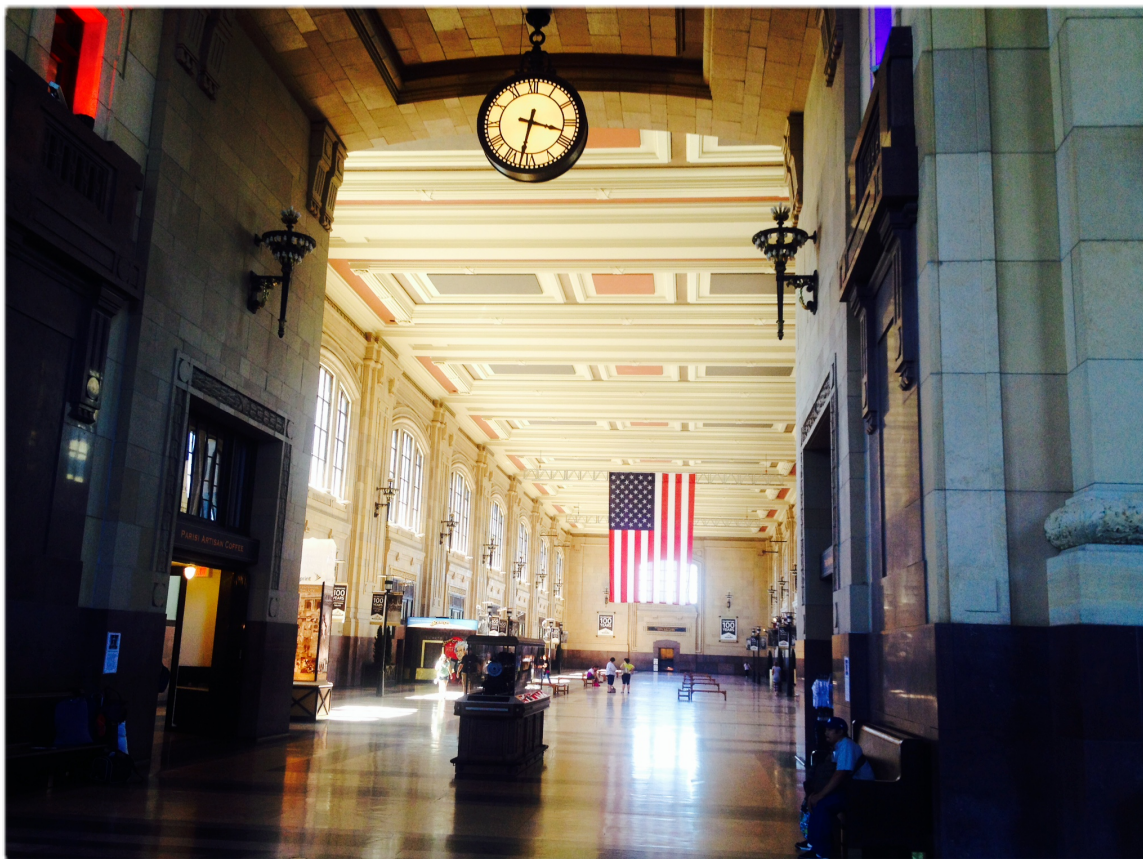


## LINER NOTES - FIREBIRD



### **Christopher Burnett** *Firebird*

How are jazz careers made? Many have remarked on the big historical shift: musicians used to apprentice on the road with masters and learn the language firsthand, but those cultural conditions are fading, and the bandstand has been replaced by the graduate degree. There's truth in that narrative, and yet it fails to account for the full variety of paths that players are taking as they strive to find their voice in this music.

For alto saxophonist Christopher Burnett, the journey involved spending 22 years as a musician in the U.S. Army. He left the service in 1996 — “I’ve been out nearly as long as I was in,” he says — and resettled in 2001 in his native Kansas City metropolitan area. Two years earlier, in 1999, he had released his debut recording, *Time Flies*, and in 2008 he followed up with *Theme Music*, both on the Artists Recording Collective (ARC) label that he cofounded with saxophonist Erica Lindsay and pianist Sumi Tonooka. Now at age 58, Burnett reaches another level of achievement with *Firebird*, showcasing a fine working quartet and a set of compositions rich in beauty, subtlety and sophistication.

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“In the military I was a very diversely skilled musician,” says Burnett. “A very good sight reader, played all different types of music. I had to make time for my creative music because that was not really called for most of the time. There was always this longing to be where I am now. I paid those dues, raised our family with my wife, and now our kids are successful and productive grownups. And I’ve built a life in music that’s on par with what I had when I left the Army Music Program. That has always been my main motivation: to record and continue to engage a viable career in music after the military, based on the fact that music is just what I do. Being an artist is a necessity.”

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Jazz history is deeply bound up with the tradition of military and parade bands. James Reese Europe’s Harlem Hellfighters forged a large-ensemble sound replete with breaks and syncopation, a kind of proto-jazz that spread to the European continent during World War I. Burnett, when he enlisted, came into close contact with that lineage and encountered musicians of a high caliber. “Many people still don’t seem to realize that there have always been cats in the military bands who are just as good as anybody they’ve likely ever heard in the commercial world,” he insists. “While I was on staff and faculty at the Armed Forces School of Music, I sat beside cats on the Faculty Lab Band every day, and those guys *played*, man. They weren’t worried about people knowing who they were. They didn’t care about that kind of thing. They simply cared about the music, and that’s the beauty.”

There was one stark difference, however, between music in the military and in the outside world, and it had all to do with resources. “In the military it was like I imagined being associated with a major label would be,” Burnett says. “If you wanted to record, you literally went down the hall to the studio, booked the time, and brought your group in. You also didn’t worry about booking gigs because there was an office in the organization and that’s what they did. Same with PR. The military band organizations were run as companies, and their purpose was to support all aspects of music business logistics and functions. I was fortunate to have worked in each of those jobs, so I learned all of those different skills over the course of a couple of decades. When I finished and got out of the military in 1996, I realized what needed to be done regarding a commercial career, but then I looked in the mirror and said, ‘Hey, there’s only one of you. You don’t have a staff of 12 people to carry this out.’ So I had to reorganize in order to fit the current paradigm. I also had to learn a lot about the commercial industry when I first began to record in the late ’90s.”

Burnett also speaks about the “intangibles” he gained from his time in the military. “I learned how to operate a business, I learned about leadership, I learned about character, I learned about getting up early, playing in the rain, in the snow, all those things. I didn’t even know I was learning all of that, until I got out here and I had skill sets that I saw many musicians didn’t have back then. On top of that, there was this honor code that you learned. Not like everybody was

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perfect, and not like I'm a Boy Scout or Beaver Cleaver or something, but there is a learned standard and a positive character that I also want to embrace and represent within my music."

It should be noted that merely by being active in Kansas City, Burnett is also helping sustain one of the country's most historically significant jazz scenes. As the regional hub of the great territory bands in what used to be called the Southwest, Kansas City gave rise to the Count Basie Orchestra in the mid-'30s and Charlie Parker just a bit later — no small detail for an alto saxophonist cultivating his art today. In Burnett's words Kansas City "isn't nearly as big as the borough of Brooklyn in New York," but he's not relying on steady club gigs for his bread and butter. As the Marketing Communications Manager of the American Jazz Museum since 2011, he's putting his business training to use, taking part in education and research efforts as well as live presentations to help keep the heritage and future alive.

"A lot of people come through and visit the Museum at 18th & Vine," Burnett says, adding that the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum has its home in Kansas City as well. "It's a cultural center. The programming and facilities we have ensure that fresh ideas are injected in the scene. We've brought in international touring artists ranging from Ramsey Lewis to Steve Coleman and many others. The Museum is also the highest employer of local and regional artists in the area as well. The different styles played in our venues are reflective of the entire spectrum of our global jazz culture at large, and the local KC audience is pretty sophisticated."

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It was in 2007 that Burnett cofounded the ARC label, a home for recordings by its three principals as well as John Blake, Mark Taylor, Don Aliquo and many more. "With most conventional record labels, a 'record deal' seemed like getting a home loan," Burnett says. "I felt like that was the last thing I wanted to do — I just wanted a platform for my music to be presented." Even right off the bat with *Time Flies*, well before iTunes, and with online infrastructure for music in its infancy, Burnett was finding ways with downloads and streaming audio to get his music heard around the world. With *Firebird* he continues that strategy: the CD is a limited edition and the music within will be distributed far more widely online.

"The music that I make now comes from a different place than it did when I was still in my 40's, 30's or 20's, as it should," says Burnett. "I want listeners to glean that level of experience and the sincere artistic places where that comes from. I have gone through Bird and Cannonball, Trane, Dexter, like most of us do in this music. I've studied classical, jazz, bebop, modal, 12-tone rows, all of that, I can teach it and I can do it. But there comes a time when you grow past relying so heavily on the intellect of others, because you have developed your own intellect and opinion. I have something more personal to present now."

There's a remarkable lyrical ease and harmonic savvy in the compositions that make up *Firebird*, not least of all on the title track with its layered flutes and Latin-tinged rhythmic feel. Burnett's legato eloquence and depth of expression on

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the slow 4/4 “Ballad for An Optimist” is another highlight. His choice of the inspired, metrically shifting “A Risk I Take,” by French horn virtuoso and colleague Mark Taylor, tells us much about his refined taste and interpretive abilities. Behind the success of these performances is of course the band itself:

## QUARTET

**Roger Wilder** (Piano): “Roger is a native of Rochester, New York who came to Kansas City by way of the University of Miami and a stint in New York. We met at the Grand Emporium in KC during a break at the ‘Battle of the Saxes’ fundraiser for the Kansas City Jazz Ambassadors organization. I really liked how sensitive, supportive and inherently creative he was in each situation. He’s been my pianist of choice since that day in 2001. Not only does this cat play in a vital supporting role with other artists, his own quintet is likely one of the premier groups working in jazz today as well. Check out Roger’s debut recording, *Stretch*, available at iTunes, CD Baby, Amazon, etc.”

**Jeff Harshbarger** (Bass): “I first heard Jeff with the progressive saxophonist/conceptualist Mark Southerland, and I was moved by his artistic creativity. Next I heard him with Bobby Watson, performing hard-bop in the Blue Room and was so impressed by his versatility. Jeff is in demand — a scene-builder, an entrepreneur. Finally I had the opportunity to perform with him in various contexts and was certain he’d be the bassist of choice for my own work. What I like about Jeff’s musicianship, particularly with bands that play through-composed material as well as improvisation, is his simpatico with what is happening musically in the moment. He brings a constant presence of engagement and his time is impeccable.”

**Clarence Smith** (Drums): “I first met Clarence when he was still head of the vaunted jazz program at the Paseo Academy of Arts in Kansas City, where some of his students over those years included Harold O’Neal (piano), Logan Richardson (alto saxophone), Jake Blanton (guitar) and many other top young artists to come out of Kansas City. I had written an arrangement of an original composition by one of the city’s legends and his wonderful student jazz band performed it. We first performed together in 2008 as members of the Kansas City Youth Jazz Program faculty. But it wasn’t until I performed with Clarence in my own groups that I got a true picture of his range as a percussionist. He’s an artist, educator and scene-builder. Without a doubt, he is one of the finest percussionists working today and brings a sincere positive energy to my work.”

## GUESTS

**Terri Anderson Burnett** (flute): “We met while both of us were serving as professional musicians with the Army band in Germany over 30 years ago. We became best of friends and decided that we wanted to spend the rest of our days together. Upon graduating from Lake High School, Terri attended Bowling Green

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State University as a music major. She joined the US Army Bands Career Program and played flute and piccolo with the Army band at Ansbach, Germany. After completing her active-duty military service tour, she returned to studies at Drury University and subsequently began teaching in public schools. She furthered her studies in education through graduate work at the University of Missouri at Columbia and ultimately attained lifetime certification in the State of Missouri. After relocating permanently to the Kansas City metro area, Terri began working for the Veterans Administration, where she helps clients access their hard-earned benefits. She currently teaches a small studio of flute students and performs with various community wind ensembles and orchestras.”

**Freda Proctor** (flute): “Freda is Assistant Professor of Music and Director of Instrumental Musical Studies at the University of Saint Mary. A master pianist, organist and flutist, she has taught at USM for more than 20 years. She received a Bachelor of Music from Wichita State University and a Masters from Eastern Illinois University. Before coming to USM, Freda taught piano at Eastern Illinois and the College of DuPage and flute at Wheaton College. She has played at Carnegie Hall and served as pianist for the Topeka Symphony, as well as an accompanist for numerous performers. She especially enjoys accompanying chamber ensembles. She’s active as a performer, teacher, adjudicator and church organist-choirmaster. At USM she teaches music theory and directs the Community Band, chamber ensembles and the Bells of Saint Mary Handbell Choir.”

“We live in truly wonderful times as artists, and we’re ready to entertain a lot of different next things in jazz,” Burnett says. “I want my music to reflect all of this positively. My family has always been vital to my life. And I am where I am as a person because we as a society and a people, as Americans, we continue to grow despite our fears, our inadequacies, our biases, our weaknesses. We have the courage enough to seek to better ourselves, and to follow those great people who were pulling us along sometimes, to reflect something really pure.”

David R. Adler  
New York, August 2014

