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Chicago Drummer, Composer and Curator
LILY FINNEGAN
Introduces HEAT ON, Her Powerhouse
Multigenerational Quartet, with the Blisteringly Hot
Self-titled Debut Album, *HEAT ON*

In a jazz era that bristles with young talent, releasing an album that's sure to be shortlisted for best debut recording of the year is impressive. But Chicago drummer and composer **Lily Finnegan**'s consistently enthralling project *Heat On* achieves something considerably more significant. Embraced by the Windy City scene in recent years, she's returned and amplified the affection with her first album. Slated for release by Cuneiform in June, 2025, it introduces her powerhouse, multi-generational inside-out **Heat On** quartet featuring legendary Chicago tenor saxophonist **Ed Wilkerson Jr.**, Chi-town alto sax great **Fred Jackson Jr.**, and consummately versatile **Nick Macri** on upright and electric bass.

"It is a love letter to Chicago," Finnegan says. "I'm clearly inspired by the music, energy and ethos here. Chicago is about creating good music and art for itself. It's about dealing with the whole spectrum of sound. Even the more angular, dissonant music comes back to deep grooves. The free things can still have a dance and melody."

A regular collaborator with Chicago heavyweight Ken Vandermark in Edition Redux with pianist Erez Dessel and Beth McDonald on tuba, Finnegan is also part of saxophonist Sarah Clausen's trio, punk band Cucuy, and duo with violinist gabby fluke-mogul. Adding to those overlapping circles she's collaborated with James Brandon Lewis, Nicole Mitchell, Tomeka Reid, Macie Stewart, Fay Victor, Sylvia Bolognesi, Shanta Nurullah, Dave Rempis, Katie Ernst, Jason Stein, Devon Gates, Lia Kohl and many others.

Finnegan's affirmation of freedom and groove, dissonance, dance and lyricism runs throughout *Heat On!* a project inspired by Chicago legend Jack DeJohnette and his quartet with David Murray and Arthur Blythe. She was introduced to his classic 1979 ECM album *Special Edition* by drummer Allison Miller, "which made me interested in drums, bass, alto and tenor configuration," she said. "Jack's playing is so multi-directional and his songs are journeys. I want to structure my music like that, with moments of pocket, swing and groove."

Her freedom-in-swing approach is evident from the opening track "Green Milk," a harmelodic blast that quickly pivots away from the angular Ornettish feel into an extended dialogue between Jackson and Wilkerson, who at 71 is at the peak of his powers. Best known as the founder and director of the cutting-edge octet 8 Bold Souls and the 25-member performance ensemble Shadow Vignettes, Wilkerson has been at the center of the Chicago scene for half a century. In *Heat On* he swoops, swaggers and croons with complete authority, adding an eloquent new chapter to his discography.

Finnegan is out front on “RSJ,” initials that reveal its source of inspiration, the late, great drummer Ronald Shannon Jackson. It’s a piece that showcases her potent connection with Macri, whose inventive, persistently bouncing lines provide a springboard for the horns as they phase in and out of sync. Rapidly shifting gears with “Inverted Spoon,” the music turns slow and oozy rising and falling as the saxophonists ease across each other (and the rumbling arco bass foundation). Like on the following track “Rimrock,” which simmers at medium tempo churn driven by Finnegan’s confident brush work, the structure emerges from the horns’ harmonies.

The album’s centerpiece is Finnegan’s three-part suite “Beltline,” which opens with Macri and Finnegan laying down a persuasive tide of funk over which Jackson and Wilkerson ride and glide. “Part 1” maintains relentless momentum, while “Part 2” turns brooding and introspective, trading forward motion for lapidary free-form disquisition. The wending “Part 3” gets back on the road, seeking and finding several intriguing paths. The album closes with “The Great,” a post-bop workout “influenced by some specific, hard hitting DeJohnette songs,” Finnegan says. “It’s high energy music with a groove, but the lines fall off the edges. The goal isn’t necessarily to be super clean.”

Part of what makes *Heat On* such a revelatory project is the frisson created by the intertwined tandems of rhythm section and horns. Finnegan and Macri, who met through Vandermark, have often found that they share similar aesthetics, “connecting over their love of punk and rock and free improvised music,” she says.

Finnegan connected with Jackson on a gig with Chicago storyteller and sitar player Shanta Nurullah and was enamored with his big Texas sound. A protégé of clarinet great Alvin Batiste, he moved to Chicago in 1999 and has played a central role in the ACCM’s 21st century resurgence. Finnegan thought he’d make an ideal foil for Wilkerson, who’s also a longtime member of the AACM. “I was a big fan of 8 Bold Souls,” she says. “They’ve got different styles but blend really well.”

For her first album she designed a spacious set of music based on brief motifs for bass and saxophones, looking to create an extended listening experience. Harmonies take shape via interaction between Jackson and Wilkerson as they create counterpoint lines. Song form and free improv, groove and thrash, “there’s room for a lot of different sounds,” she says. “From my punk background I write music in little pieces. I’m interested in through composed pieces, but with wide-open stretches for improvisation.”

In many ways the project embodies the intergenerational nature of the Chicago scene, and Finnegan is both proud and humbled to be joining that history and lineage. “Ed was open to doing the album and it was a huge honor to have him record my compositions,” she says. “He was really supportive and great to work with. Ed, Fred, and Nick are musicians playing as their life-long endeavor. This is what they’re here to do. I’m interested in making this a sustainable life-long endeavor for myself, and I hope to keep the excitement and curiosity as I go.”

Born in Chicago and raised in nearby Evanston, Finnegan started playing drums as a tween. Drawn at first to punk and alternative rock, she started delving into jazz in high school, making connections between “Improvised, free music and punk at the end of high school,” she recalls. “I was drawn to music about liberation and bigger topics, and less concerned about fitting in to a genre box.”

At the University of Wisconsin–Madison she started with sociology rather than music, but ended up spending as much time playing drums as with her books and graduated with a double major. During a summer in Boston she connected with drum star Terri Lyne Carrington, who recruited her to Berklee’s master’s program. She earned the degree in the thick of the pandemic via a full scholarship to the Global Jazz Institute, a 20 person cadre led by Danilo Perez. She was also part of the Institute of Jazz and Gender Justice, where she was mentored by Kris

Davis, Linda May Han Oh, and Carrington (working on her “Music for Abolition” thesis, as well the *Visualizing Abolition Exhibit* at the University of California Santa Cruz).

“I’ve been blessed with great mentors, people who’ve supported me being curious about all these different styles and histories,” she says. “Allison Miller is another one.”

Returning to Chicago in 2021 she connected with Vandermark through Kris Davis. He invited her to join a new band he was starting, Edition Redux, and she got a front row view into his compositional process. “There are so many different ways to write and organize music,” she says. “It’s been three years since I met him, and we’re working and playing a lot.”

Building on her Berklee thesis project, “Music and Abolition: Creating a World Without Policing- Music’s Role in Imagination, Experimentation, and Collectivity,” Finnegan has continued to study and observe the way power structures, history, and social movements have shaped the Chicago scene. This is not a passive process. She’s one of the curators of the Option Series, a showcase of contemporary approaches to improvisation and composition held at Experimental Sound Studio. Finnegan is also a member of the cooperative Catalytic Sound, as well as a festival organizer

Clearly, Finnegan contains multitudes. From punk rock to free improv to post-bop jazz tunes, “the variety of projects help me connect with the different sides of myself,” she says. “I feel taken in many directions, and happy to be organizing events and shows. I did some touring with James Brandon Lewis in the fall, filling in for Chad Taylor. It feels like the beginning of everything.”

With *Heat On* Finnegan takes a major first step, celebrating the Chicago legacy that inspires and informs her bountiful music.