

Earl MacDonald

jazz pianist • composer/arranger • conductor • educator

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Described as “a magical, musical alchemist of hip hybrids” (Hartford Courant) and “a major force in the world of jazz composition” (Dan Bilawsky, AllAboutJazz.com), MacDonald’s inexhaustible commitment to the jazz art form reveals itself in his performing, composing and teaching.

All seven of MacDonald’s albums differ in instrumentation – ranging from a quartet comprised of cello, saxophone, piano & percussion to a full 17-piece jazz big band. This variance speaks to MacDonald’s restless artistic spirit, unquenchable inquisitiveness and his desire to continue stretching himself musically. Such experimentation led one reviewer to speculate vis-à-vis “. . . an attempt to create a hybrid jazz form” (JazzReview.com). Each project leaves an indelible impression, garnering critical acclaim and accolades: two Independent Music Awards (for Jazz Song and Jazz Producer of the Year) and two JUNO nominations for jazz album of the year.

As a composer, MacDonald embraces the roles of social commentator and provocateur, broaching consequential subject matter in his music. In addition to composing music for his own ensembles and recording projects, MacDonald often receives commissions to write pieces for jazz big bands. Praised for his creative compositional voice, MacDonald won the Sammy Nestico Award, sponsored by the Airmen of Note, was a finalist for Charlie Parker Jazz Composition Award (during his affiliation with the BMI Jazz Composer’s Workshop in New York City) and twice he appeared as a finalist for the ArtEZ Composition Contest in the Netherlands. His compositions for 17-piece jazz orchestra have been performed by professional and university-based ensembles across North America.

MacDonald serves as a professor and Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Connecticut. The UConn Chapter of the AAUP honored MacDonald with its Excellence in Teaching Innovation Award (2006), and the Teaching Promise award (2003). In 2013 he garnered the *Outstanding Faculty Award* for the School of Fine Arts. His passion for jazz education stretches beyond UConn; he adjudicates educational jazz festivals in the U.S. and Canada, presents at conferences, conducts high school honor bands, and teaches at summer programs and jazz camps.

His own education includes a bachelor of music degree in jazz performance at Montréal’s McGill University and a master of music degree from Rutgers, where he apprenticed with NEA Jazz Master, Kenny Barron. (Barron’s recording of MacDonald’s *Wanton Spirit* earned a Grammy-nomination.) MacDonald jokes about “attending the *Maynard Ferguson Finishing School for Bandleaders-in-Training*.” The experience he gained as Ferguson’s pianist and musical director at the end of the 1990s cast a formative imprint.

Despite his considerable career accomplishments, one senses the best lies ahead. He recently accepted the musically influential role of Composer-in-Residence for the Hartford Jazz Orchestra. MacDonald says, “Artistically, I hope to continue the long, impactful tradition of political and social activism that jazz music and its musicians have created.”