



“EARTHWARDS” SONG DESCRIPTIONS

1. "Earthwards" with Mario Castro (Tenor Sax) - 6:11 Medium

I composed this tune right after my first lesson in the Alexander Technique - a practical method for expanding perception and reducing unnecessary muscular and mental tension. The technique is often used by musicians and actors, and it aims to help artists understand and tap into natural energy sources. For instance, one can utilize gravitational energy at times in order to conserve muscle energy. This first lesson was an exciting breakthrough in my musicianship! Afterwards, while contemplating and envisioning gravitational energy, I began to formulate some ideas for this song's melody. I felt connected to the energy source - the very core of the Earth. All our lives, we are pulled earthwards - towards home. To me, this energy is the source of all creativity... and the source of my music.

2. "Floating Twice" with Felix Peikli (Clarinets) - 5:48 Fast

This tune was written during an intensive solo practice session in the basement rehearsal space I leased near Berklee College of Music. It was a cold, grimy basement along Boylston Street with wires hanging from the ceiling and fast food kitchens above. As it was well after 3:00am, my mind was slightly in a dreamlike state and I nearly fell asleep twice while practicing. I remember the peculiar, floating sensation of drifting off while still playing notes, and I developed this tune from that feeling. The strong riff at the end, featuring Felix on bass clarinet, is a nod to my roots in rock music.

3. "Desert Front" with Mario Castro (Tenor Sax) - 8:05 Medium

“Desert Front” begins with the image of a man standing outside the gates of a dusty fortress along a boundless, arid desert. He could enter the fortress and enjoy shade, food, and rest - but something compels him to venture into the wilderness. And so, he sets out alone - hungry, unprepared - and soon is lost among the endless, identical sand dunes. By the middle of the tune, he can see the tantalizing waters of an oasis in the distance - but, alas, it is just a mirage. Days go by, and yet he presses on - without water; step by step closer to his death - constantly taunted by false visions of cool, life-giving water. He finally sees an oasis that is real, far, far in the distance. The man inches towards his salvation... Does he make it in the end?

4. "Pavane" with Felix Peikli (Clarinets) - 7:49 Medium

After composing this piece, I thought that the harmonic movement sounded superbly dark - I even considered naming the song “Requiem”. However, once I brought the song to rehearsal, I found such a sense of fun and adventure in playing it. In the end, I kept the idea of using a traditional title since the harmony and form are so classically influenced. The melody within the chorus also follows conventional pavane form: three distinct motifs, each followed by a respective variation. It is one of my favorite tracks on the album. In particular, I love Zwe's stellar bass work, which gives the solo section a very lyrical conclusion.

5. "Truth & the Abstract Blues" with Felix Peikli (Clarinet) - 7:13 Fast to Medium

The name of this song is a play on the title of one of my favorite jazz albums, *The Blues and the Abstract Truth* (1961), by the great reed player and composer Oliver Nelson. In particular, his song "Stolen Moments" was a special influence in the composition of "Truth & the Abstract Blues". I've written two notable themes throughout my piece: "The Truth", which is lively, rhythmic, and elusive, and "The Abstract Blues": mellow, cool, and slightly orthodox. I used a Dean Palomino Solo Archtop Guitar to compose this piece - but I'm playing a Gibson ES-175 in the recording. The band has such a fresh energy in this take, which showcases the incredible phrasing and tone of Felix Peikli.

6. "Opener" Featuring The Original Yuto-Trio - 5:19 Fast

Halfway through the album, I thought I'd return to the roots of my musicianship by showcasing the original trio. This song is especially fun to play due to the "call and response" style of trading at the head, which evokes jazz standards such as "Stompin' at the Savoy". I often play "Opener" as the first song of the night because it always energizes the band. It has that classic bebop feel, while utilizing more modern harmonies. And as usual, Jonathan is slammin' hard on this tune. "Opener" is my nod to both traditional jazz and bebop - the essential foundations of our modern jazz vocabulary.

7. "The Ocean" with Felix Peikli (Clarinet) - 7:15 Medium

The melody for "The Ocean" comes from a deeply emotional part of me, as it was composed directly following the tragic Japanese earthquake and tsunami of March 11th, 2011. At the time I was living in Boston. It is hard to convey the sense of helplessness I felt while seeing such events unfold from afar. I was able to express a few of my overwhelming feelings in this composition, which I debuted at a tsunami benefit concert held at the All Asia Bar in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My band featured Hiro Honshuku on flute that evening. In spite of such a catastrophic situation, it was good to see the community come together. My hometown is in Fukushima Prefecture, one of the regions most affected by this disaster. In Japan, we have a distinct relationship with the ocean and view it as the source of life itself. We also have a challenging history with nuclear energy - I myself was born in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl incident. When composing "The Ocean", I tried to paint a beautiful picture of the sea, seen through the lens of impermanence. The majority of our Earth's surface is ocean - powerful, dangerous, vast, and beautiful. It is a vital part of Earthwards.

8. "A Dream of you (Dancing in the Shallows)" with Mario Castro (Tenor Sax) - 6:24 Fast

Imagine, if you will, someone that you love dearly, dancing for joy in the shallow waters of a beautiful lake. Imagine their feeling of freedom as they send splashes of water outward with every movement. Imagine, then, that this is a dream of theirs. Picture them sleeping soundly, dreaming of the shallows. And now realize that it is you who are dreaming of them. When listening to this piece, try and discern the borders between the shallows, their dream, and your own. The goal of my composition is to blur this distinction. Our own joy resides within the dreams of the ones we love.

9. "Three" with Felix Peikli (Bass Clarinet) - 8:39 Slow

This is the only tune on the album that I composed in Japan before coming to Boston in 2007. It was one of the first melodies that I could 'hear' in my head and bring to life through technique and arrangement. I wrote it from an instinctive, youthful perspective, and I'd consider it to be my very first jazz composition. For me, three is an important and balanced number in music. Traditional chords are determined by a triad of notes. For bands, I feel that a trio is the most freeing configuration of musicians - whether it be for jazz or the proverbial "power trio" in rock. Duos can be a slightly limiting format, and a quartet often requires a more structured arrangement. But three is supportive and freeing. I think the number is also important to me because I have two siblings, and I am the middle child.

10. "Eli" with Mario Castro (Tenor Sax) - 4:42 Fast

"Eli" was composed right after I first heard the song "Three Card Molly" on Elvin Jones' 1982 album, Earth Jones. One of my best friends, Japanese bassist Shota Ishikawa, played this record for me at his place during a late-night hang. We listened to music until the early hours of the morning. When I returned home, the sun was already up. Exhausted, I nonetheless sat down at my piano and let the melody to "Eli" flow through my fingers. I felt something very powerful happen then, and envisioned an intense image of great strength. Thus, I named my new tune "Eli" after the Semitic term for "deity".

11. "Pinwheel" Featuring Yuto Kanazawa (Guitar) - 1:42 Slow

In writing this solo guitar piece, I drew inspiration from my mentor, guitarist and artist Jon Damian, who teaches at Berklee College of Music. He has written an extremely informative book entitled *The Guitarist's Guide to Composing and Improvising*. When I was still in high school, my father gave me a copy of this book, and it had a major impact on me. At the time, I didn't quite understand the heavier concepts, but the CD that was included helped me realize that I was destined to attend Berklee. Several years later, I achieved this dream and took Jon's "Creative Workshop" class there. In fact, I'm honored to be a part of his upcoming book, in which I will present some of my ideas based on his brilliant concepts. My song is named "Pinwheel" because the melody evokes circular, rotational movement. As one cycle ends, another begins. Our whole universe is built upon such cyclical patterns of decay and renewal. So it is fitting that we conclude our journey Earthwards with something new...

12. "Truth & the Abstract Blues (Featuring Kurt Elling)" (Vocals) - 8:11 Fast to Medium

It was such a great experience to record this tune with the outstanding jazz vocalist, Kurt Elling. What a vibrant, energetic and talented person! The idea to add vocals to my song came from bass player Dave D'Arango, who produced this album. During the mixing stages, he kept saying that he 'heard' vocals on one of my songs. I didn't think much of it until he presented me with lyrics and a rough vocal demo one day. I saw the potential, and agreed to try it for the album as long as we found the right singer. With the kind help of Mitch Haupers and Jimmy Haslip, Dave was able to secure a recording session with Kurt just in time to meet our final mix and mastering deadlines. The recording was held at the famous Avatar Studios in New York City, and it was an invaluable experience. I was struck by Kurt's great professionalism and inventiveness. He suggested great lyric changes, had cool ideas for overdubbing, and, displayed a truly remarkable ear for jazz improvisation. It is an experience I'll never forget, and one that opened me up to a new palette of composition. I hope you enjoy this version of "Truth & the Abstract Blues" as much as I do.