



Gallant Music

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MICHAEL GALLANT

Biography

Described by one critic as “an artist unafraid and bending the tradition,” keyboardist/composer **Michael Gallant** has never been one to play as written—and with his new augmented trio release *Live Plus One*, Gallant reintroduces his disruptive musical tendencies within the context of a lush and powerful live album.

Live Plus One is the **Michael Gallant Trio**’s follow-up to the widely acclaimed 2013 debut *Completely* (Gallant Music). Combining a rich orchestral sensibility with assertive grooves, flowing energy with studio-quality performances and production, *Live Plus One* centers around Gallant’s stylistically omnivorous, post-fusion, and often simultaneous improvisations on both acoustic piano and overdriven electric keyboard. The CD also showcases his chops as a composer, arranger, and producer of uncharacteristic breadth and guts.

Recorded live and almost exclusively at Levine Music in Washington, DC, where Gallant studied piano as a teenager, *Live Plus One* first came together when the school invited him to perform as part of an alumni concert series in 2014. With his trusty Nord Electro 3HP keyboard tucked underneath the keyboard of a Steinway Model D, Gallant delivered a sumptuously inventive set with his working trio: electric bassist **Dmitry Ishenko** and drummer **Rob Mitzner**, a longtime friend and once-again bandmate from Gallant’s days growing up in the DC area. The ensemble performed a kinetic program of Gallant originals, joined on five tracks by veteran DC acoustic bassist **Pepe Gonzalez** (the “plus one”), whom Gallant has considered a mentor since his teenage years.

In many ways, the concert is a posthumous tribute to Gallant’s most consequent piano teacher, **Maria Rodriguez**, a fiery presence who taught at Levine and sparked his abiding love of jazz, blues, and other forms of improvised music. “She was a fierce older woman who played beautifully,” he recalls, “and she was more Monk than Oscar Peterson. She often played sparsely, but with great attitude and power. She could say more with two or three notes than many can with two choruses.

“She’d sometimes jam my hand into the keys and say, ‘Put some salsa into those fingers!’” he continues, laughing. “‘Don’t play like you’re apologizing for it!’ That’s a lesson I took to heart.”

Maria would be proud, as there are no apologies to be heard on *Live Plus One*, a project that asserts itself right from the start with a powerful and present sound mix by Grammy Award-winner Mario J McNulty (David Bowie, Angélique Kidjo) and mastering by Dave McNair (Bob Dylan, Maroon 5). Co-produced by Gallant and his wife and frequent musical collaborator **Rachel Rossos**, the album opens with

“**Returned**,” a quietly captivating piece that combines the lush chords of a rock anthem with the soaring harmonies of a Romantic concerto. It’s grand but not grandiose, full of sweeping, orchestrated movement and intertwining Nord-plus-Steinway dance moves.

“Along with classical composers from Debussy and Tchaikovsky to Bartók and Beethoven, rock bands were a big part of my upbringing,” Gallant says. “When I work with this trio, I want to combine the sophistication and rigor of the pianists I love—people like McCoy, Herbie, Duke, and Bill Evans—with the raw energy of the grunge rock acts that I grew up with. Melding those influences is a big reason why I play the Nord and piano at the same time. I love how those sounds can melt and fuse with each other, like two sides of the same voice.”

After the aerial excursion of “Returned,” Gallant gets earthy with “**Greens**,” an altered blues that develops fierce momentum. A brief impromptu piano interlude sets up the galloping “**Follow Me**,” a piece turbo-charged by the addition of Gonzalez to the churning rhythm section. The arrangement evolved out of extemporaneous interplay by the trio while exploring “Afro Blue.” It’s a technique that Gallant has employed several times, unleashing the quicksilver imagination of Ishenko and Mitzner.

“They’re great players and I like throwing unexpected things their way sometimes,” Gallant says. “This piece grew out of me telling them, on the gig, ‘F minor, follow me,’ and then launching right in. The form and melody evolved over months of developing the tune in front of live audiences.”

Much more choreographed is the album’s centerpiece “**Completely**,” also the title track of Gallant’s critically hailed 2013 debut album. While mostly a traditional AABA form, the piece is fueled by a powerful rock riff that embodies the “edge, rawness, and rage” of Gallant’s grunge roots “with more delicate, soaring harmonies and melodies,” he says. “The two temper and balance each other, in some ways letting me go even more extreme in both directions.”

The undulating and passionate “**Sandra and Michel**” was inspired by the legendary Dominican pianist Michel Camilo and his wife, while “**The Real Maria**” is a piece of buoyantly grooving piano funk that pays tribute to Rodriguez; by the time Gallant starts adding distorted chords on the Nord with his left hand, he’s left no doubt that she was one hip and formidable woman. The CD closes with the only piece not from the Levine concert, “**Love You Better**,” a solo stride-piano and dissonance-infused excursion recorded live at Musidium in Toronto that serves as the album’s kiss goodnight.

If Gallant’s music seems to encompass a wide array of moods and influences, it reflects his polymathic tendencies. A noted music journalist, he spent almost a decade as a writer, and eventually Senior Editor at *Keyboard* magazine, interviewing artists such as Camilo, Dave Brubeck, Billy Joel, Justin Timberlake, Hiromi, Ben Folds, Tori Amos, Chick Corea, will.i.am, Herbie Hancock, and many more. Often, Gallant’s interviews would evolve into four-hand jams at the piano.

Gallant was born in Silver Spring, Maryland on October 16, 1980; grew up in the city of Rockville; and attended Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC. The son of a musical family, he began piano lessons at age five, but it wasn’t until he began studying with Rodriguez that jazz became a true focus. “I had always appreciated jazz and knew who Duke Ellington was, but she was the one who got me into improvised music and taught me the blues,” Gallant says. “‘Stolen Moments’ by Oliver Nelson was the first tune I learned to play, and it’s still one I love to pull out at jam sessions here in New York. But at the same time as I was learning to improvise, bands like Pearl Jam were a huge influence. I loved Phish, too, not for their lyrics or songwriting, but for their virtuosity, their arrangements and breadth of style, how amazingly they could listen and improvise together as a group. That level of internal fluency and comfort is something I really strive for in every group I play in.”

By high school, Gallant was performing widely, playing traditional New Orleans and Chicago style jazz, swing, and funk in prestigious settings from the Kennedy Center to Preservation Hall in New Orleans. He attended Columbia University, where a spontaneously chosen class on Japanese doomsday cults inspired him to earn an undergraduate degree in anthropology. “Being interested in pretty much everything, music and beyond, is a big part of my personality,” Gallant says, “and I’m thankful that Columbia gave me the best of both worlds. I got to study all kinds of things, take courses in electronic music and classical composition, and just by virtue of breathing the air in New York and soaking up the culture of the city, I learned a huge amount about music.”

That breadth of knowledge would prove to be of great use in Gallant’s work at *Keyboard*, which began shortly after he earned his degree in 2003 continues to date. He resigned his full-time editorship in 2009 to run **Gallant Music LLC**, a company through which he has composed theme music for the world’s first iPad interactive graphic novel, created an orchestral suite for the Anti-Defamation League’s Centennial Anniversary video with voice-over by James Earl Jones, scored the award-winning indie feature drama *Remedy*, and released albums by both the **Michael Gallant Trio** and **Aurical**, Gallant’s singer/songwriter project with Rossos; the latter group made its Lincoln Center debut in 2013.

He first gained national notice as a jazz artist with the release of 2013’s *Completely* (Gallant Music), a stellar trio session featuring drummer **Chris Infusino** and rising star bassist **Linda Oh**. The album received four stars from *DownBeat* and inclusion on their Best Albums of 2013 list, as well as additional widespread critical praise. The trio with drummer Mitzner and Ishenko took shape during the pianist’s monthly residency at Tomi Jazz in Midtown Manhattan, a standing gig that has evolved into a proving ground and muse for Gallant’s prolific output as a composer.

Still an avid journalist, Gallant’s writing clients include the National Endowment for the Arts, the U.S. Department of State, and *DownBeat* (cover story interviews on Diana Krall and Esperanza Spalding). As a studio musician, Gallant contributed to the album *Winds of Samsara* by Ricky Kej and Wouter Kellerman, a project that won the 2015 Grammy Award for Best New Age Album.

“Jazz is the best label for what we do, but it’s only part of the picture,” Gallant says of his trio. “By the time we recorded this album live at Levine, I felt like there was so much more maturity and nuance to the music than when *Completely* first came out. And there was such a great vibe in that room, playing for my friends and family in my hometown. It was wonderful to be able to capture that in a project that I’m really proud of.” •

Michael Gallant Trio: *Live Plus One*

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Web Site: www.gallantmusic.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/gallantmusic

Twitter: www.twitter.com/Michael_Gallant

Media Contact:

Terri Hinte

510-234-8781

hudba@sbcglobal.net