. Every title has a connection to my time here and the people whom I've shared sounds with. ♡

For more information, visit [martinwind.com](http://martinwind.com). *Wind's My Astorian Queen* project is at *Cellar Dog Nov. 18th and Mezzrow Nov. 19th*. *Wind* is also at *Birdland Theater Nov. 12th* as part of a Frank Kimbrough tribute and *Birdland Nov. 23rd-27th* with Ken Peplowski. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Martin Wind/Bill Mays/Keith Copeland- *Gone With The Wind* (September, 1993)
- Martin Wind-*Remember October 13th* (Edition Longplay, 2000/2010)
- Jeff Cosgrove/Frank Kimbrough/Martin Wind- *Conversations with Owls* (Grizzley Music, 2012)
- Martin Wind-*Light Blue* (Laika, 2017)
- Martin Wind/Phillip Catherine/Ack Van Rooyen- *White Noise* (Laika, 2019)
- Martin Wind-*My Astorian Queen* (Laika, 2021)