

In 2021, I recorded what amounted to three records of original music that I planned to release all at one time. It was recorded during three two-day blocks in the studio with multiple ensembles taking part. **Unjust** is the third of the three. While the first two were dedicated to extended works and very compositionally oriented, **Unjust** was far less scripted. Like **Fatherhood**, my last record, we recorded in the same room without using isolation booths or headphones. I really love the overall process and purity of being in the studio. There's no audience cheering or filling the room with an excited, joyful energy. It's not that I dislike playing live or that an audience doesn't bring about inspiration. It's just that the listeners' experience is a byproduct of the music, not the music itself. For me, being in the studio feels like a much more intimate or direct experience with the music, with less distraction. I love that it's just the ensemble and the music. I liken it to the feeling a painter may have when creating a work.

The material here includes songs I wrote in the past but had yet to record; sections from one of the two unreleased extended works; a song from an earlier record; and music written particularly for this project. There's music that includes piano, and much that does not. The vibraphone — playing melody and/or residing in the rhythm section — creates subtle variety in the fabric of each song. The bass and drums are the only instruments that are consistent throughout. On the title track you hear a piano-less quartet with trumpet and tenor; there's quintet with vibraphone and alto; and several other combinations. This recording is very much about the interaction of the musicians with each other, with the material, and in some ways, with the studio itself.

For this project, I chose musicians who would honor the conception and philosophy and also bring unexpected magic. This is exactly what occurred and I could not be happier with the outcome.

Nicholas Payton whom I have known for many years, is someone I've always had great respect for. We've been on the road together (often spending a good amount of off time playing duets, with me on piano and Nicholas on bass), played in each other's groups, and recorded together as sidemen. I've been thinking about having him on one of my recordings for a long time and I'm ecstatic that it's finally happened. Nicholas is a brilliant and extremely intuitive musician; he brings a deep understanding and love of the music. His sound is beautiful, full of history and feeling. With all the gifts Nicholas possesses, he still completely resides within the ensemble.

Joel Ross and Immanuel Wilkins are two young musicians I've been playing with the last few years, and they both appeared on **Fatherhood**. Though having strong and individual voices, I often find myself writing for them as if they're one musician. They have a unique way of playing together. I rarely offer instruction to them when they're together within a piece, as they always work it out organically. One of the extended compositions I recorded was a nonet featuring them both with strings, and this connection is apparent throughout that piece as well as here on **Unjust**. Two very original voices, both with much to offer. It's always inspiring and a joy to play with them both.

The other horn player is Nicole Glover. The first time I played with her was on these recordings. I knew she was special and I had no apprehension about including her on the record, even though we had never played together. I felt she would bring something special, but I had no idea the amount of poise she would bring. Nicole's playing on the song *Lullaby in D* is perfect and couldn't be more beautiful. I composed this ballad several years ago and waited until this project to record it. I'll always be grateful to Nicole for how she brought it to life.

I've been playing with pianist Orrin Evans for many years now, he's played on my last three records and we've spent a lot of time on the bandstand together. Orrin brings a special quality to how he makes the music feel; his playing encourages freedom and fearlessness.

I've known pianist Addison Frei for several years but had not played with him a lot. I did play on his trio recording *Time and Again*, recorded a few months prior to *Unjust*. The songs Addison played, required things to be very specific, yet still played with individuality and creativity. I knew he would be perfect and he was. Addison is the rare musician who plays with both strength and humility.

I have great respect for the artistry with which Aaron Kimmel plays the drums and creates music, evidenced throughout this recording. Nothing he plays sounds random or overly scripted. I can always hear the logic of his choices. Inside the music, he listens carefully and always reacts with clarity. He plays with an understanding of the material coupled with a great knowledge of the history. It was a complete joy recording this record with Aaron.

This project was a gathering of musicians I believed would find common ground with each other and would also find some magic within the ensemble. I very much enjoyed the process and I'm extremely proud to present *Unjust*.

Ben Wolfe, October 2022, New York City