

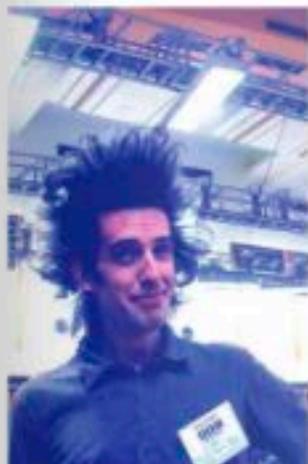
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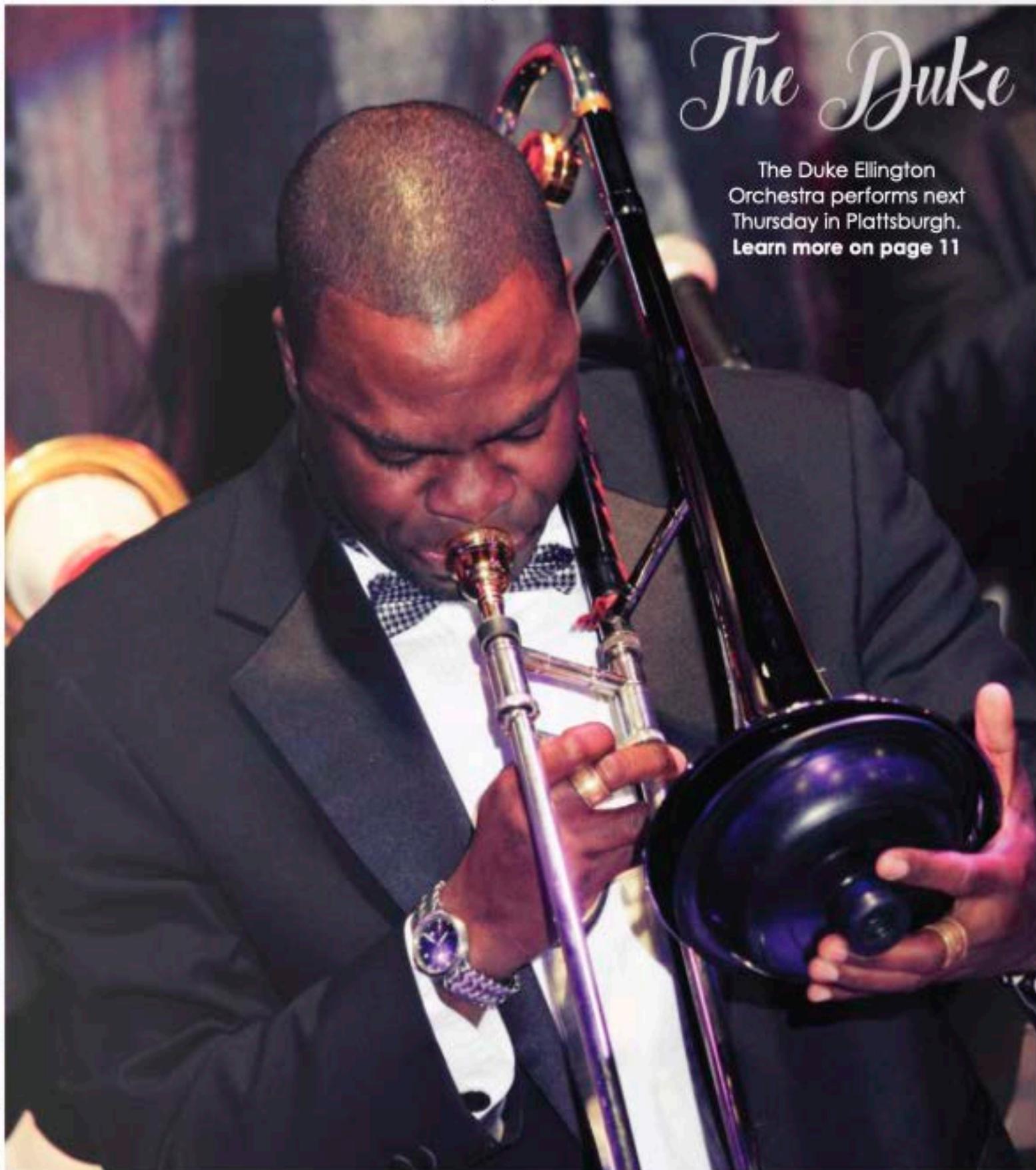
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Gene Baker. Photo courtesy of the artist

Sounds Like Fun

By Benjamin Pomerance

THE REVOLUTION CAME without a whisper. It happened in a place called Artspace Hartford, a gathering ground at the Hartt School of Music for people hell-bent on being heard, leaving their sonic imprint upon an unsuspecting world. In walked the guy from California, picking up the electric guitar and switching on the amp. In walked the Hartt student — “looking a little scruffy,” the guy from California recalls — to the Hammond organ, turning on the power. One of them — they can’t remember who — started to play. Immediately, the other one joined in.

“And what commenced,” remembers Gene Baker, the Hartt student, “was some of the most insane, intense, competitive, joyous, experimental speed jazz anyone’s ever heard. A magnificent duel which continues to this day, 20 years later.”

“I never had met anyone like this before,” recalls Will Northlich-Redmond, the guy from California. “We didn’t shake hands. We didn’t talk. We met and connected on purely musical terms. And that is how it has always been. In our work together, the music has always come before everything else.”

What they didn’t know on that day was how similar they were, how each man was trading far-out licks with a kindred spirit. Two artists with a sixth sense of sound, an uncanny thirst for risk and an almost spiritual sense of music as a kind of higher calling — something that could unshackle everyday banalities and move people to emotions beyond their command.

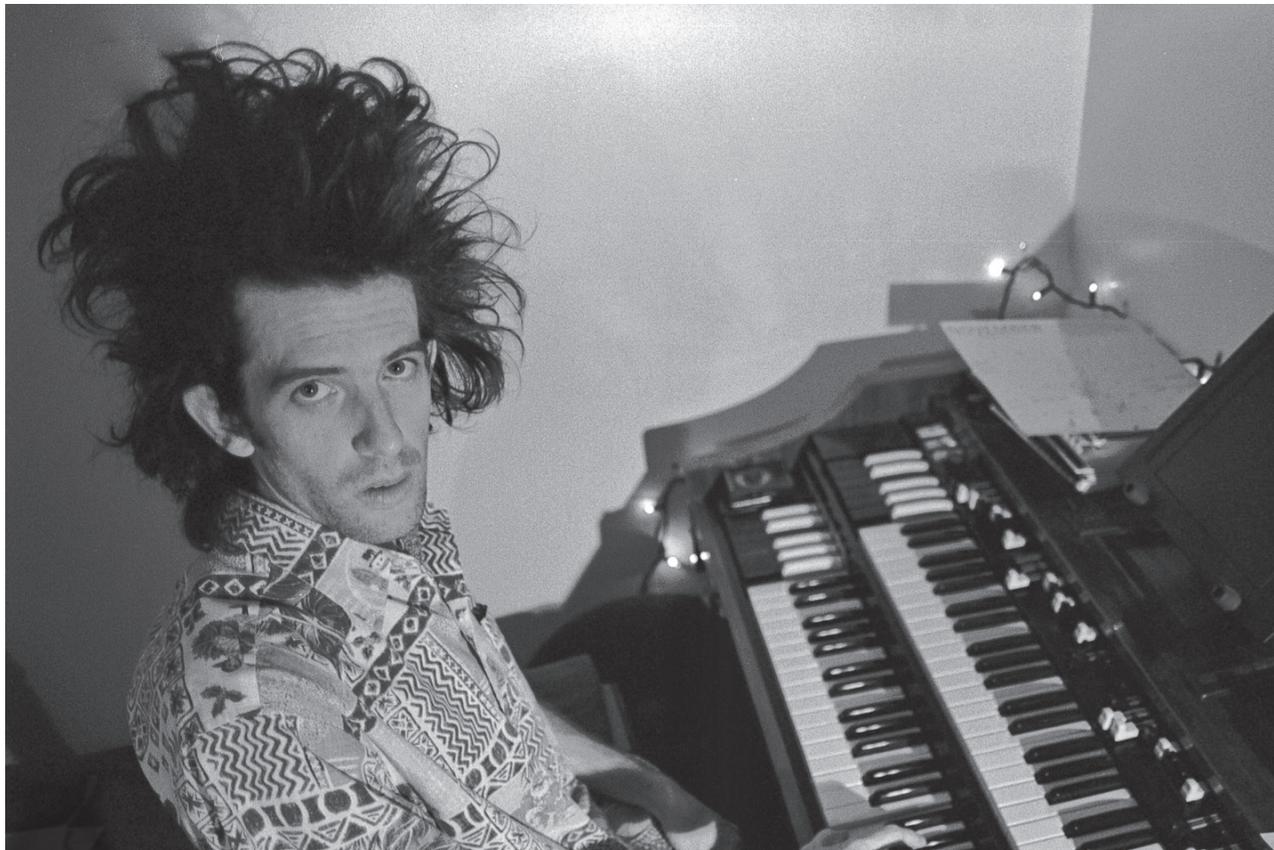
Like a flood of tears. Baker was 3 years old when the magic first happened, the strains of flugelhorn genius Chuck Mangione over the car radio abruptly leaving him weeping.

He could not describe what he was hearing. He only knew that it was the most beautiful noise that he had ever heard. “I asked my mother, ‘Mom, what was that?’” Baker says. “She smiled and said, ‘That’s a trumpet, Gene.’ From that moment on, I was determined to play the trumpet.”

Or a terror that inspires weeks of nightmares. Northlich-Redmond was home alone at the age of 7 when he decided to watch *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Suddenly, the otherworldly music of György Ligeti’s *Requiem* was pounding out of the television set, invading him with feelings deeper than anything that he had grasped before. “I didn’t know how or why this music had been created,” he states. “But after that overwhelming audio-visual experience, it was no longer possible for me to go back to a world of conventionality and congeniality.”

Bad dreams plagued him unyieldingly after that. That music — “a morphing cloud of sound,” he calls it — wouldn’t leave him alone. The piano lessons that his family coerced him into taking didn’t prove to be much of an antidote. *Chopsticks* sounded nothing like Ligeti. He yearned for something more, something that would wipe the emotional floor with him in the way that *2001: A Space Odyssey* had done.

Then he found it. A friend handed him a tape of Aerosmith’s *Love in an Elevator*, and the sensors of the soul all started rioting again. Soon, he was filling his Walkman with the acid rain of Rush and Metallica. “The distorted guitars,” he recalls, speaking with the fervor of a gourmet remembering his finest meal. “The relentless percussion. The aggressive vocals. All of it got to me. So, I decided that I had to learn the guitar.”



Gene Baker. Photo credit: Reuben Radding

By this point, Baker had also opened his sonorous floodgates. Music ran in his blood; his parents met when Baker's father-to-be hired Baker's mother-to-be as the new lead singer in PRIDE, the band that Baker's father-to-be led in the 1970s. And when the son observed his father improvise blues or jazz at the keys of the Hammond

organ, he watched with the awe of a spectator gaping at Houdini. "When I got a little older, it became clear to me that he didn't need any music; he just sat down and played," Baker says. "So, I wanted to be like dad."

It wasn't long before this fascination had rolled over into a new arena: composition. In high school, he solidified his

mind around a central principle — dissonant or avant-garde sounds were his enemy. Traditional harmonies of bygone centuries were his only guiding stars.

But then he arrived in college, a greener-than-grass freshman at the Hartt School. In a composition class, a graduate student named Istvan B'Racz, who was serving as a teaching assistant, took him under his wing. "[He] learned of my rash opinions during a lesson," Baker recalls, "and said, 'Okay, Gene, we are going to sit here, and I am going to play this minor second for you over and over again. Don't judge it. Just listen to it.'"

So, the pupil sat and listened. For 30 seconds, the jarring interval of two adjacent notes hammered his ears. "At first, I cringed," he remembers. "But after a bit, my opinions dissolved. I began to truly listen — to understand dissonance as rhythm, as pure sound, existing only for its own sake. Man, I can't thank that guy enough."

Later that year, the aged bedrock crumbled further. His composition professor, David Macbride, doled out the darling of semester-long assignments: studying Igor Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*. "At every composition class for four months, we listened and discussed, poured over the score, and at home I listened, tried to analyze, tried to understand," he states. "As a result of that, I was a transformed musician."

Meanwhile, Northlich-Redmond had found his own transformation. Like his previous attempt at piano lessons, formal instruction on the guitar required patience — a virtue that he did not abundantly possess. Finally, he quite literally took matters into his own hands. "I started doing noise experiments with my amp, much to the dismay of my father," he says, laughing now. "In doing that, I was able to create my own visceral sound world for the first time."

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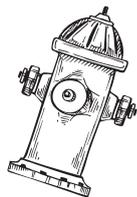
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Will Northlich-Redmond. Photo courtesy of the artist

Still, even with his self-induced fascinations, music played second fiddle to soccer. It was the sport that brought him to Redlands College, earning a spot right away on the school's varsity team. Yet the experience proved disappointing. "The coach had no idea what he was doing," he remembers. "In my sophomore year, I told him that I wasn't going to return to the team for the next season. So, I started going through the mind Rolodex of what to do with myself. And in my junior year, I finally decided to start in on the music thing."

It was a peculiar place for someone weaned on a diet of Ligeti, Metallica, Rush and amplified noise experiments to begin. "Redlands was a very classically oriented and romantically oriented music school," Northlich-Redmond says. "The most contemporary thing that you got there was the jazz band."

But looking in hindsight's mirror, he sees that the courses in theory and history that he dreaded taking were exactly what he needed. For the first time, he saw himself as something other than a musician on Olympus, blazing trails that mortals could not comprehend. "I needed to take a step back," he explains. "I needed to see how this stuff works from historical principles. I needed to realize that when I made music, I was building on history, building on tradition."

Then came his encounter with Baker at the Hartt School in 1999, galvanizing a moment when both artists were dissolving assumptions and opening themselves to new possibilities. And when they finally stopped improvising long enough to say hello, they discovered that they could connect with words almost as freely as they could with notes and rhythms.

"As it turns out, Will and I ended up having a lot of mutual interests musically," Baker says. "And beyond that, we both had the interest and ability to use music as a place to explore the 'other' — this vast and infinite world where anything is possible and anything that has ever been experienced is fair game."

Of course, they wound up in a band because two people who meet with such serendipity have to end up in a band. But when the typical ending occurred, and the band broke apart, the ties between the duo remained steadfast. "Gene and I realized that we have a strong

affinity for music with a very strong emotional impact," Northlich-Redmond states. "At the end of the day, we believe in the integrity of this stuff. We believe that we have an obligation to do what we do with a purpose, to do it with conviction, to do it right — whatever that means."

In many respects, the two men have successfully gone their separate ways. Baker has collaborated with free jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor and sound artist Alvin Curran and genre-defying composer Ingram Marshall; Northlich-Redmond has joined forces with free jazz innovator Blaise Siwula, jazz-hip-hop fusion guru Graham Haynes and far-ranging pianist Roger Admiral. Baker founded UTILITY-POLE 689, an experimental record label and publishing company; Northlich-Redmond carved out a niche as "BlipVert," creator of mind-bending electronic music.

Northlich-Redmond plays guitar in Blarvuster, a bagpipe-led rock and free improvisation quartet. Baker recently formed a 17-piece big band, casting himself as lead vocalist and organist, to record an album that he titled *i am a gorgeous wife*. Northlich-Redmond lives in Edmonton, Canada, where he is finishing his doctorate at the University of Alberta. Baker lives in Saranac Lake, where he works with his wife, cellist Esther Rogers, to curate The Bakery, a concert series of contemporary music.

But across time and distance, certain connections remained common. Education is one such stream. Both men have taught music in schools and have unvarnished opinions about what they saw. "A nationwide obsession with standardized testing and the elimination of successful music programs, compounded with the commodification of music in our culture, has led to a general misunderstanding of what art is and how it can help us be better, more complete people," Baker states. In a separate conversation, Northlich-Redmond speaks virtually identical words.

And when they come together again, no matter how many weeks or months have elapsed since last contact, the jigsaw puzzle still fits. Before an audience, without a scrap of music in sight, without a set list in their minds, they go to work. "This is a vehicle for exploration," Northlich-Redmond says. "Whatever happens is what needs to happen. We push each other to the limit. It's a brain exercise. Can we really create an hour-long composition from scratch?"

At first blush, such a concept sounds terrifying. Northlich-Redmond even admits that after all this time, fear still manages to creep in. "I'd be lying if I told you that I never worried about how things came across to an audience," he declares. "But I keep reminding myself why I am doing this. This is what I know. This is who I am. Why would I ever want to go out there and try to be somebody else?"

Which is why, at the end of the day, the duo uses an unexpected word to describe this leap-before-you-look routine. It is a word encapsulating a 3 year old hearing Mangione or a 7 year old hearing Ligeti's *Requiem*; a word covering a youngster marveling at his father's organ improvisations and a teenager blaring Metallica on his Walkman; a word encircling music from Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, BlipVert and The Bakery; a word describing two strangers communicating with such imperfect perfection without saying anything.

"It's never been hard to play with Will," Baker says. "It's always been easy — well, extremely intense at times, but not difficult. Like a dream where you're flying, and you've always known how to fly. You look up to the sky and just do it. In those moments, you know, it's pure fun."

Gene Baker and Will Northlich-Redmond will present concerts of free improvisation titled "FUN!" for the Piano By Nature concert series on June 1 at 7 p.m. and June 2 at 3 p.m. in the historic Hand House located at 8273 River St. in Elizabethtown, N.Y. For tickets and more information, call 518-962-8899, email pianobynature@gmail.com or visit pianobynature.org.

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