

Unconventional Entrepreneurialism

Eric Lewis has reasons for a calisthenic approach to the piano. He prefers to play while standing. Which is physically exerting enough, but there's also the added weight that comes from a set of body armor.

"I just got two forearm guards in the mail yesterday," Lewis said while on tour in California. "It's mostly medieval, and some contemporary Batman type stuff. I'm blending it in with suit jackets."

No question that this choice of onstage attire would be classified as unconventional for a jazz musician, especially one with an impressive pedigree. But Lewis has a solid philosophy and aesthetic underpinning the novel gear.

"It's just about entrepreneurialism," Lewis said. "Sun Ra and those guys tried to get theatrical, and I'm just focusing it in to a martial space. And it's a statement about rigidity, classicism. We've never seen a black guy in King Arthur's court. Black people don't have the same connection to war heroes, let alone European wars of the 1300s. Wearing medieval armor and mixing it in with my suits speaks to a fantasy history, and just speaks to something in me."

Lewis is now aggressively marketing such personal concepts. In 1999, he won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Piano Competition and logged considerable time working for Wynton Marsalis, Cassandra Wilson and Elvin

Jones. All while hosting jam sessions until late at night in New York clubs. But around 2005, he left that entire circuit, partially out of frustration about not landing a record deal of his own.

"I started reading a lot of psychology books, neuroanatomy books because people called me crazy," Lewis said. "Started reading about what Navy SEALs had to do. If they didn't have their chops correct, they'd get killed. So I wanted to be that intense."

The result of that study is his self-released solo acoustic disc, *ELEW Rockjazz Vol. 1* (elewrockjazz.com). His versions of songs identified with Nirvana, The Killers and the Rolling Stones came about when he decided to change his image, but he found musical connections, too.

"It's a different language but I could hear correlations to what I was playing with Elvin," Lewis said. "Minors, major flat sixths. I could hear all these harmonic correlations that reminded me of McCoy Tyner, especially when I heard guitars playing fifths."

Perhaps the most unusual reinterpretation on *Rockjazz* is Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," which is identified with a white segregationist vision of the South. Yet, like with medieval armor, Lewis consciously absorbs it.

"I was in a bar one time and heard it come on and it was groovin' and beautiful in terms of that I-IV-V harmony and I could hear poignan-



Eric Lewis

cy of vocals," Lewis said. "After seeing the lyrics and reading the about the controversy, it works out. Because since I'm a black guy covering that tune, it's the same thing that Barack Obama speaks to, where things are changing. Rather than being afraid to talk about something, the best way to overcome something is to take control of it and own it." —Aaron Cohen



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