

Chuck Owen (Long Bio)

Chuck Owen is Distinguished University Professor of Jazz Studies at the University of South Florida. A committed, passionate, and nationally respected jazz educator for over 35 years, having established USF's acclaimed jazz program; he is recognized equally for his unique compositional voice; one steeped thoroughly in the jazz tradition but drawing on a diverse array of additional influences from contemporary classical and American folk/roots music to Latin styles, funk, hip-hop, . . . even country! The result is an evocative, thoughtful, and frequently quite playful/joyous body of work.

Owen's primary creative outlet is his own 19-piece *Jazz Surge*. Founding the ensemble in 1995, Owen serves as conductor, primary composer/arranger, and producer of its six highly-feted CDs. *Whispers On the Wind*, the ensemble's most recent project, expands on the American folk and roots leanings long evident in the band's offerings, enlisting the evocative violin of **Sara Caswell**, the luminescent harmonica of **Gregoire Maret**, and an array of acoustic guitars deftly played by **Corey Christiansen**; Owen has created a sound that is drenched in atmosphere – at times buoyant, playful, and triumphant at others, melancholy, mysterious, and intimate – but always coming straight out of the American heartland. **Randy Brecker**, who last appeared with the Surge on *A Comet's Tail*, returns with a blistering solo on *Into the Blue* as well as a rollicking turn on *Gunslingers* – a somewhat otherworldly, Jazz Messengers minor blues. As with his prior project River Runs, *Whispers* was conceived by the composer as a single entity - a suite of 7 pieces linked by a somewhat ethereal vision and examination of the American tradition its values, landmarks, folklore, heroes, and myths. Associating quotes from authors Stephen King, Larry McMurtry, and Cormac McCarthy with each piece; Owen's music displays a clear affinity for the local color, wry sense of humor, unique personalities, strong sense of place, and disarmingly unsentimental honesty these authors are noted for.

In 2013, Owen and the Jazz Surge released, *River Runs, A Concerto for Jazz Guitar, Saxophone, & Orchestra* - a 5-movement, hour-long, genre-bending composition that draws its inspiration from various American Rivers , and specifically, Owen's float trips down them. Recognized with two GRAMMY nominations (*Best Instrumental Composition & Best Instrumental Arrangement*) and composed under the auspices of a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, the work soars majestically through its unique blend of large-scale symphonic forces, propulsive jazz rhythms, evocative solos, and tinges of American folk/roots touches (Owen at one point referencing - and thoroughly deconstructing- the well-known "Shenandoah"). Praise for River Runs has been extensive with performances of the work undertaken by such venerable music institutions as the Manhattan School of Music and Cincinnati Conservatory of Music.

“ . . . a masterpiece of aural sounds; a dazzling array of prismatic colors and textures that envelop the listener in a splendidly evocative way. Owen masterfully creates his cinematic music in such a way as to seamlessly meld modern jazz improvisation with

more traditional orchestrations and the result is a marvelous amalgam of the two. Mr. Owen has proven himself to be a compositional force to be reckoned with."

Huffington Post

" . . . it's as if Owen has captured an entire ecosystem with its messy, sometimes awe-inspiring, sometimes opaque, frequently frightening detail. Like water, Owen's music will go everywhere it can imaginative, paradigm-shifting and often exhilarating . . . combining elements as diverse as swing, heavy-metal, bluegrass, and the avant-garde and making them work together seamlessly."

NY Music Daily

" . . . remarkably beautiful music . . . on the model of such predecessors as Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue' or Duke Ellington's 'A Tone Parallel to Harlem'."

Seattle Post

" . . . a tour de force in contemporary orchestral composition."

Rufus Reid

"An ocean of melody, sound, and soul!"

Randy Brecker

It was *The Comet's Tail* (2009), the Surge's fourth recording that first clearly captured the imagination of critics and audiences around the world. Celebrating the compositional output of the late jazz icon, Michael Brecker, by re-envisioning his work through the eyes of various arrangers in addition to Owen himself (including frequent Brecker collaborators, Gil Goldstein & Vince Mendoza) the recording was described as "riotous and joyous" (*JazzTimes*), "muscular" (*Downbeat*), and "deserving of universal attention" (*All Music Guide*). Joining the Surge were a host of special guests (Randy Brecker, Dave Liebman, Joe Lovano, Mike Mainieri, Adam Nussbaum, & Mike Stern) all frequent Brecker collaborators. A 2009 GRAMMY nomination, along with many "best of the year" mentions, followed.

The Surge has performed at a wide range of festivals, conferences, and clubs; serving as the resident orchestra for Central Florida's *Jazz Masterworks Series* as well as the *International Jazz Composer's Symposium*. These events, produced by Owen (originally in conjunction with the USF Center for Jazz Composition (CJC) and, more recently, with the International Society of Jazz Arrangers and Composers (ISJAC)), resulted in a steady stream of performances between 2005 and 2008 with noted jazz composers such as: Bob Brookmeyer, John Clayton, Chick Corea, Dave Douglas, Slide Hampton, Bill Holman, Jim McNeely, Bob Mintzer, and Gerald Wilson along with many, many others.

In addition to his work with Surge, Owen has undertaken a fairly diverse body of commissions and projects. Collaborations with the Netherlands' Metropole Orchestra, the Aarhus Jazz Orchestra (Denmark), the U.S. Army Jazz Ambassadors, Confluences, and tenor saxophonist Jack Wilkins have all resulted in significant contributions on recordings. Other performances include the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orch., the Tonight Show Orch., the Brussels Jazz Orch., and the Cincinnati Symphony Pops Orch. among others. In addition to his recent Guggenheim Fellowship, Owen is the recipient of the prestigious 2000 *IAJE/ASCAP commission*

in honor of Louis Armstrong and three Florida Individual Artist Fellowships. He has over 100 published compositions for jazz ensemble and is a frequent guest artist, clinician, and lecturer at universities throughout the country.

Born in Norfolk, VA, Owen spent his elementary school days in Omaha, NE before his family moved to Cincinnati (which remains home for his brother and much of his mother's extended family). Following a year at the College of Wooster (OH), Owen matriculated to the University of North Texas where he received a BM in Music Education (trombone concentration). There, a host of mentors and friends, along with a dozen jazz "lab" bands all hungry for new music, proved the perfect incubator for a budding composer/arranger. He went on to earn his Master's degree in Orchestral Conducting (!) at California State University, Northridge before spending another couple of years in Los Angeles free-lancing and apprenticing with film/TV composer, Patrick Williams, via a National Endowment for the Arts Study Grant.

In 1981, Owen moved (along with his wife and 3 month old daughter, Nicole) to Tampa to accept the first dedicated faculty post in Jazz Studies at the University of South Florida. With the enviable and exhilarating opportunity to build a program from scratch - designing virtually every facet of the curriculum and degree programs - Owen immersed himself in teaching. Recognized with the USF "Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching Award" as well as the "President's Award for Faculty Excellence", it was upon the addition of Jack Wilkins to the USF faculty in the mid 1990s the reins of this now nationally recognized program could be handed over - freeing Owen up to refocus his energies on composing & developing the jazz composition program at USF. He most recently was honored with the University's "Outstanding Researcher Award".

In 2004, a long held vision, the USF Center for Jazz Composition, was birthed . . . with Owen as its Director. Espousing a mission that sought to illuminate the role of the composer in jazz as well as to assist in its continuing development, the CJC launched several prominent programs: the Jazz Composers' Symposium, the International Jazz Arranging Competition, the Jazz Masterworks Series, & the Michael Brecker Tribute Project - leading to the publication of the Center's first CD with Owen as producer/arranger/conductor. Along the way, several works were commissioned, others transcribed, and dozens premiered. Sadly, funding for the Center was a casualty of the 2008 recession and was forced to close its doors in 2014.

In 2015, Chuck met with two former students, Dr. Dave Stamps & Dr. Brian Coyle, and began discussions/planning that led to the formation of the International Society of Jazz Arrangers & Composers. Although still in its infancy, that Society has already been received enthusiastically by a world-wide array of composers who flocked to the first ISJAC-sponsored Jazz Composers' Symposium in May, 2017 which Owen produced. He currently serves as President of ISJAC.

Owen prominent professional service has included a term as President of the International Association for Jazz Education, as "governor" for the Florida Chapter of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, and as a grants panelist/chair for the Pulitzer Prize in Music, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Grammy Awards, the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs,

and numerous others. He is the author of several articles on jazz composition and for years routinely reviewed new music for the Jazz Educators Journal.