

PYROCLASTIC

BY JOHN SHARPE

Not content with forging new models on the bandstand, pianist Kris Davis seeks to achieve similar ends with her Pyroclastic Records imprint, which she has set up as a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting innovative artists who create art for non-commercial purposes. The label likely came to the attention of many jazz fans thanks to the sustained critical praise for *Diatom Ribbons*, Davis' shapeshifting extravaganza built upon the foundation of her trio with drummer Terri Lyne Carrington and electronicist Val Jeanty. It was selected as *The New York Times* Best Jazz Album of 2019 and also took top spot in the prestigious NPR Critics Poll. Quite a coup for a small independent. More on that later.

Although she has released music on a variety of outlets, including Clean Feed, Fresh Sound and Intakt, Davis explains the impetus to start Pyroclastic: "As I was growing and creating more work I just wanted to localize where that work was. A lot of the small labels take some kind of publishing and I just felt like I want to own my own music." The name stems from an analogy with Davis' sometimes fiery pianistics. "Pyroclastic is explosive material that comes out of a volcano. And I was feeling that sometimes my playing is a little bit like that."

She launched the label in 2016 with her ambitious *Duopoly* project, a two CD/one DVD set matching Davis with eight different collaborators (guitarists Bill

Frisell and Julian Lage, pianists Craig Taborn and Angelica Sanchez, drummers Billy Drummond and Marcus Gilmore and reedplayers Tim Berne and Don Byron). Every aspect of the date was carefully thought through, from the palindromic sequencing of compositions and improvisations and video by filmmaker Mimi Chakarova to the stylish packaging. She developed the concept in collaboration with a longtime ally, producer David Breskin, whose involvement has been crucial. Davis elaborates: "He also runs The Shifting Foundation, which has supported probably my last four or five CDs. That's how I've been able to create these large-scale projects and have such nice video, nice packaging for *Duopoly* and also *Diatom Ribbons*. And also help to start the label. He's been part of that as well."

As a result of such support Davis has been able to enlist further assistance. "I have a team working with me. I've hired a couple of people to help, a young saxophonist David Leon and also Rob Martino who's a drummer. Then I have a web person up in Toronto and Stephanie Jones is writing all the liner notes and Ann Braithwaite is doing all the press. So I just oversee now. Part of that is we have an Artistic Board with Terri Lyne Carrington, Rio Sakairi from The Jazz Gallery and also David Breskin. So between the four of us we decide who we will put out on the label each year. We're trying to aim for five to six recordings now per year, that's the goal for 2020 and 2021."

When initiating Pyroclastic, Davis benefitted from John Zorn's experience with Tzadik and was able to discern a potentially workable model based on setting up the label as a non-profit. As well as the Artistic Board there is also a Board of Directors, which brings

together individuals with an interest in the music. "Through their donations we are able to support artists with the infrastructure of hiring a publicist, printing CDs and getting them a bit of money to record and do the artwork and everything. So trying to do it right as much as we can." She laughs: "This really is a non-profit business, literally."

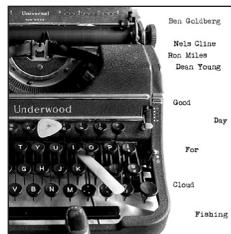
Pyroclastic licenses a release for seven years from the artist; after that it will be their choice to continue with the label or do with the album as they wish. In the meantime the label will seek to recoup all the production costs and thereafter split any revenues 50/50 with the artist. Artists are given CDs to sell at live shows and they keep all profit from those sales.

So far three of Davis' own sessions have been balanced by three by others: pianist Cory Smythe's *Circulate Susanna*, bassist Chris Lightcap's *Super Bigmouth* and clarinetist Ben Goldberg's *Good Day For Cloud Fishing*, all of them extraordinary. So does she commission, or take on readymade projects? "It's a mixture. So far, Chris Lightcap's and Ben Goldberg's were both recorded beforehand. I approached Eric Revis about putting something out on the label, because he's been very supportive of me as a sideperson in his group and I wanted to give him an opportunity to record something."

Back to *Diatom Ribbons*. Has the critical acclaim translated into sales? "Actually it has surprisingly. I've almost run out of physical copies, which surprised me. I printed like 1,500; probably 200-300 were used for publicity, sending to writers and radio stations. I sold out of the whole stock almost and I'm going to have to reprint, so that's a good problem to have."



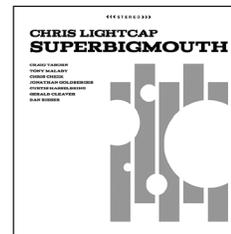
Octopus
Kris Davis/Craig Taborn



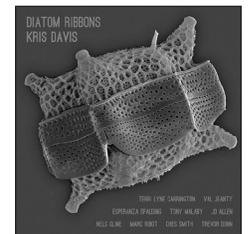
Good Day For Cloud Fishing
Ben Goldberg



Duopoly
Kris Davis



Superbigmouth
Chris Lightcap



Diatom Ribbons
Kris Davis

Alongside the desire to bolster innovative artists, Davis, now an Associate Program Director of Creative Development for the Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice at Berklee College of Music, intends the label to promote gender equality. "I'm trying to encourage artists who are thinking about gender equality. So male artists who are hiring women and mentoring them or choosing to work with women, also to find some kind of gender balance in their groups, is really important to me. So it is a part of the decision-making process going forward. And also hiring women as leaders too. So I'm trying to find a balance over the year of these elements."

There are exciting times ahead. "Eric Revis' record is coming out in May. Cory Smythe has another record coming in June. Angelica Sanchez and Marilyn Crispell have a two-piano record that is coming out in September. And Craig Taborn is putting out a Junk Magic record in the Fall." ❖

For more information, visit pyroclasticrecords.com. Artists performing this month include Chris Lightcap at Brooklyn Conservatory of Music Mar. 7th with Rob Garcia and Ben Goldberg at Downtown Music Gallery Mar. 22nd. See Calendar.