

Sullivan Fortner

ARIA



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1. **ARIA** 6:31
[Sullivan Fortner] Sajofo Music Publishing / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (Ss), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
2. **BALLADE** 6:07
[Sullivan Fortner] Sajofo Music Publishing / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (ts), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
3. **PARADE** 5:15
[Sullivan Fortner] Sajofo Music Publishing / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (ts), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
4. **I MEAN YOU** 4:54
[Thelonious Monk / Coleman Hawkins] Embassy Music Corporation / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (ts), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
5. **YOU ARE SPECIAL** 4:34
[Fred Rogers] Fred M Rogers / ASCAP
Sullivan Fortner (p), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
6. **ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE** 4:09
[Jerome Kern - Oscar Hammerstein II] Universal Polygram International Publishing Inc. / ASCAP
Sullivan Fortner (p), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
7. **YOU KNOW I CARE** 5:48
[David Mc Hugh] TL Music Publishing / ASCAP
Sullivan Fortner (p), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
8. **PASSEPIED** 3:46
[Sullivan Fortner] Sajofo Music Publishing / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (Ss), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)
9. **FOR ALL WE KNOW** 5:11
[J. Fred Coots / Samuel Lewis] Sis 'N Bro Music Company / Toy Town Tunes Inc. / ASCAP
Sullivan Fortner (p)
10. **FINALE** 4:15
[Sullivan Fortner] Sajofo Music Publishing / BMI
Sullivan Fortner (p), Tivon Pennicott (ts), Aidan Carroll (b), Joe Dyson (d)

Sullivan Fortner piano

Tivon Pennicott tenor/soprano saxophone

Aidan Carroll bass

Joe Dyson drums

«Sullivan Fortner is the 2015 Cole Porter Fellow
in Jazz of The American Pianists Association»

ARIA

by Dan Ouellette

In talking with 28-year-old pianist **Sullivan Fortner**, you're impressed by his amiable and humble persona. He's quick to laugh, full of life and eager to cite his many mentors, and he's so unassuming that it's almost as if he's surprised that his debut recording, *Aria*, arrives on one of the most honored label imprints in the jazz world: impulse! But as soon as you hear the rhythmic and harmonic originality of his pianistic voice, the staccato beats and singular voicings teeming through his original compositions and then witness him take the dangerous plunge into approaching Monk and emerging with a tumbling, twinkling "I Mean You" brilliance, you know immediately that Sullivan has fully arrived as one of jazz's most important young artists. And you wonder, where has he been and why didn't he streak into a studio after his postgraduate studies like most, if not all, young and impetuous musicians with lofty jazz ambitions?

Sullivan almost shrugs at those questions. As for why impulse! showrunner Jean-Philippe Allard offered him a deal, he says:

“Geez, I have no idea. I wish I knew. It all happened in a whirlwind. It was suddenly, join our team and be a part of the impulse! party.”

was suffering through a huge crush on the choir

Tracing Sullivan's career trajectory reveals a depth of artistry. He dials back to his youth in New Orleans when at age 4 he

director at church, watching her hands on the piano and even being allowed to turn the organ on and off.

"That's when I knew I wanted to play the keyboards," he says, adding that the first tune he learned on the toy piano his mother bought him was the theme from the TV show Jeopardy. "I scared my mom because I understood where the octave shifted and when the half step came."

Sullivan continued to play by ear in the church and choir, then took his first lessons at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts that opened the door for him to attend Oberlin Conservatory of Music on a scholarship. His first mentor was Dan Wall, who upon Sullivan's graduation in 2008, recommended that he head to New York to get his graduate degree at the Manhattan School of Music in the class of 2010. He was broke but quickly became connected, including linking up

“If I owe an arm or a leg or a liver to anyone, it would be Stefon,” he says.

pianist Rodney Kendrick at a jam session in the Upper West Side club Cleopatra's Needle. Kendrick was so impressed that he brought trumpeter Roy Hargrove to check him out. Soon Sullivan became an apprentice in Roy's bands playing gigs at Jazz



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with vibraphonist Stefon Harris in his Blackout band.

Early in his New York life, he met

Gallery.

One of Roy's shows took him to New Morning in Paris. Before impulse! was officially reactivated as a division of Universal Music France in January 2014, Jean-Philippe was talking music with Roy's manager Larry Clothier, who told him he should check out Sullivan. Jean-Philippe liked what he heard, but then sought another opinion by asking the future impulse! signee, Rodney Kendrick (who went on to record his label debut, *The Colors of Rhythm*, in February 2014), what he thought about Sullivan. "Rodney was so enthusiastic, he was loud about Sullivan," Jean-Philippe says. "Sullivan was shy, but I could see his spirit. He gets lots of information from the

elders. He had a good attitude. His focus was on music music music. I told him I wanted to sign him."

For one of their first new artists signed to impulse!, Executive Producer, Farida Bachir set up a recording date at Avatar in New York and Jean-Philippe Allard brought on the label's North American A&R Brian Bacchus to co-produce. Bacchus had heard Sullivan play at Jazz Gallery and immediately recognized his talent. "He's a monster, from a pianistic perspective in terms of his physical playing," he says. "But also his harmonic and rhythmic conception on the piano are very advanced. He's rooted in the core of the music — the church as well as New Orleans — but he is certainly one of the cats on the edge too. He's like a sponge and constantly growing and absorbing from various influences."

As for the simpatico quartet members Sullivan assembled for **Aria**, he says:

“I couldn't have imagined my music sounding like it does without them. They took it and went with it. It was a miracle.”



Tivon Pennicott



Sullivan Fortner

The band comprises tenor/soprano saxophonist **TIVON PENNICOTT** (who had been a roommate of one of Sullivan's best friends), bassist **AIDAN CARROLL** (who Sullivan was first introduced to through saxophonist Logan Richardson) and drummer **JOE DYSON** (a New Orleans grade school buddy who Sullivan told back then that he wanted him to be on his first recording).



Joe Dyson



Aidan Carroll

On ARIA

Sullivan delivers five of his own lyrical compositions and five covers. He brings hip new harmonic life to **"You Are Special"** written by Fred Rogers (the host of the children's series *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*). After saxophonist John Ellis introduced the tune to him, Sullivan started *"messing with a lot of orchestration, working on some of the harmonic devices I learned at Oberlin."* On it, he enters into a playful dance mode and, with Tivon sitting out, plays a catchy left and right hand call-and-response passage.

Also with the trio, Sullivan offers a gentle, moving rendition of Duke Pearson's **"You Know I Care"** (his dedication to Roy Hargrove) and the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein gem **"All the Things You Are"** taken to a grandiose yet punchy rhythmic space with a touch of mystery in the mix. *"I heard this when Cedar Walton and Barry Harris did a show at the Allen Room at Jazz at Lincoln Center",* he says. *"They did it really fast, but I slowed it down and worked in a killing bass line."* He solos quietly and dynamically on **"For All We Know,"** which dates back to a one-piano performance he did at Jazz Gallery. *"I really like this song",* he says. *"I was thinking, hey, I might not record again, so let's take a shot at it."*

As for the best cover on the recording, Sullivan's spirited rendition of **"I Mean You"** is a fast-flow, piano-elation wonder of the trad meeting the modern

with tumbling and dissonant lines, upbeat dazzle and frolicking scampers. Tivon's saxophone exuberance is remarkable, and underlying it all is the hint of a New Orleans funk groove.

Another reason why Jean-Philippe signed Sullivan was that he was impressed by his originals. *"Sullivan writes sophisticated melodies",* he says. *"That to me is very important. The title track is a really great melody. It's like an aria in an opera where Sullivan plays the piano thinking like a voice."*

ARIA which is the album's leadoff tune, opens with a soprano sax-piano buoyancy and bounces into a pianistic mirth. Sullivan explains that the song is the first movement from a six-part suite that he composed for Jazz Gallery where, indeed, he says he was *"envisioning a big*

fat dude in opera house. I used to call this 'Purple Circles' because it reminded me of a very circular relationship I had with a young lady whose favorite color was purple. So I wrote it in B minor which reminds me of the color. It is circular, never ending with turbulence in the midst."

Other originals include the lyrical, soulful dance **"Ballade"** (dedicated to his mother who's a major Stevie Wonder fan), the playful and roiling **"Parade"** (written in three harmonically varied sections symbolizing a New Orleans funeral procession with celebration and dancing mixed in with a dark, morbid sensibility), the driving and elegant **"Passepiéd"** brimming with dots and exclamation points (based on Baroque period dancing, with altered rhythms that are *"like bebop in 7,"* he says), and the joyful **"Finale"** the last movement of the Jazz Gallery suite that was originally cast as a ballad but morphed into an uptempo groove number.

It all adds up to an auspicious beginning of a career that introduces a unique voice. *"Sullivan is an original,"* Jean-Philippe says. *"He's not following a crowd or seeing himself in a school. He has all the advantages of the great artists. He's focusing on his music. He's young and holds so much promise to be making even greater musical statements in the future."*

Dan Ouellette

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Ron Carter: *Finding the Right Notes* and

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27-year *DownBeat* contributing features writer;

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Sullivan Fortner Thank Yous :

The Chief Musician, and the Heavenly Father God for everything good and perfect

Family (Parents Cynthia and Sullivan Sr, and sisters Ashtin and Amanda) for continuous support.

Teachers Stephen Dwight Foster, Betty Wilkerson, Michelle McLean, Dean Curtis, Veronica Downs-Dorsey, Peter Martin, Michael Esnealt, Michael Peller, Chris Severin, Ellis Marsalis, Dan Wall, Gary Bartz, Marcus Belgrave, Billy Hart, Sanford Margolis, Robert Ferraza, Oberlin Conservatory of Music Family, Jason Moran, Phil Markowitz, Garry Dial, Dave Liebman, Manhattan School of Music Family.

Mentors Roy Hargrove, Roberta Gambarini, Stefon Harris, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Rodney Kendrick, Larry Clothier, Joel Harrison and the American Pianists Association

The Musicians Production Team Tivon Pennicott, Aidan Carroll, Joe Dyson Jr., Brian Bacchus, Jean-Phillippe Allard, Farida Bachir, Jay Newland (Thanks For your Musicianship, Ears, and Support... Very Blessed to have you apart of this project)

Dedicated in Memory of My Grandmothers Lula Hollins-Reeder, and Ora Thomas-Fortner

Thanks For Listening

Produced by **Jean-Philippe Allard, Brian Bacchus** and **Jay Newland**
Executive Producer, Art Direction: **Farida Bachir**

Recorded at **Avatar Studios** NY on November 14th & 15th 2014
Recording and Mixing Engineer: **Jay Newland**
Assistant Recording Engineer: **Aki Nishimura**
Mastered by **Mark Wilder** at **Battery Studios**

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Assistants: **Rita Johnson, Laurène Bertolo**

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Liner Photography Session: **Cheung Ching-Ming**
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Sullivan Fortner is represented by **Kervin A. Simms** at ka.simms@verizon.net

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