

# UK JAZZ NEWS

## INTERVIEW WITH MARK LEWANDOWSKI

by [Sebastian Scotney](#) 21 May 2023



Mark Lewandowski. Photo credit: Alex Bonney

***“This last couple of years have been amongst the most productive of my life. I’m thrilled to have been accepted by the New York City Jazz community...”, says Nottingham-born bassist Mark Lewandowski.***

***It is now nearly six years since he left the UK at the invitation of Wynton Marsalis, originally to join the Juilliard Artist Diploma Ensemble. We last interviewed him at the end of 2021 (link below), in the context of a new album. Now, with another album – “A Bouquet (for Lady Day)”, with Heidi Vogel and Liam Noble on Ubuntu Music – set to appear in mid-July, we took the opportunity to check the facts of his amazing recent story... and to congratulate him!***

**UKJazz News:** *I spotted your name as a frequent player in the Mingus Big Band at their Wednesday residency. That’s quite an honour!!! How did the first one happen?*

**Mark Lewandowski:** Yes, although I wouldn’t say I’m quite a ‘frequent player’ yet! It’s been such an honor the couple of times I’ve been able to play that timeless music with that incredible band. I remember my excitement in hearing the Mingus Big Band at Ronnie Scott’s when I was living in London. One thing I remember vividly is how the musicians in the band loved to hang out after their set and sit in during the jam session. I’d very often be part of the jam session band at Ronnies and that’s how I met a lot of their long-term members – Philip Harper, Wayne Escoffery, Boris Kozlov, Dave Kikoski, Frank Lacy. Those guys are a huge reason I’ve been called to play with the band now I’m here in New York. I’ve been lucky to maintain connections with a lot of those musicians and have worked with them in their own group and other bands since relocating. Their recommendation ways in at a lot and I’m honored to be on the rotating roster now. Mingus’ music is very special to me – it was in many ways my gateway into the music and the bass. They celebrated Charles’ centennial last year and had a lot of concerts celebrating his music. The then-manager of the band called me up and said ‘you need to get down to Dizzy’s Club right now. We have a surprise’ (this was before I’d had the opportunity to play with the band). Anyhow, I went down to Dizzy’s super jet-lagged and run down, having just come back from a long tour and low and behold they had both of Mingus’ basses laying there on the bandstand. After the concert, Boris and the management let me spend some time with each of his instruments. It was truly one of those goosebumps moments. Especially playing his famous ‘lions head’ Roth bass. That bass played EVERYWHERE! At Massey Hall with Bird, on most of his recordings.

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**UKJN:** *And now you've been back and played a few times?*

**ML:** Yes a couple of times now. I hope to get the call again and to continue my relationship with the organization. They have a rotating cast of musicians come through the band which has been the model for a long time. A lot of the greatest names in the New York scene have gone through that band and historically they've always given the most promising a start. They're starting a new Monday night residency this Summer. After the Jazz Standard closed, it was a big shame. I used to love going to those Monday nights to hear the band there. I used to go there with Henry Grimes and his wife. Henry loved Mingus' music!





**UKJN:** *And you've been spending some Mondays.... in the Village Vanguard Orchestra too?*

**ML:** Oh yes! I mean that has been yet another huge honor! It's strange too as, before these two calls came in, I was playing with big band only very rarely. It's amazing how two of the greatest bands in the world have now called me in such quick succession! Of course the legacy of the Village Vanguard goes without saying. In a very 'New York' way, I got the call to sub with the band at about 5pm from their pianist, Adam Birnbaum. Of course I hastily said yes, and 2 hours later I'm carrying my bass down those famous red

stairs where all of my heroes have played. It was such a whirlwind that the weight of playing there passed me by – I was totally focussed on playing the gig to the best of my ability. It looks like I did though because they've called me back to sub a few times now! I must have made an impression as that very first night, I was the only musician that wasn't the official band-member! The history in that band is stunning, many of the guys having played with Thad Jones and Mel Lewis over its various configurations. I mean that saxophone section alone – Dick Oatts, Billy Drewes, Ralph Lalama, Rich Perry and Gary Smulyan!! Now I've done the gig a few times, every time David Wong (their regular bassist) calls me to make a gig, I get the excitement feeling without the nerves of the first night. It's a pleasure and again, I'm so very grateful to be given the opportunity every now and then to make music in that historic club with those incredible musicians.



L-R: Rick Germanson, Mark Lewandowski and Joe Chambers at The Side Door

**UKJN:** *And since good things are supposed to happen in threes, I understand you've also appeared on a Blue Note album?*

**ML:** Wow, what can I say about this? Again I guess it speaks to the importance of mentorship and recommendation in the jazz world. This time I think it was Javon Jackson who recommended me to the great **Joe Chambers**, whose record I was on. I think two of my other heroes and mentors recommended

me to Javon in turn – Peter Washington and Gerald Cannon. To have the recommendation of your elders, and especially those who play your instrument is such a wonderful feeling. Gerald, Peter and Ben Wolfe have done a lot of amazing things for me and I value their advice and love greatly. It's a good job they're to busy!! That's the reason I'm getting a lot of these opportunities haha! I recently got to sub for Peter for three nights with the great Peter Bernstein at Birdland. Again, this was with about 1 hours notice. New York moves like that. If you blink you've missed it, it's fast. But back to the Blue Note recording. Obviously I'm obsessed with that labels output and its' cultural significance in the history of the music. Twinning that with the fact I was there recording with master-drummer Joe Chambers, who is himself THE SOUND of Blue Note, I was truly on cloud nine for this.

In fact I was meant to record for Blue Note with Joe in 2021. We'd rehearsed, had the dates in our calendars and then the world shut down before we got to make the record. I remember being pretty heartbroken to have the opportunity taken away like that. It was a rough day actually. I was going to be playing the proms with Wynton Marsalis in London that year and I'm pretty sure I found out that gig was cancelled on the same day as the bad news about this record date. Anyhow, I just put it down as one of those things and carried on. Cut to 2022 when I get another call from Joe asking me to be part of this recently released record, 'Dance Kobina'. Of course I jumped on this opportunity again and it was an all-round incredible experience. I can proudly say I am on a Blue Note record now. Certainly a milestone in my personal development and a huge tick on the bucket-list. Joe is incredible, I grew up listening to him with Joe Henderson, Bobby Hutcherson, Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea and basically everyone you've ever heard of. Playing with such an important musical voice is a blessing and a humungous learning experience.

**UKJN:** *And you now have a regular teaching job too?*

**ML:** Yes, I've joined the faculty of the Jackie McLean Institute of Jazz at the University of Hartford. Again a great privilege and I take the job very seriously. Dr McLean spilled his blood, sweat and tears in forming this program which has so much important history. I'm greatly aware of this and the importance of the position, I never take for granted. I'm enjoying my time with my bass students and find I'm really getting a lot out of teaching on this level. I'm proud of what they're achieving and I'm flattered to be a small part in helping them grow in their passion, dedication and love for this music.

**UKJN:** *Have you maintained your links with the JALC structures?*

**ML:** I have – I live just a stones-throw from Jazz at Lincoln Center, by Columbus Circle so I always feel close to them! Recently I've been on a few longer tours as part of their umbrella. Not with the big band,

but with some other projects that they're touring now with an amazing touring agency called IMG Music. These usually focus on the younger musicians on the scene. I just did 5 weeks with a band led by trumpeter Riley Mulhekar called 'Songs We Love'. I've done some gigs with a band reinterpreting the music of Thelonious Monk, largely led by vibraphonist Joel Ross. I'm headed to Saudi Arabia on Monday with Benny Benack and then doing a 10 week tour with him and Bria Skonburg in the US next year. They're truly a wonderful organization and I'm thrilled to be part of the family. You already know the love I have for Wynton and the importance of him in my journey.

**UKJN:** *And what's the story of you recently going to South Africa?*

**ML:** Back in 2022 I have the great honor of winning 1st place in the UNISA International Jazz Strings Competition in Pretoria, South Africa. This was the only competition I've ever entered and I was a bit hesitant to do so in the first place. I don't usually like to mix music with competition, although I was assured that this particular competition (the only one of its kind on the African continent) was an amazing experience and opportunity. My good friend, pianist Addison Frei, won the Piano Competition a few years prior. Well it all worked out great and I took home the first prize! The former president Thabo Mbeki (who was Vice President under Mandela) awarded me the prize and there was lot of ceremony around the whole thing. It was the start of what I hope to be a long-lasting and rich relationship with the country. I found it to be an incredible place and of all the many places I've been lucky enough to travel through music, one of my favorites for sure. I've long admired the music created through the unique collaborations of South African and British musicians. During apartheid, many South Africans moved to the U.K in exile so they could play in mixed bands. The Brotherhood of Breath and The Blue Notes are two of my favorite bands of this generation. I value this special relationship and hope to continue in those great musicians' footsteps. I certainly have plans to collaborate with some of the younger generation of South African musicians and build on this collective history. I just got back from another trip to Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban, where I was yesterday when we spoke. Again it was a thrilling experience, visiting some universities and playing a few gigs with some musicians over there. I was chatting with some amazing players and I have big plans for the future when it comes down to me and South Africa.

**UKJN:** *Er... Anything else to mention?*

Well I think the most obvious thing is the amount of times in one interview I've used the word 'honored'. I truly mean this though. This last couple of years have been amongst the most productive of my life. I'm thrilled to have been accepted by the New York City Jazz community and I'm enjoying



everything about the journey of being here. I still have so much reverence for the place, and a lot to achieve here. I feel like I've found many lifelong friends and musical partnerships here. I'm of course proud of what I've achieved and relieved that my approach of keeping my head down; working hard; having respect for the tradition and being active socially and musically have worked so far. New York really is a wonderful place and despite the strains of living here and some of the difficulties, I find it to be inspiring and energizing. I'm very lucky to have such wonderful friends and mentors here who are helping me greatly as I move from one opportunity to the next and I'm excited to continue contributing to the musical landscape of this amazing city. If I could go back in time and tell the 17 year old Mark that I've played at the Village Vanguard and recorded for Blue Note Records I'd think I was dreaming. Actually that's not the case. I've always had the ambition to live a rich life, pushing myself within my chosen art form. I'm glad I've had the opportunity to achieve what I have at this stage, but I'm not getting complacent at all. I'm already thinking about what's on the horizon and trying to grow as a musician and man. I'd like to represent the importance of this music; celebrate its beauty and empower others to join in this journey of learning together. This really is a beautiful way to live life and I wouldn't change my path significantly at all, if I could choose again what to do with my time here on earth.



Liam Noble, Heidi Vogel, Mark Lewandowski at the Vortex. Photo credit Alex Bonney



**UKJN:** *And you have found the time to come to London and record an album? What's that story?*

**ML:** Of course! I really do wish that I could have been more transatlantic this last few years. After I finished at Juilliard I had every ambition of coming back to the U.K a lot more to work with some of my significant musical partnerships there. Unfortunately, the pandemic had other ideas. Now that things are getting a little better on that front, I aim to make this happen much more. Last October I made the first step in this by recording a new album. I teamed up with Liam Noble again, who I consider to be a great inspiration and a wonderful friend and collaborator. We dipped our toes back into the concept of reimagining historical repertoire. After the success of 'Waller', my debut in 2017, we this time chose to explore music associated with or written by Billie Holiday. The album also features one of my all time favorite vocalists, the incredible Heidi Vogel, who's singing is a pure joy. She joins us on 2 tracks of the album. It's called 'A Bouquet (for Lady Day)' and will be released in July 2023 on Ubuntu Music. I'm thrilled to have began this partnership Martin and the label, who I think provide a very safe and supportive space for creative music. I'm proud of the music on this recording and what we've achieved with such limited instrumentation. It truly is a thank you to Billie, celebrating the beauty of her life and especially her significant musical relationships. Too often the emphasis is on the tragedy in her short life. I think again we've avoided falling into the dangers of pastiche and nostalgia and I find the results to be fresh and current in their aesthetic. We recorded at the Vortex, again with Alex Bonney doing his incredible work on the recording, mixing and mastering. I also did some teaching when I was back in London. Some young bass players I hadn't met before who've come onto the scene since I relocated. Damn they can play! I was seriously impressed with their dedication, knowledge and care they put into their craft. It's hugely encouraging and I'm happy and proud that the U.K has so many phenomenal bassists who'll surely go from strength to strength.

**UKJN:** *You will let us know – I hope – if there is going to be a London launch??*

**ML:** For sure! This will correlate with my next visit to the UK. I need to speak with Liam and Heidi about their availability – they're both so in demand!! We have every intention of touring this band and launching the music in London. Of course I'll share this when we have some solid dates in our schedule, but know that it's going to be in the near future!

[Mark Lewandowski website](#)

[Artist page at Ubuntu Music](#)

[Our 2021 interview](#)