

Earl MacDonald

Composer · Pianist · Educator

Full Biography

Earl MacDonald is a socially engaged composer, pianist, and educator whose work blends jazz, classical, and global traditions into carefully constructed musical responses to the most urgent challenges of our time. His recent compositions engage themes of climate change, migration, systemic injustice, political polarization, and the human search for hope—translated into sound worlds that are at once lyrical, probing, and quietly confrontational. For MacDonald, music is not escapism; it is a call to attention, empathy, and civic responsibility.

A two-time JUNO nominee for Jazz Album of the Year and recipient of the Sammy Nestico Award, MacDonald has released seven recordings ranging from chamber ensembles to full jazz orchestra. His dectet album *Open Borders* marked a significant artistic shift, reframing composition as a form of civic dialogue. The project was recognized with the Connecticut Office of the Arts' Artistic Excellence Award and signaled a deepening commitment to socially conscious musical storytelling grounded in meticulous craft.

MacDonald's work has also been shaped by close engagement with the jazz lineage. He served as musical director, pianist, and arranger for the Maynard Ferguson Big Bop Nouveau Band, and his composition *Wanton Spirit* was recorded by Kenny Barron as the title track of a Grammy-nominated album—an early affirmation of his compositional voice within the tradition.

His interdisciplinary collaborations further reflect an interest in art as social inquiry. Projects such as the animated short *By Our Love* examine ideological division and moral responsibility, while ongoing partnerships across media explore the intersections of music, narrative, and activism.

As Professor of Music and Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Connecticut, MacDonald teaches with the same intentionality that defines his creative work, emphasizing artistic integrity, global literacy, deep listening, and socially informed musicianship. He remains active as a clinician and adjudicator, bringing a reflective, holistic perspective to diverse educational and artistic settings.

His current project, *Songs for a Shifting World*, represents a culmination of his evolving artistic identity. Reimagining art song as a living, contemporary form, the work weaves classical lineage, jazz sensibility, and global influence to confront ecological crisis, human displacement, systemic injustice, and fragile resilience—offering listeners a space for contemplation rather than certainty.

Across all his work, MacDonald composes from a place of conscience, treating music not as refuge, but as responsibility. His music invites audiences not only to listen, but to think, to feel, and to engage more deeply with the world they inhabit.

Modular Short Bios (for presenters)

A. Medium Bio (~200 words)

Earl MacDonald is a socially engaged composer, pianist, and educator whose work blends jazz, classical, and global traditions into music shaped by contemporary social and political realities. His compositions address themes including climate change, migration, systemic injustice, and political polarization—treating music as a site of reflection, dialogue, and responsibility.

A two-time JUNO nominee for Jazz Album of the Year and recipient of the Sammy Nestico Award, MacDonald has released seven recordings ranging from chamber ensembles to jazz orchestra. His dectet album *Open Borders* marked a major artistic evolution, redefining composition as a form of civic dialogue and earning the Connecticut Office of the Arts' Artistic Excellence Award.

MacDonald's composition *Wanton Spirit* was recorded by Kenny Barron as the title track of Barron's Grammy-nominated album, and he previously served as musical director, pianist, and arranger for the Maynard Ferguson Big Bop Nouveau Band. His music has been performed by professional jazz orchestras and leading university ensembles throughout North America.

Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Connecticut, MacDonald is known for teaching with the same intentionality that defines his music. His current project, *Songs for a Shifting World*, reimagines art song as a contemporary form addressing ecological crisis, human displacement, and fragile resilience.

B. Short Bio (~100 words)

Earl MacDonald is a composer, pianist, and educator whose work blends jazz, classical, and global traditions into socially engaged contemporary music. A two-time JUNO nominee and recipient of the Sammy Nestico Award, he has released seven recordings spanning chamber ensembles and jazz orchestra. His dectet album *Open Borders* marked a shift toward composition as civic dialogue and received the Connecticut Office of the Arts' Artistic Excellence Award. MacDonald's music has been recorded by Kenny Barron and performed by professional ensembles across North America. He is Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Connecticut.

C. Very Short Bio (~50 words)

Earl MacDonald is a socially engaged composer and pianist whose work bridges jazz, classical, and global traditions. A two-time JUNO nominee and Sammy Nestico Award recipient, his music has been recorded by Kenny Barron and performed internationally. He is Director of Jazz Studies at the University of Connecticut.