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We Rob America of Something Very Important When We Deny Visas to Foreign Artists

By [Leeron Hoory](#) • 07/08/16 2:56pm

47Soul. (Photo: Fabrice Bourgelle.)

With tickets, accommodations and venues booked for [47Soul](#)'s two-week American tour, everything seemed set for the U.K.-based band's first trip to U.S. But a week before the "ShamStep" group was scheduled to make its debut in the States at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) in New York City, the United States Embassy informed one of its members his visa had been denied.

"One of the band members whose visa

application was rejected received a letter from the embassy stating that he could not prove enough ties outside the U.S.,” 47Soul’s Tareq Abu Kwaik told the Observer in an e-mail.

The four members, who hail from Amman, Jordan, to Galilee, Israel, to Ramallah, Palestine, are currently based in the U.K. Despite the fact that 47Soul has toured Australia, Scotland, France, Chile, Egypt, New Zealand and Canada, a letter from the U.S. Embassy claimed the band member hadn’t shown sufficient proof of intent to leave the U.S. upon the tour’s conclusion, although he’d provided proof of residency, address and work visa in the U.K.

“It was strange for us because the other members were interviewed on the same day in the same window and had the same supporting documents and were accepted,” Kwaik said.

The band’s four members, Walaa Sbait, Kwaik (a.k.a. El Fa3ri), El Jehaz and Z the People are each musicians with solo careers. Before they formed 47Soul, El Farzi was performing a mix of “Jabali/Bedouin”-style vocals and guitar, and released an album with El Jehaz in Jordan in 2012. Shortly after, they met Sbait, who was combining Dabke style

with Reggae and Dub. Discovering Walaa “was like finding the parallel Palestinian musician back in the part of the land where we cannot go anymore,” Kwaik said. Z the People, who was born and grew up in Washington, D.C., and originally comes from a town outside of Ramallah in the West Bank, was developing new Arabic keyboard synth sounds and joined later on.

47SOUL "Intro to Shamst...



“The four of us have roots in historical Palestine, even if some of us were not born there,” Kwaik said. Each band member holds different passports, and border constrictions in the region initially made it challenging to meet in person. After live and studio collaborations in Jordan between different combinations of the members, they officially formed as a band in 2013.

Their collaboration as musicians made

sense; they were all interested in bringing in sounds from their roots, music they grew up with, and blending in new beats. Together, they combine Dabke dance, Iraqi Chobi, Mijwez and Argdul, both wind instruments, with electronic, soul and hip-hop influences resulting in a unique genre they've named this genre "ShamStep," but the sound is impossible to put into words—it's a genre that perhaps can only be created when musicians extend beyond their geographic locations and surpass the limitations of borders, physical and otherwise.

With lyrics in Arabic and English, many addressing themes of freedom of movement and border control, they've amassed a large number of fans in the Middle East and Europe.

"The visa process we have to bring artists over to the U.S. is an extremely tortured, illogical, frustrating process."

47Soul's abrupt denial of entry to the U.S., though not extremely common,

isn't an isolated issue.

“The visa process we have to bring artists over to the U.S. is an extremely tortured, illogical, frustrating process,” Brian Goldstein, an attorney at GG Arts Law, a firm that specializes in visas for non-U.S. artists and the general counsel for Le Poisson Rouge, said.

To apply for a visa, an artist must first file a petition for the ability to apply, which is reviewed by the USCIS, and must prove to government officials that the band is an internationally recognized group with a sustained level of achievement and recognition.

It doesn't matter how famous someone is, every foreign artist is subject to the same process. “In other words, if the Metropolitan Opera wants to hire an opera singer, it's not good enough that the MET thinks this person is wonderful. A government bureaucrat who has never been to an opera has to be convinced that this person is famous and talented,” Goldstein said.

Petitions can take up to four months for approval and cost \$350 to file. Here's how it really tends to work out, though: bands book venues beforehand and end up needing to pay a rush fee of \$1,225 (per member) for a response in

two weeks—before the actual visa application even begins. After petitioning, musicians still have to go to the consulate to apply, which costs an additional \$190.

47Soul. (Photo: Court

That's not the case in every country. In the U.K., certain cultural institutions, like the Royal Opera, have a fixed amount of preauthorized visas to issue per year.

These convoluted processes impoverish the U.S. music scene of worthwhile cultural exchange, and deter many artists from even applying—they just can't afford the time and energy to go through it, and end up skipping the U.S. entirely (requests for artist visas to enter the U.S. decreased by 25 percent from 2006 and 2010). But when the process is this draconian, who can blame them? "The

question is how many more people could we be seeing if it wasn't for this system," Goldstein asked.

Visa expenses, which often mount to thousands of dollars, are a financial strain on an already tapped-out industry. When a band, such as 47Soul, is denied entry at the last minute, it impacts not only the artists who were scheduled to tour, but every venue who booked them and all the fans who were planning on seeing them, severing ties in the global music community.

"It's much easier to bring in an artist from Europe than from the Middle East, but we don't have cultural and political and social issues with that part of the world."

The complicated application process creates room for many obstacles and errors, often leading to months of delays, and as if there weren't enough hoops to jump through, Arab or Muslim names have been subject to particular scrutiny, or "additional administrative

processing,” as a 2012 *New York Times* report noted.

“It’s much easier to bring in an artist from Europe than from the Middle East, but we don’t have cultural and political and social issues with that part of the world,” Goldstein said.

Border restrictions are nothing new for 47Soul. Their vision of free movement is what led them to create music together, a theme that’s has resonated strongly with fans across the world. If anyone knows the value of overcoming border control to create art, it’s the creators of ShamStep.

Until it becomes easier for foreign artists to tour and perform in the U.S., we can only wonder about the unique collaborations and music America is missing out on, all in the name of immigration control.

FILED UNDER: 2016, 47SOUL, AMMAN, ARABIC, ARABIC MUSIC, ARGHUL, BEDOUIN, CONCERT, DABKE DANCE, DUB, EL JEHAZ, ELECTRONIC, GALILEE, IRAQI CHOBI, ISRAEL, JABALI, JORDAN, LE POISSON ROUGE, MIDDLE EAST, MIDDLE EASTERN MUSIC, MIJWEZ, NEW YORK CITY, PALESTINE, RAMALLAH, REGGAE, TAREQ ABU KWAIK, UK, VIDEO, VISA, VISA ISSUES, WALAA SBAIT, WEST BANK, Z THE PEOPLE

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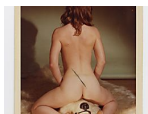
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The Best Jazz Albums of 2016 (So Far)

By Ron Hart • 06/20/16 12:23pm

Theo Croker. (Photo: Courtesy of Theo Croker.)

We're already six months into 2016, and jazz is maintaining the momentum it enjoyed in the wake of the breakthrough year that was 2015.

Hip-hop continues to imbue the corners of 21st-century pop, no doubt. But as these 10 amazing new titles make abundantly clear, the ways that some of today's bright young talents are paying homage to the history of their craft is what is making this particular moment in jazz a most exciting one indeed. Dig in and take notes.

10) Theo Croker, *Escape Velocity* (O'Keh)

As the grandson of legendary Dixieland trumpeter Doc Cheatham, it was natural for Oberlin Conservatory graduate Theo Croker to pick up the horn in kind. However, what this young man has

created on *Escape Velocity* goes far beyond his Big Easy pedigree as he and his group DVRK FUNK, comprised of reedist Anthony Ware, pianist Michael King, guitarist Ben Eunson, bassist Eric Wheeler and drummer Kassa Overall, explore a middle ground between electronic and acoustic jazz that is equal parts Mac Rebennack and Mark Morrison's "Return of the Mack." This is headphone bop of the highest order.

9) **Snarky Puppy, *Culcha Vulcha***
(Universal Masterworks)

For the last three years, genre-bending Brooklyn/Dallas jazz collective Snarky Puppy have been displaying their prowess on the concert stage with a trio of excellent live albums in 2013's *Family Dinner Vol. 1*, last year's *Sylvia* (recorded in the Netherlands with the Metropole Okrest) and this winter's second volume

of Family Dinner. And with seven of their II albums being of the live variety, it's pretty clear the big band founded by bassist Michael League a decade ago kicks ass on stage. However, as their first studio LP since 2008 showcases, these guys need to get into the studio more often.

Culcha Vulcha might be a silly way to say it, but it very much serves as the chief indicator as to what to expect from this hour-plus journey into sound, as the group absorbs everything from South Asian percussion to New Orleans parade rhythms to psychedelic funk to *August-era* Eric Clapton to the kind of smooth electric dalliances with Mediterranean music that made Robert Plant's Now & Zen such a great listen into their perpetual orchestral groove. And at its best, as on such hypnotic cuts as "Beep Box" and "Palermo," the songs come across like Lalo Schifrin for the Tumblr generation, while even the weaker cuts like the over-the-top "Big Ugly" cannot be denied because of the pure oneness of this mighty orchestra.

**8) Marquis Hill, *The Way We Play*
(Concord)**

From Louis Armstrong's famous Hot Fives and Hot Sevens recordings in the late '20s to the third eye modality of Lester Bowie, Chicago has always enjoyed a solid rep as one of the great cities for jazz trumpet. At 29, Marquis Hill continues this lineage with a sound that embodies the history of his city while also pushing its legacy into the 21st century with his esteemed Blacktet: saxophonist Christopher McBride, Justin Thomas on the vibes, bassist Joshua Ramos and drummer Makaya McCraven.

On his Concord Jazz debut, this native son of the Windy City pays homage to his town, first and foremost, by opening up *The Way We Play* with a soulful reading of the Chicago Bulls theme music from the Michael Jordan era. From there, this incredible ensemble delivers futuristic re-imaginings of such jazz

standards as Horace Silver's "Moon Rays", fellow Chicagoan Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage", Donald Byrd's "Fly Little Bird Fly" and "Straight, No Chaser" by Thelonious Monk, whose International Trumpet Competition Hill won in 2014.

Meanwhile, a steamy rendition of Victor Young and Ned Washington's "My Foolish Heart" with vocals by singer Christie Dashiell, is indeed more KING than Nat "King" Cole. *The Way We Play* is more than an album; it's a calling card assuring that classic Chicago jazz is alive and well in the hands of one of its most talented young lions.

7) Anat Fort Trio with Gianluigi Trovesi, *Birdwatching* (ECM)

Ornithology has always been on the of
the more intriguing thematic points of

interest within the context of jazz music. Ornette Coleman, Dave Holland, Donald Byrd and, of course the original Birdman of jazz, Charlie Parker, have all paid sonic homage to birds and birdwatching throughout the years. For her third LP for ECM, Israeli pianist Anat Fort follows along this inspirational trajectory in her art, not only naming her new album after her favorite pastime, but spreading her proverbial wingspan as well with some of her most expansive compositions yet.

On *Birdwatching*, Fort returned home to Tel Aviv, where she performed a series of concerts with one of the pianist's favorite artists, Italian horn player Gianluigi Trovesi. The successes of these performances inspired the trio, rounded out by her longtime rhythm section of bassist Gary Wang and drummer Roland Schneider, to head into the studio with Trovesi and record this exceptional collection of 12 compositions. This is a classic blend of Hebrew and Mediterranean sounds that intersect one another like the delicious fragrances coming from a marketplace in old Brooklyn, creating a listening experience as colorful and calming as the hobby it was named after.

6) Logan Richardson, *Shift* (Blue Note)

Pat Metheny has only appeared on two Blue Note albums over the course of his career: Once in 1994 on a stunning duet album with fellow guitarist John Scofield called *I Can See Your House From Here*, and again in 1999 when he was one of the guests on Cassandra Wilson's homage to Miles Davis, *Traveling Miles*. That is, however, until this past winter when the guitar legend was placed in a starring role in the label debut of saxophonist Logan Richardson, performing alongside an A-list squad rounded out by the magnificent Harish Raghavan on bass, Jason Moran on piano and his drummer Nasheet Waits.

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Defense of 'Dad Rock'***

For many fans of modern jazz, this lineup is something of a dream band and they do not disappoint in the least on *Shift*, where Richardson pays homage to his Kansas City roots with a sense of unconventional daring that goes from the chamber jazz stylings of “Slow” to a moody rendition of Bruno Mars’ Police-jacking “Locked Out Of Heaven” with seamless ease.

5) **Alfredo Rodriguez, *Tocororo* (Mack Avenue)**

Following up on 2014’s *Invasion Parade*, pianist Alfredo Rodriguez continues to pay full homage to his Cuban heritage with an album that could easily be considered his most adventurous to wit. Named after the national bird of Cuba, *Tocororo* celebrates his motherland’s newfound freedom by collaboration with an enclave of musicians from all around

the globe, including France, Spain, Lebanon, Cameroon and India, all under the watchful eye of executive producer Quincy Jones.

The result is an equal parts worldly and otherworldly cousin to Q's own *Walking in Space*, a celebratory lifting of the embargo that offers Cuban musicians full reign to explore sonic landscapes beyond the parameters of their island to craft a quintessential sound of creative freedom taking first flight.

**4) Miles Davis & Robert Glasper,
Everything's Beautiful (Columbia-Legacy)**

May 26 would have been the 90th birthday of Miles Davis. Now imagine if the jazz legend had lived to see that landmark day, and the way he and his trumpet would have absorbed

the '90s and '00s. Robert Glasper, who also produced the soundtrack for Don Cheadle's excellent biographic fever dream *Miles Ahead*, offers perhaps the most convincing hypothesis yet with *Everything's Beautiful*.

What we have here is a revolutionary revision of original Miles recordings through the piano maverick's innovative eye, flipping the evolution of his eternal groove to include appearances by some of the top acts in the alt-soul game, including Ledisi, Erykah Badu, KING, Bilal, Laura Mvula and Hiatus Kaiyote, to usher in the Man and his Horn into the 21st century. Other guests include Phonte of Little Brother, longtime Miles guitarist John Scofield and, perhaps most importantly, Stevie Wonder, finally bringing together these two giants of American music after so many years of wondering "What If?"

**3) DeJohnette/Coltrane/Garrison,
Movement (ECM)**

Jack DeJohnette only played with John Coltrane once for three songs in the early-'60s. But a half century later, the iconic Chicago drummer finds himself leading a group comprised of Trane's son Ravi on sax as well as Matthew Garrison, the son of longtime Coltrane bassist Jimmy Garrison. And all you have to do is listen to the opening strains of their version of Papa's "Alabama" to get the gist of the futuristic modality these three men bring out here.

Together, this incredible cross generational trio ushers in this great jazz legacy into the now with an incorporation of electronics that offers a nod to the skills of the youngest member of the esteemed Coltrane/McLeod clan, Flying Lotus, thanks to the laptop knowhow of bassist Garrison. The trio even does a beautiful meditation on

Miles Davis' "Blue In Green", a loving homage to both Ravi's pops and Jack's old charge in the same cool breath. *In Movement* is, in a word, magnificent.

2) Jeff Parker, *The New Breed*
(International Anthem)

Though there are many who love them regardless of the direction they take, there is very much a minority of Tortoise fans who have been supremely bummed since the Chicago post-rock supergroup began going in a less-jazz, more electronic- and rock-oriented direction following the release of 1998's *TNT*. However, if you've been following the solo career of their longtime guitarist Jeff

Parker, you will quickly realize that the pastoral nature of his main band is still alive and well in the heart of his own recorded work.

The New Breed, his first for the amazing International Anthem label, perhaps cuts closest to the cloth of the classic Tortoise sound many of us love and miss so much more than anything the band themselves has released since *Standards*. Rooted in old home recordings and beats that have been sitting on a hard drive or on his dormant MySpace page since the late-2000s, Parker revisited these relics with a killer ensemble comprised of cats who've worked with Me'Shell Ndegeocello (bassist Paul Bryan), Esperanza Spalding (saxophonist Josh Johnson) and Robert Glasper (drummer Jamire Williams), and updated them to fit his recent obsession with the Brainfeeder label and its accompanying *Low End Theory* movement.

Tortoise's newest LP, *The Catastrophist*, has been panned by many of those aforementioned fans as the group's weakest work to date, particularly due to the fourth-wall-breaking move of incorporating vocals into their sound. Luckily, *The New Breed* provides a perfect counterpoint.

1) Julian Lage, *Arclight* (Mack Avenue)

For his official debut as a leader on the Mack Avenue imprint, former child prodigy Julian Lage continues to prove why he is the best guitar player in modern jazz with this dazzling tribute to his electric guitar heroes of the early 20th century. If you are hearing aspects of Chet Atkins and Les Paul throughout the course of *Arclight*, that's because Lage and his mind-blowing rhythm section of bassist Scott Colley and drummer Kenny Wollesen pay homage to the guys Chester and Lester were influenced by like Merle Travis and George Barnes, crafting a mood that is equally in step and out of time to brilliant effect.

The Observer spoke with Lage over the phone earlier this year. We discussed his fantastic album, *Arclight*, his favorite guitar players and the enduring

influence of the blues on his recent work.

You play the Telecaster on *Arclight*. Was it a particular kind of Telecaster you used for this album?

It's a Telecaster made by a guy called Dan Strain. It's a "Danocaster," actually [laughs]. Dan makes some of the best replicas of the old style Telies. They're what you call relics, in that they're made to look old, to feel old and to sound old, especially versus buying a new one off the rack. It's got like an early-'60s style, a little brighter and lightweight. It's really a great guitar.

And you were definitely going for that vibe for this album, yes?

I was, definitely. I was going for that early electric guitar style of George Barnes, who gets credited as the first to play the electric Spanish-style guitar. He was really the first guy to come out of the gate and plug in; Charlie Christian was a little bit after that. And some of the early lap steel players from Hawaii, which really launched me into a whole new world of exploration, which is always a good thing. Eddie Durham was another one who I really love as well.

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& Reclamation at
Montréal Jazz Fest***

You can definitely hear some Chet Atkins influence here as well, but it seems like you were inspired by the guitarists he must have been listening to while honing his craft.

Chet was probably a contemporary of those guys I just mentioned, maybe a little bit younger. But I get the sense that the application of the electric guitar had already been established by the time Chet really began dominating the guitar world. But you definitely get the sense that he was picking up a lot of stuff from the likes of George Barnes and Eddie Durham.

There is definitely a heavy blues influence on *Arclight* as well. It's odd how much of the modern guitar-based rock music, especially in the indie world, is kind of devoid of the blues for the most part.

I feel more and more like a blues guitar player these days, really. It's the music I've been drawn to play lately. And I don't

think it's super different from jazz, in a way. There are just certain sensibilities, especially on the guitar that I lean towards. There are also sensual things about the blues in terms of how do you touch the instrument, how you bend the strings or whatever. So the blues is alive and well, at least on my part. In fact, probably the first famous guitar player I ever got to meet was John Lee Hooker when I was about 5 or 6. I had a friend who very graciously ushered me backstage and John Lee Hooker signed a guitar of mine, which I unfortunately don't have anymore. He was one of my first guitar heroes.

What did he say to you when you met him?

Honestly, I was so little I don't even remember [laughs]. But he was sweet and very nice and I remember him just sitting there holding court backstage. I wish I could remember any kind of conversation we might have had, but it's fuzzy.

Having been a former child prodigy, what is your following among children like? I'm sure your story has been a big inspiration for kids who get into jazz guitar.

Honestly, I don't know. The kinds of

places that I play don't cater to young people as much as I'd like. But that's just the nature of playing clubs or halls or other places where children unfortunately are not permitted to be inside. I'd certainly love to see more young people in the audience at my shows, and we do see some young people if we ever do like a Sunday matinee or if I do something at a school. Young people, children especially, just soak everything up and they're incredibly honest. They'll either like it or they don't [laughs]. There's no artifice.

FILED UNDER: 2016, ALFREDO RODRIGUEZ, ANAT FORT TRIO, ANTHONY WARE, ARCLIGHT, BEN EUNSON, BEST ALBUMS OF 2016 (SO FAR), BIRDWATCHING, BLACKTET, BLUE NOTE, BLUES, BRAINFEEDER, BROOKLYN, CHICAGO, CHRISTIE DASHIELL, CHRISTOPHER MCBRIDE, COLUMBIA-LEGACY, CONCORD, CUBA, CULCHA VULCHA, DALLAS, DOC CHEATHAM, DONALD BYRD, DVRK FUNK, ECM, ERIC WHEELER, ERYKAH BADU, ESCAPE VELOCITY, ESPERANZA SPALDING, EVERYTHING'S BEAUTIFUL, GARY WANG, GEORGE BARNES, GIANLUIGI TROVESI, HARISH RAGHAVAN, HERBIE HANCOCK, HORACE SILVER, IMAGINATION ANTHEM, INTERVIEW, JACK DEJOHNETTE, JAMIRE WILLIAMS, JASON MORAN, JAZZ, JEFF PARKER, JIMMY GARRISON, JOSH JOHNSON, JOSHUA RAMOS, JULIAN LAGE, JUSTIN THOMAS, KANSAS CITY, KASSA OVERALL, KENNY WOLLESEN, LES PAUL, LIST, LOGAN RICHARDSON, MACK AVENUE, MAKAYA MCCRAVEN, MARQUIS HILL, MATTHEW GARRISON, ME'SHELL NDEGEOCELLO, MERLE TRAVIS, METROPOLE OKREST, MICHAEL KING, MILES DAVIS,

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