



Kurt Elling onstage at the Green Mill in Chicago



'Apprehend the Greatest Ideas'

By Allen Morrison

Photo by Michael Jackson

For Kurt Elling, lunch is an event to be savored. We start early at a neighborhood Italian joint he favors, around the corner from his home on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

When DownBeat encounters Elling at 11 a.m., he's already settled in comfortably, checking his phone and nursing his first glass of Montepulciano. As is his habit, he's looking dapper, more elegant than casual, in a sky blue shirt and burgundy fleece jacket.

Phone in hand, he's studying an Instagram photo of his favorite lunch in Chicago: an Italian beef sandwich from Portillo's, accompanied by a side of fries, two kinds of hot sauce and a generous slice of chocolate cake. When I say I've never had one, the Windy City-born vocalist replies, "Oh, ya gotta do it! It's so strong. With hot peppers all over it, and it's on that mushy bun. I get hungry looking at it."

Elling's enthusiasm and *joie de vivre* provide an interesting counterpoint to the serious intent of his

latest album, *The Questions* (Okeh), a thoughtfully curated and unusually wide-ranging collection of songs. A prolific lyricist, Elling poses questions both political and cosmic, considering the fate of America in the age of Trump, and, more broadly, the human condition: our mortality and search for meaning through love.

Elling opens the album, which he co-produced with saxophonist Branford Marsalis, by singing the first verse of Bob Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" a cappella; then a stark, post-bop small-group arrangement kicks in, featuring a poignant statement from Marsalis on soprano and an explosive solo from Jeff "Tain" Watts on drums. Later, Elling presents Paul Simon's "American Tune," a lament that feels appropriate for the nation's current malaise.



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When revisiting early portions of his catalog, Elling hears a “raw” singer.

Inspired by the poetry of 13th-century mystic Rumi, Elling crafted new lyrics and paired them with a Jaco Pastorius instrumental to create “A Secret In Three Views,” and he reworked Carla Bley’s “Lawns” into a new tune, “Endless Lawns,” featuring his own lyrics and Sara Teasdale’s poetry. Another tune, “The Enchantress,” pairs an instrumental composition by pianist Joey Calderazzo (a member of Marsalis’ band) with Elling’s lyrics, which adapt text from iconic poet Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). The program also includes poignant renditions of songs by Hoagy Carmichael, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Leonard Bernstein and Peter Gabriel.

Elling has been asking “the questions” since his early 20s, when he was working toward a master’s degree in divinity at the University of Chicago. He took leave of his studies to pursue his jazz career when he was just one credit shy of earning the degree. In the current age of anxiety, Elling might not have all the answers, but his baritone voice has a reassuring quality that makes the listener feel less alone in the quest.

In 2016, Marsalis invited Elling to join his quartet for a tour and some recording sessions. The result was the Grammy-nominated album *Upward Spiral* (OKeh). As co-producer on *The Questions*, Marsalis helped select the material and played on three tracks, offering a luminous soprano saxophone solo on “I Have Dreamed.”

From his home in Durham, North Carolina, Marsalis praised Elling’s artistry. “He’s one of the few non-classical singers who can change the sound of his voice to create an emotional effect on the listener,” Marsalis said. “Not that all classical singers can do it. But all the highly success-

ful ones can. The magic in music—regardless of genre—is when musicians understand the power of sound to create emotion. That’s what always excited me when I heard Kurt sing.

“I knew he was into the vocalese thing; that wasn’t really exciting to me. What excited me was that when he sang a sad song, it was like the thing that Billie Holiday had—when she sang a sad song, it was sad.”

The album benefits from Elling’s collaboration with his bandmate Stu Mindeman, who plays piano and B-3 organ, arranges several tunes and contributes the 12/8 hymn “A Happy Thought,” merging his original music with a poem by Franz Wright that wrestles with the concept of human mortality.

“I was honored to be involved with *The Questions*,” Mindeman said via phone from Chicago, his hometown. “Branford’s inspiring direction and Tain’s energy on drums really helped us achieve a fresh spirit on the album. Kurt and I have a mutual interest in the connection between poetry and music, and he takes a poet’s approach to setting his lyrics to music.”

Below are edited highlights from DownBeat’s wide-ranging conversation with Elling.

DOWNBEAT: YOU’RE A DIED-IN-THE-WOOL CHICAGO GUY ...

KURT ELLING: And yet I’ve been [in New York City] for, hmm, it’s getting to be 10 years now.

PLUS, YOU’RE RAISING A FAMILY IN NEW YORK.

Yes, my 12-year-old daughter and our 1-and-a-half-year-old foster son. We’ve had him since he was six days old. We’re hoping to adopt him. We call him “Ajax”; that’s his nickname because we don’t get to name him.

IS THAT THE REFERENCE TO “MR. FABULOUS” IN THE ALBUM’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS?

Yep, that’s him, Mr. Fabulous. He’s our guy.

WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO LIVE IN NEW YORK?

Well, you don’t want to live your whole life and not live in New York if you’re a jazz musician. I love bumping into people in the street. I love not having a car. I love that you can step out any time, day or night, and there’s something happening. ... I’m happy to make the scene down at the [Jazz] Standard, Birdland, the Blue Note; and going to the [Village] Vanguard always feels like it’s a real moment in your life ... ’cause all the ghosts are in there.

But I’ve gotta say, having tried them all out, nothing beats [Chicago’s Green] Mill. The verve that’s in the room; the moxie. The young people. The drinks are being poured like it’s real. The ghosts are in there, too, but they’re ready to party ... I can’t wait to move back and get my weekly gig there again, for \$100 a night, or whatever [laughs], because it’s so much fun.

DO YOU THINK YOU WILL MOVE BACK AT SOME POINT?

I think so, because we’re not gonna have enough space if we [get to] keep the little man.

CONSIDERING THAT YOUR DEBUT ALBUM EARNED A 1995 GRAMMY NOMINATION, YOUR CAREER WAS IN PRETTY GOOD SHAPE WHEN YOU DECIDED TO MOVE.

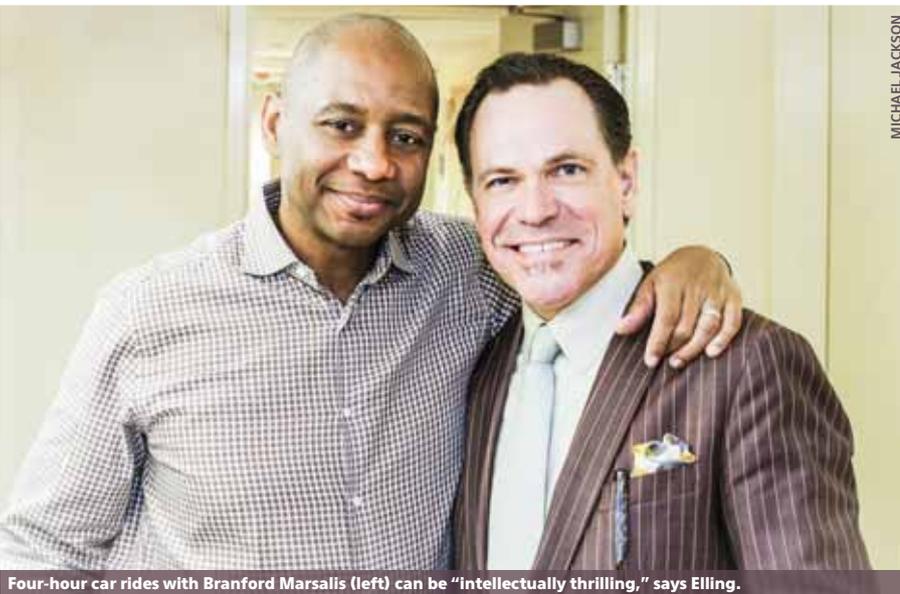
When you’re ambitious as hell, you want to give it every shot to be as big as it can be. And that’s not just because your ego is greedy, but because, I mean, what are we here for? If you’re trying to play music for people, you want to play it for as many people as you can, and encounter as many other musicians as you can, so you’ll learn more.

It’s a strange thing. I listen back to those records, and, wow, was I raw. There’s a lot of heart and intention, and I’m singing in tune most of the time, but in terms of more “jazz consequential” stuff, man, was I under-prepared. But I hope I’ll feel the same way when I’m 70 and listen back to what I’m doing now. The point is to keep making progress, to outdo yourself, and to keep, as much as you can, scoring a personal best.

YOU HAVE SAID THAT, EARLIER IN YOUR CAREER, YOU STRUGGLED A BIT WITH YOUR STAGE PERSONA. HOW DID YOU COME OUT OF THAT PHASE?

Keep living. That’s why I keep thinking about [age] 70. There are so many things I wanted to be. I was in love with [jazz] history, the recordings, and I wanted to be that. At a certain point you realize you’re not going to be that, you’re going to be you. But informed by all of that.

THE AMBITION OF THE NEW ALBUM IS EVIDENT. ON *THE QUESTIONS*, WE CAN SEE THE FORMER DIVINITY STUDENT AND THE MUSICIAN IN YOU COMING TOGETHER IN A VERY INTEGRATED WAY. WHAT



MICHAEL JACKSON

Four-hour car rides with Branford Marsalis (left) can be “intellectually thrilling,” says Elling.

PROMPTED THIS QUESTION? HOW MUCH OF IT IS A RESPONSE TO THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION?

Quite a lot of it is a response. Not just to the administration, but also the road that we've been going down. And Trump is just the most individually egregious example . . . History rhymes with itself, and things come around again, just like this whole rise of tribalism and fascism . . . To see the thing that you love, your nation, being assaulted from within, to see Washington, D.C., become a playground for madness, and to see the effects it is having on the weakest among us—it's not moral to stand by.

HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA TO START THE ALBUM WITH BOB DYLAN'S "A HARD RAIN'S A-GONNA FALL"?

Oh, man, as soon as I knew we were going to do that composition, I had a feeling it would [be the leadoff track]—even though I didn't know it was going to be a record called *The Questions*. The lyrics are straight out of today's headlines: the Boko Haram stuff, the children with weapons in their hands, the corruption . . . it's a masterpiece of list poetry. Then when we were in the studio with it, and I realized that Branford could have a solo on it and Tain could, too, I realized that, well, *that's* done [laughs].

REGARDING YOUR COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH BRANFORD, YOU HAVE SAID, "WE'RE HERE TO PLAY GREAT MELODIES AND EXPRESS AUTHENTIC EMOTION—TO BE THE REAL DEAL AS MUCH AS WE CAN." IN JAZZ, WHAT DOES BEING "THE REAL DEAL" MEAN TO YOU?

It means continually investigating . . . the greatest music that's come before us.

SO IT'S A RESPECT FOR TRADITION?

It's not just respect; it's a desire to apprehend the greatest ideas. Because how else are you gonna play them? The wealth that's come before us is such a treasure. Branford and I love a lot of the same guys, who played incred-

ible, emotional music, and got people to move and dance and stomp and sing. Like Gene Ammons, that fat Chicago sound that gets people to be excited that they came out.

I think of Wayne Shorter, for example. There's so much intellect happening. But that's not what draws me to it so much. And I don't think that's what draws the majority of the audience to Wayne. It's the *thrill*, the chance that anything could happen. His band is the same way—it's a thrill ride. The intellect is there, but it's driven by the spirit and the passion.

Branford's band is like that, too. Talk about passion. Every night those guys come and bring their anger, their frustration, their joy, their laughs and jokes and their love for each other. I was totally inspired being with that band for a year-and-a-half on the road . . . That's the stuff. You want the swinging feeling, the melodies that connect with people, and you want the passion. What are you doing otherwise?

HOW DID YOU AND BRANFORD SELECT SONGS FOR THE QUESTIONS?

I always have a backlog of songs I'm interested in doing. Most of the time, it has to do with lyrics that I've written, either to famous instrumentals or to something [new] I've heard, like Joey Calderazzo's stuff. I've been working on lyrics to a lot of his things. I've got lyrics to five Wayne Shorter songs, including "Speak No Evil." I've got one to a Ben Webster tune. I just want to record what's best for the project.

In this case, I put together a Dropbox of about 20 things and tossed them over to Branford, and said, "What do you think?" And he commented in his usual pithy and direct way [laughs]. I've always been attracted to really smart people who don't put up with any bullshit. That level of certainty—I respect it. You take a four-hour car ride with Branford—it's intellectually thrilling. What music is he going to play? What is he going to say about what I

play? He spun my head around about a bunch of things I took for granted, and reinforced some things that I had suspected.

We would listen to some singers . . . As you would imagine, he has strong opinions about what makes a jazz singer, [just] as he does on what makes a good saxophone player. . . . With Branford, it's just such declarative sentences! And you'd say, "Really? How come you say that?" Then I'd point out [something I liked], and he'd say, "Nah, ain't makin' it." Those are the kind of conversations you get to have usually when you're in music school or just starting out. And here I am, a 50-year-old man, and I'm being thrilled and fascinated by conversations about great recordings again with somebody I love and respect.

DID HE GET YOU TO LISTEN TO SOMEBODY YOU HADN'T APPRECIATED BEFORE?

He kept putting on [classical composer Richard Strauss'] *Der Rosenkavalier*. And I said, "Wow, this is tough listening." And he said, "I know. I wanted to understand it, and I walked around with *Der Rosenkavalier* and listened to nothing else for two years until I understood it." It's true. If you want to understand the sound of something, then you've got to listen to it until you understand it.

HOW IMPORTANT TO YOU IS WRITING LYRICS? ARE YOU ALWAYS WRITING?

I'm trying. I think it's my strongest suit. I've written some songs, but I'm not really a composer. But thanks to Eddie Jefferson and Jon Hendricks, there's an avenue for me. Inasmuch as I can make artistic progress in that obscure and under-explored realm, and present it with clarity and it's musical, then I want to do it. I think it's a worthy pursuit. It's not gonna make me any money, but I can say a lot of things that I want to say.

ON DEDICATED TO YOU, YOUR 2009 TRIBUTE TO JOHNNY HARTMAN AND JOHN COLTRANE, YOU DIDN'T TRY TO IMITATE THOSE MASTERS. YOU DESCRIBED IT AS "HOMAGE THROUGH INNOVATION." DOES THE SAME IDEA APPLY TO YOUR TREATMENT OF THE MODERN CLASSICS ON THE QUESTIONS?

The most essential thing is the *force* of the sound. That's why Trane at his best is not "Giant Steps;" that was an exercise. It's not the intellect or the mathematics. It's "I Want To Talk About You," when . . . after blowing incredible, gorgeous melodies that have never been apprehended before, they return to the bridge, and he and Elvin hit [sings the melody]. *That's* the spot. That's the stuff that people respond to. So, when you're talking about innovation—I'm never gonna out-math Trane. I want to learn the math, so that I can be articulate about my passion. But we do this to get to the place where there's so much passion happening that we lose ourselves.

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