

SAXOPHONE ODYSSEY

DePaul alumnus Jon Irabagon charts
his own course in the jazz world

By Craig Keller and Tatiana Walk-Morris

Photos on this page and
following: Saxophonist
and composer Jon
Irabagon shines in
“LEGACY: Jon Irabagon,
A Solo Tenor Odyssey,”
a short film capturing
his solo virtuosity.

In March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic prompted former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo to issue an executive order pausing nonessential business operations in the state, New York City resident **Jon Irabagon (MUS '00)** packed up his tenor saxophone and decamped for the wilds of South Dakota with his family for eight months. Six hours a day, six days a week, Irabagon, a prolific and protean jazz musician and composer, roamed Falling Rock, a limestone-walled canyon outside Rapid City, dueting with nature in an improvisational stream of sonic exploration.

2020 happened to mark the centennial birthday of sax icon Charlie “Bird” Parker. Hence, “Bird with Streams,” the solo album Irabagon self-recorded on an iPad during his rambles and released in 2021, features Parker tunes interpreted in a dizzying range of jazz styles—from hard bop to experimental, extended technique—that has characterized Irabagon’s uncategoryable career.

“It was a complete life-changer to experiment like that and question, ‘In an ideal world of music, how do I want to play and sound?’” says Irabagon.

Scaling Up

Overcoming challenges through perseverance and creative exploration has guided Irabagon since his first encounter with jazz in the Chicago suburb of Gurnee, Ill., where he grew up, and his music education at DePaul.

Initially unsure if he could make a living as a full-time musician, notably as a Filipino American in a field with scant Asian American representation, Irabagon has since thrived as a band leader, in-demand sideman and solo artist. He’s released 13 albums as the leader of trios, quartets and quintets (including his core group, Outright!) as well as three solo albums showcasing his versatility on tenor, mezzo soprano and soprano saxophones. He produced nine of those albums on his own label, Irabagast Records, which he launched in 2012.

Irabagon has been a co-leader and sideman on many more studio recordings, and in live performance, with such prominent contemporary talents as Dave Douglas, Mary Halvorson and Barry Altschul. He’s also a founding member of Mostly Other People Do the Killing, a quartet that blends rock, pop and modern classical elements in its anarchic alchemy and first courted curiosity with an audacious, note-for-note recreation of Miles Davis’ seminal “Kind of Blue.”

In addition to his own work, Irabagon has released music on his label by fellow envelope-pushing peers, including Brandon Lee, Josh Sinton, the Uptown Jazz Tentet and Anders Svanoe. Like him, they’ve experienced difficulty finding homes for their challenging music on larger, commercial labels.

“I felt their music needed to be heard, so I decided to help out by releasing their albums, too,” says Irabagon. “They’re all incredible artists and visionaries with their own direction in music, and I’m happy to be associated with them.”

Poise Through Preparation

Irabagon started Irabagast Records to ensure creative control of his music and reduce the delay between recording and public release that frustrates many artists in the jazz world.

“On my own albums, I want control of the order of the tracks and what they sound like. I want control of the artwork,” says Irabagon. “I don’t really care about fame or fortune. Maintaining control is the most important thing.”

Irabagon’s path to self-reliance began at Warren Township High School in Gurnee. He’d played saxophone since fifth grade (fortuitously assigned the instrument when all the trumpets were taken by classmates) and learned piano from his musically inclined aunt. But he didn’t know much about the history of jazz, which was soon to inspire him.

Tom Beckwith, the school’s band director for three decades before his death in 2019, taught Irabagon about bebop legends like saxophonist Cannonball Adderley, lent his student jazz records, and encouraged him to become acquainted with modern jazz patriarchs such as Roscoe Mitchell and Anthony Braxton, who pioneered avant-garde jazz on Chicago’s

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South Side as members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Irabagon also attended live shows by the late Von Freeman, a hard-bop, tenor-sax icon who attracted young musicians to his weekly New Apartment Lounge shows, which ended with jam sessions admirers could join.

Irabagon became further enamored of the scene while attending DePaul, where he was awarded a partial scholarship and earned a Bachelor of Music in Performing Arts Management—a course of study Irabagon, at the time, considered a safer bet to support and sustain a career in the music industry.

He played in the university's big band while taking side gigs at local clubs and

offering private classes in saxophone and improvisation. Being so actively engaged convinced Irabagon he could pursue a career as a full-time performer. After graduation, he moved to New York City and earned a master's degree in the jazz arts program at the Manhattan School of Music and an artist diploma at The Juilliard School.

"I'm thankful for all the people I met, and still get to play with these days, through DePaul," says Irabagon. "I'm also thankful for the diversity of experience that I had while I was there. I could play in the large ensemble and travel with the band, learn music history more extensively, and take classes in both Lincoln Park and downtown Chicago. It was exactly what I needed at the time."

Distinguished Company

Relocating to New York and immersing himself in the city's vibrant jazz scene paid off for Irabagon in 2008, when he won the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz International Competition. The prestigious competition, established in 1987 by the nonprofit jazz education organization (renamed the Herbie Hancock Institute of Jazz in 2019 for the acclaimed jazz pianist who has long served as its board chairman), spotlights early-career artists and focuses on a different instrument each year. Past winners include such jazz luminaries as saxophonist Joshua Redman and vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, placing Irabagon in esteemed company.

Winners are awarded a recording contract with Concord Music Group, an international music recording and publishing company comprising six active labels, including Concord Jazz and Fantasy Records, and several historical labels, including Riverside, Prestige and Stax. For his Concord release, "The Observer," Irabagon was teamed with pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Rufus Reid and drummer Victor Lewis, elder statesmen who'd toured as the rhythm section with tenor saxophonist paragon Stan Getz.

Irabagon wrote seven of the 10 tracks on the album, recorded by the late Rudy Van Gelder, a legendary sound engineer whose vast résumé includes such landmarks as John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." Irabagon used the opportunity to dial back his avant-garde tendencies and elevate more straight-ahead fare with frenetic, post-bop cadences and subtle, lyrical phrasing.

"The most memorable part of taking part in the competition was the time I spent with people like Wayne Shorter, Herbie

Hancock, Greg Osby and Jimmy Heath," says Irabagon. "Getting to ask them questions about composing, improvising and the daily life of jazz musicians back in the day really changed my perspective and was definitely a growth opportunity for me. Recording at Rudy Van Gelder's studio was also an unforgettable experience that I will carry with me my whole life."

Cinematic Summary

Listeners who aren't sure where to pin Irabagon on the jazz-genre map have a helpful entry point with "LEGACY: Jon Irabagon, A Solo Tenor Odyssey." The 43-minute film, which captures Irabagon in solo performance at the Columbus Dance Theatre in Columbus, Ohio, was produced by A Tribe for Jazz, an organization that chose Irabagon as its first profile in a planned series of short films. Irabagon performs original selections from throughout his career while immersed in misty lights that

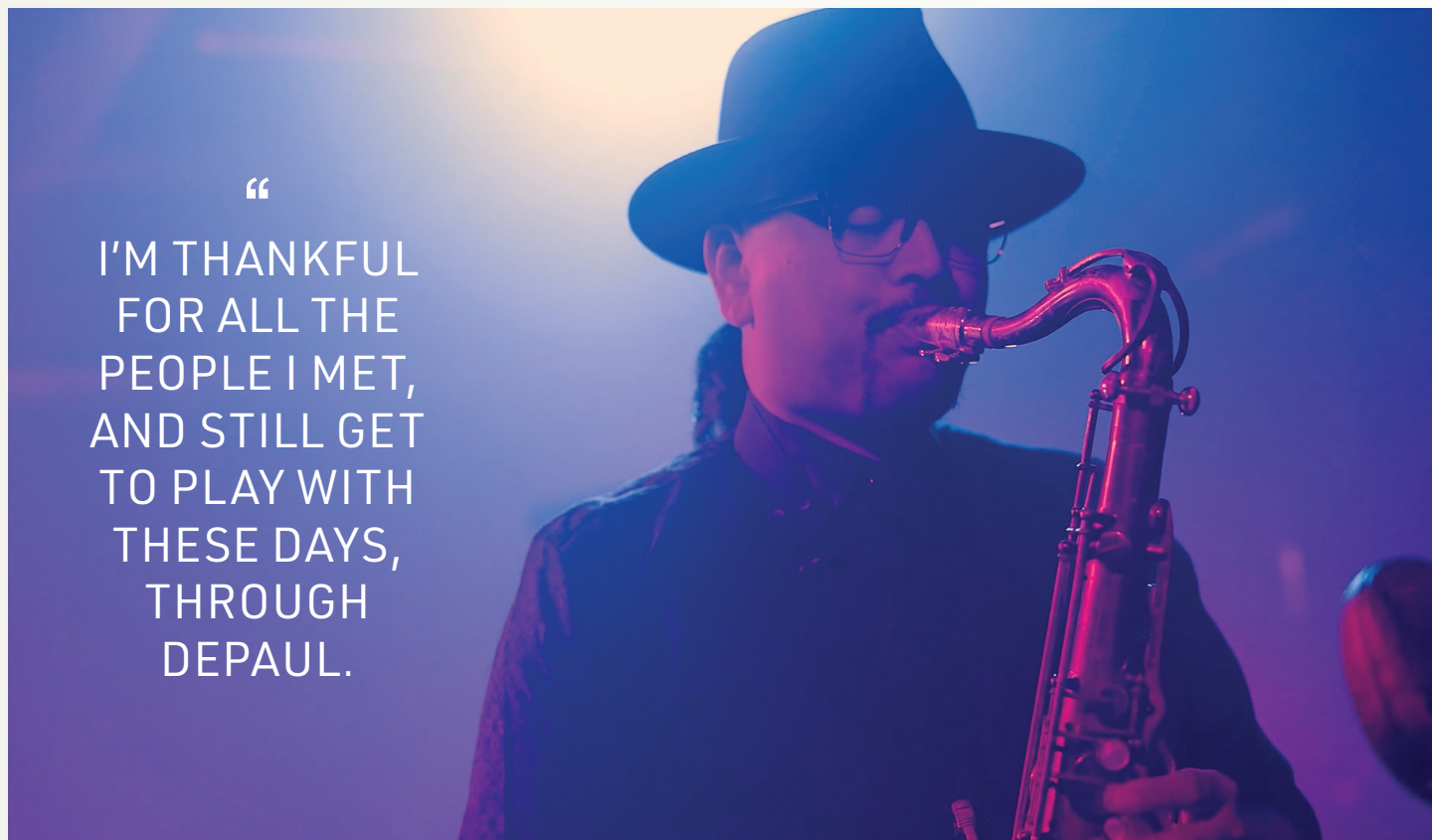
change color to complement the emotionality of each piece.

"This film was a collaboration with A Tribe for Jazz, a nonprofit organization championing several up-and-coming jazz musicians," explains Irabagon. "Their expertise in so many different facets of the music business has shown me what it takes to succeed in this industry, and the chance to record several of my pieces with their attention to artistic detail has further deepened where my music comes from and what it means to me."

This latest chapter in Irabagon's career crystallizes another truth: that while his music is sometimes just one horn, it always draws on collaborators—whether canyons, quintets or filmmakers—to bloom.



Watch clips from "LEGACY: Jon Irabagon, A Solo Tenor Odyssey" at depaulmagazine.com.



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