



**JOHN BEASLEY**  
**presents *MONK'ESTRA, VOLUME 1***

**John Beasley** has shared stages with some of the most important names in jazz during his three-decade career. From his days as a member of Freddie Hubbard's quintet and one of Miles Davis' last touring bands to his role as Music Director for Jazz Day galas for the Thelonious Monk Institute, Beasley has had a first-hand involvement with the genre's never-ending evolution.

Thelonious Monk is a Mount Rushmore figure in the creation of modern jazz. As the centennial of his birth rapidly approaches, Beasley—pianist, conductor and arranger—has grappled with the complex composer's legacy with his versatile big band riffing on the wit and unmistakable architecture of the Monk songbook with irrepressible energy and swinging abandon on **presents *MONK'estra, Volume 1***, available August 19 on Mack Avenue Records.

The album and band have its roots in a commission from Los Angeles's Luckman Jazz Orchestra. When the gig was over, Beasley felt inspired to search deeper and continued to write more arrangements long after the performance, eventually assembling some of the finest musicians in Los Angeles to bring the charts to life in a musician's union rehearsal room.

Amassing enough arrangements and developing a signature feel, he took the band public at Los Angeles's jazz incubator, the Blue Whale, to sold-out crowds. With a fifteen-piece ensemble, which includes first-call horns like Bob Sheppard, Bijon Watson, Rashawn Ross, Beasley conducted the band with an improviser's eye—free flowing and open to solos that add to the narrative. Since that casual debut in 2013, the band has become a fixture on the scene, performing at Disney Hall, Jazz Standard, Ford Amphitheatre, SFJAZZ twice and most recently at the Playboy Jazz Festival held at the world famous Hollywood Bowl.

"I don't play a lot of piano in the band," Beasley says about his role. "The band is my piano. It gives me the opportunity to change the music on the spot by conducting. I can cut everybody out and have myself play or I could change the order of the solos. Whoever is hot that night, I can keep throwing it their way."

Through a lens influenced by Thad Jones, Gil Evans, Herbie Hancock and Aaron Copland, Beasley found a compositional openness in Monk's music that encouraged him to discover the right combination of freedom and restraint, coaxing the very best from the ensemble.

"Jimmy Heath once told me that all the good stuff is already built into Monk. The tunes are built to swing. The sound he got out of the piano, the way he played the piano, the voicings he used, the wild intervals. His groove was so strong." And Beasley is no stranger to strong grooves. "The sign of a great composer—like Gershwin, Ellington, Wayne Shorter or Stevie Wonder—is that you can play their tunes at any tempo and change the structure if you like. Bach sounds incredible at any tempo. So does Monk. His tunes are a living and breathing organism."

Opening track "Epistrophe" was Beasley's first attempt at a large-scale Monk arrangement and he tackles the angular tune with an elongated sense of time, controlling each breath with unwavering patience. Vibraphonist Gary Burton shines during a shimmering guest spot. "What a virtuoso," says Beasley. "One take, boom! He just nailed it."

Beasley pulls from two very different worlds for "Skippy" simultaneously evoking the Jaco Pastorius and Jimmie Lunceford big bands. Sheppard is in top form on the twisting chart, unfurling a crisp soprano saxophone over the controlled chaos of riffs and handclaps. Beasley infuses a literal electricity for "Oska T" and a trio version of "Round Midnight." The band conjures a sinister swagger, generating a buzzing hive for trumpeters Gabriel Johnson and Brian Swartz to cut loose while the trio embraces the pliability of Monk's greatest known composition with a contemporary bend.

During a visit to New Orleans, Beasley was inspired to fuse multiple Monk riffs to create “Monk’s Processional,” a brief second-line celebration imbued with southern charm and spirit. A crowd favorite, the performance strikes just the right tone of playful reverence.

On the densely shifting moves on “Ask Me Now,” harmonica player Grégoire Maret guests with support from Tom Peterson and Tom Luer’s spooky bass clarinet duo. The unusual instrumentation helps to push the languid stroll into another world. Two tunes embrace the footwork essential to Monk’s greatest ideas. Beasley envisions a soft-shoe routine for a bouncing “Gallop’s Gallop.” “Little Rootie Tootie” picks up a partner, embracing the cha-cha amid the funky refrains and growling support of the brass. The band closes out with “Coming on the Hudson,” making deliberate steps amid the arrangements delicate flourishes and steady push from the endlessly creative drummer Terreon Gully.

As the name of the album implies, this is only the beginning for Beasley’s large-scale exploration of the High Priest of Bebop. The band’s introduction is an undeniable statement from a great new voice in big band arranging and a testament to the timelessness of Monk’s music.

“We all know that Monk’s music is strong on his own,” says Beasley. “What’s even more amazing is how much room there is to keep his music alive. The songs are a living and breathing organism. It can keep changing with the times. Maybe we’re even catching up to his time.”

### **About John Beasley:**

Born in Louisiana, Beasley started writing arrangements in junior high school, which sparked the attention of Jimmy Lyons—the founder of the Monterey Jazz Festival—who recommended him for a scholarship at the Stan Kenton summer jazz camp. The pianist cut his teeth with Miles Davis and Freddie Hubbard in the 1980s and has since performed and recorded with a who’s who of artists including James Brown, Marcus Miller, Chaka Khan, Christian McBride, Steely Dan, Dianne Reeves, Sergio Mendes, Carly Simon, John Patitucci, Al Jarreau, Kelly Clarkson, George Duke, John Legend, Chick Corea, Destiny’s Child and Queen Latifah, among others.

Living in Hollywood, Beasley juggled a touring musician’s schedule while working in studios composing for award-winning television sitcoms and commercials including Cheers, Family Ties, Star Trek and Fame, to name a few. He has worked with multiple Oscar-nominated film composer Thomas Newman for three decades on credits including James Bond *Spectre* and *Skyfall*, *Get On Up: James Brown*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel I & II*, *Finding Nemo & Finding Dory*, *Wall-E*, *Shawshank Redemption* and more.

While touring with Miles Davis, Beasley was inspired to make his first of eleven recordings, *Cauldron*—which was produced by Walter Becker of Steely Dan—and went on to earn a GRAMMY® Award nomination for his 2011 release *Positootly*. He has since served as musical director for the Monk Institute’s gala concerts since 2011, guiding legends and the next generation of jazz greats through all-star tributes to Quincy Jones, Bill Clinton, George Duke and Aretha Franklin. He has also served this role for International Jazz Day since 2012, notably at the White House’s 2016 blowout bash. Under the global eye, he seamlessly shaped the televised concert featuring Aretha Franklin, Wayne Shorter, Joey Alexander and Sting through a night of swing and celebration. Since 2005, Beasley has worked as Lead Arranger for *American Idol* until its final season in 2016, and ushered the twelve female finalists of 2005 (including Carrie Underwood) by coaching and rehearsing them as well as selecting and arranging songs.

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**Mack Avenue Records • Release Date: August 19, 2016**

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