



## In Conversation: Stephanie Chou and Yacine Boulares

INTERVIEW BY EILEEN WILLIS  
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Saxophonists **Stephanie Chou** and **Yacine Boulares** have each created projects that blend elements of jazz with traditions tied to their individual heritage. Before bringing their singular voices to the David Rubenstein Atrium for free shows on March 8 (Stephanie Chou) and April 19 (Yacine Boulares), they stopped by to discuss their influences, and how they discovered their unique musical paths.

**Eileen Willis:** First, let's talk about the instrument you have in common—the saxophone. Can you each talk briefly about how you came to it?

**Stephanie Chou:** I started on piano when I was five, and I started playing saxophone when I was nine or ten and I've been playing since—mostly alto and a bit of soprano. I started out playing music from the Western classical saxophone canon (like Glazunov, Ibert, Creston) and then got interested in jazz in high school and college. The saxophone has so many possibilities and you can play in so many different styles and get so many different sounds out of it that it's just an endlessly interesting instrument.

**Yacine Boulares:** I think it started with Maceo Parker's album *Life on Planet Groove*. That was my introduction to instrumental music, around 15 or 16. I really loved his solo on "Shake Everything You've Got." And then I went from Maceo Parker to listening to Kenny Garrett paying tribute to Coltrane on *Pursuance*, and then Coltrane, and specifically the track "Wise One." Coltrane was the turning point. I started with the alto, then I went to tenor, and recently I've been really working on the soprano. Whereas tenor and alto are so heavily marked in terms of sounds, of vocabulary, of history, I feel like the soprano has more uncharted territories where I can hear other sounds.

**EW:** In addition to music, Stephanie, you studied mathematics, and Yacine, you studied philosophy. How do you think each of those disciplines has informed your approach to music, if at all?

**SC:** Actually just yesterday I gave a lecture on math and music! I studied math in college and at the end of my mathematical journey was interested in knot theory, which is a branch of topology. And for one of the first recordings I made, *Prime Knot*, I did various arrangements of a traditional Chinese song called "Jasmine Flower," where I associated different reharmonizations and rhythms with different kinds of knots. So I did one project where I actively tried to explore some ways that math could be applied to music, not necessarily with rhythmic structure or set theory or harmony,

but just this more abstract idea. Since then I guess I subconsciously incorporate math because it's just how I think, but I don't actively try to weave them together in most of the musical projects that I've done since then.

**YB:** Philosophy definitely informed my decision to switch to music. I think I studied philosophy as a spiritual question, as an existential question that I needed to solve. I didn't grow up in religion. My father was Muslim and my mom is Catholic. I learned about both, but God was never pushed into me, so I was always curious about faith and beyond. Philosophy first helped me tackle these questions with logic, with Descartes, with philosophers who tried to prove the existence of God. I think philosophy ultimately tries to solve this question, the question of God and our own existence. During my first year of a master's I was focusing on aesthetics and trying to make sense of everything that had been said about music and philosophy, and then I got sick. I got meningitis, I was in between life and death, so it kind of all came together at this moment where I had to choose something to make sense of my own existence. I think music—especially Coltrane's music, modal music in general, and other music that I discovered much later—kind of solved that question for me. Music became my God somehow, or the answer to my existential questions.

**EW:** Stephanie, in your case, what made music a clear choice?

"Music became my God somehow, or the answer to my existential questions."

**SC:** I went to study abroad in Beijing for a language program, but I spent most of my time playing with jazz musicians there, who were a combination of local musicians and expats. And that was the first time I had ever experienced playing music for entire audiences of people that did not speak English. I speak fairly fluent Chinese, but I can't express anywhere near the same level of ideas as I can in English. It was pivotal for me because it was the first time I really experienced the power of music to connect people who don't speak the same language, or who come from completely different backgrounds and experiences. After that, I decided that I wanted to pursue music.

**EW:** Another thing you have in common is that you've both chosen to be based in New York City. Can you talk about the musical community that you've found here and why it's become your home, at least for now?

**YB:** I grew up in Paris in a very white environment where my face can be white, but my name says otherwise. And I think I never was conscious of

what was going on identity-wise until I moved here and all of a sudden it was positive to be an Arab, and to be Muslim. Weirdly, because today it's the opposite, but eight years ago when I moved here all of a sudden I felt free. Arriving in New York allowed me to be the musician I wanted to be and to be like, oh, so there's no shame in being an Arab? Let me explore my own heritage. I've always been interested in that, but I was taught that I should assimilate and be more French than the French. And it took me a long time to realize that. So, for me, being here is identity freedom. I think it's beyond music. It's a sanctuary for all kinds of people that are different, whether they're gay, whether they're from races that other parts of the world oppress. Here is a safe haven for free spirits and free identities and differences.

**SC:** I grew up in Westchester County, and I went to high school at Horace Mann in the Bronx, and then I went to college at Columbia University, so I've kind of just stayed here the whole time. I've just always loved it here. I love the variety of things going on. On any given night you can find so many cultural things happening. It's also a source of inspiration to be able to go from one performance to another to another all in one night. As far as musicians that I collaborate with, I don't know if there's anywhere else I could find the same collaborators in such a wide variety of fields all located in the same place.

**EW:** Can you each talk about how you've incorporated elements from a variety of musical traditions—including jazz, western classical, and non-Western traditions—into your work as composers and performers?

**YB:** I had this teacher at The New School, Robert Sadin, and he's an arranger and producer who did Wayne Shorter's *Alegria* and Gershwin's *World* by Herbie [Hancock]. He was actually one of the first ones who was like, "Oh, so Tunisia, do you play any music from there?" He was very curious. Two years after I graduated he called me up for a recording with Plácido Domingo that he was producing. It was cello, Vincent Segal—that's how I met him—guitar with Chico Pinheiro, Ira Coleman, all types of people, a percussionist from Essaouira, Rhani Khridja. And he was like, "Oh, we have this Arabo-Andalusian song that we need to arrange, do you want to come up with something?" And the next day I went to Vincent Segal and we started working and—well, he's a shaman. He's a sorcerer. We kind of got into a zone where we were all of a sudden exploring my heritage. He's French, but he had more tools and more ways to go about it. That was 2014 and I worked on the idea for a year, got a French-American Jazz Exchange grant to do it, and then it was possible to bring Nasheet to the project and for me to explore part of my heritage that I never had the chance to because I was too busy trying to be French.

**SC:** For the music that I'm going to play at the show, I started writing it maybe six years ago. And it was part of an exploration into my cultural heritage. Before that I hadn't really done a lot of exploration of Chinese culture through music. It was actually through meeting Andy Lin, a viola and *erhu* player, in 2009 at a classical music festival in Italy. I didn't grow up listening to *erhu* music either. In terms of Chinese traditional music, I mostly listened to *guzheng*, which is the zither, some other folk songs, and a bit of opera. I hadn't really heard an *erhu* properly played until I met him. So we got together one day and I was thinking, how can I incorporate that sound into some music that also incorporates jazz and classical influences? Over time I've developed the project to be sort of a self-reflective exploration. There were times where I tried to incorporate more jazz elements or more improvisation, or classical music, and it became: how can I be the most honest with myself and my actual background?

**EW:** I feel like both of you are getting to this point about music as a way to investigate and explore personal identity, which is also, I think,

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a very valuable thing for audiences in terms of representation, so that audiences can see representation of something that may be part of their identity. It's sort of like shared—"exploration" is the word you used, Stephanie.

**YB:** We do have that in common, I think.

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**SC:** Right. Actually it sounds like we're both doing the same thing in terms of—nobody else could come up with the same set that you did, or write the same thing, in the sense of this is *your* experience. My mom is from Taiwan and my dad is Chinese but he's first generation, so he grew up here. They both love music—including anything from traditional songs from China and Taiwan to American classic rock. But I was born in New York, and music was not really encouraged as a profession in my family, so it definitely took me a long time to find my identity as a musician and composer. You know, I went through a phase where I was trying to be a *jazz* saxophone player, and before that I was trying to be a *classical* saxophone player, or *this* kind of composer or *that* kind of singer. It took me a long time to really understand and learn that the best thing I can offer is just the most honest representation of myself. And then, through exploring Chinese traditional music or folk songs and actively trying to reinvent them in new ways, that's how I found a way to do that.

**EW:** Deeper than your own personal identity, there's also an element of preserving cultural heritage, so I'm curious about your thoughts on how music is a vehicle for that. And how do you do that without locking it in and not innovating?

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**YB:** I met one of my early mentors, Fabrizio Cassol—an amazing composer and founder of the trio Aka Moon—when I was deciding that I was going to be into music. And he was like, "Think of yourself as a door that lets music pass through. Music exists before you and it exists after you. You're nothing but a door, and you need to make sure that door is wide open to let it go through you." It just imprinted something in me: okay, so he meant no ego. He meant build as much technique as possible to be that open space where music can go through. As a musician, and then going into my own heritage, I discovered trance music and healing music, therapeutic music, and how people actually use music to awaken spirits and to heal themselves and to heal the community. And I think I started to believe in the power of something beyond, something very spiritual. Recently I was listening to Cécile McLorin Salvant. She was onstage and I felt all the spirits. . . all the ghosts of all the greatest jazz singers and instrumentalists were with her. It's spooky, you know, when people manage to do that. There's different ways to see it, but I like to see it as heritage and spirits. I don't know if that answers it, but for me that's how I dig into heritage.

**SC:** Growing up in a town where we were probably one of the only Chinese families, I was always, from a young age, very aware of

being different. I went to Chinese school on Saturdays and that was always a source of protest because I couldn't go out on Friday nights and had to do extra homework, and so on. When I was younger I tried—as is a common Asian-American experience—to be "more American." It was probably not until college, maybe before that, when being Chinese became something to highlight. For the first time I met a lot of other people that were also Asian Americans. Musically, that's become sort of a goal of mine: to actively represent a bridging of Chinese culture, Asian culture, and American or Western culture. As far as drawing from different traditions in music or cultural traditions, for this album, *Asymptote*, I just started with the things that I knew the best, like traditional Chinese folk songs I learned when I was really young, things that my mom would sing to me, or tongue twisters that I knew. For subsequent stuff that I'm working on now, I've decided to explore parts of my heritage that I was not as aware of before—and actively try to make them into something new that hopefully anybody could relate to.

**EW:** Speaking of that, what can audiences at the Atrium expect from your shows in March (Stephanie) and April (Yacine)?

**SC:** Well, they'd better buckle their seat belts, because my band and I are going to take them on a wild ride through 5,000 years of musical history—at warp speed. But don't worry: we've got a great map, and lots of practice piloting the ship, so we'll bring them in for a safe landing at the Atrium! The show on March 8 is going to be a mash-up of music from ancient China with modern American jazz, classical music, and pop. I'll be playing saxophone and singing in English—with a lot of Mandarin added into the mix for extra spice. We've been busy cooking up something special for the Atrium audience, and I can't wait to share it with them! We'll be playing songs from my new album *Asymptote*, including arrangements of Chinese classics such as "Kangding Love Song" and "The Moon Represents My Heart". We're also going to be premiering a new song from my upcoming project on "comfort women."

I'm lucky to be sharing the stage with some of the best musicians in New York: *erhu*/viola virtuoso Andy Lin; Vinnie Sperrazza on drums; and Isamu McGregor on piano. For somebody who has some background in Chinese tradition, this show is a whole new take on something familiar to them. For somebody who doesn't have any background in Chinese culture, it'll be a gateway that opens up a whole new world to them. This show will bring people together across cultures and generations, and that's what I'm most excited about. And everyone will learn a Chinese tongue twister!

**YB:** I'll just say how special it is because it's the first time we're playing in the U.S. and it's also our album release tour. Vincent is coming from France and it's a unique occasion to see these guys together. I love this project as a trio, but I often look at it and I see Nasheet and Vincent, and I think you need to see that. I'll bring the music, but just for these guys together, this is a treat. Every time I step foot onstage with these two musicians I enter a trance without asking myself any questions, and I would love people to be there for that.

**EW:** What's next after the Atrium show? What are you working on and excited about?

**YB:** This is a French-American Jazz Exchange project, and the Atrium show is part of our first tour in the U.S., so I'm really excited. The night before the Atrium show we're in Pennsylvania, at Bucknell University, and then after the Atrium we go to Ars Nova in Philly, and then to the Atlas Performing Arts Center in D.C. In France we're starting to tour a little bit, but this is our first four dates in a row, so it's really exciting. And then I'm

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working on—my other project is called Ajoyo, and we're recording our second album in the summer. It's at the other end of the spectrum. It's trance as well, but it's a party band, like jazz meets West Africa. So I'm excited to work on that.

**SC:** I am working on a commission from the American Composers Forum for a piece that will be premiered with the China Institute in America and the piece is—I'm describing it as a musical exploration of the lives of Chinese comfort women during World War Two. So that's my next long-form project. We will be playing one of the pieces from that project at the Atrium show. So that's one thing that I'm working on. And another one is a recording project with engineer and producer Roy Hendrickson. We're spending a lot of time in the studio working on new songs—the goal is not necessarily to be able to re-create it live. So, two different projects.

**EW:** Finally, just for fun, what would you say the world these days could learn from musicians?

**YB:** I think it was Socrates who said "know yourself" and then you're able to embrace the world, right? I think the quality of meditation that music puts you through develops empathy, definitely. Connection. A real connection, not just "I'm going to talk to you because I need this from you." I think musicians, we're very lucky to have the time to meditate on ourselves and on other people's music and to develop this empathy.

**SC:** Listening is a huge one, of course. Active listening—listening with this empathy or support of others. Musicians, especially improvising ones, are always problem solving and just constantly thinking of creative ways to overcome obstacles. Let's say in an improvised setting somebody plays a "wrong note," or you're in a performance and somebody goes to the wrong section—I think musicians and collaborative artists in general are very good at supporting others, just automatically, for the sake of the music.

**Stephanie Chou** is a saxophonist, singer, and composer based in New York City. Her music combines classical and Chinese influences with jazz and pop harmonies and rhythms. Raised in Irvington, New York, Chou studied mathematics and music at Columbia University. In 2011, she released her first album, *Prime Knot*, a jazz quintet CD featuring trumpeter Marcus Printup. Her 2012 work *C for G* was commissioned and choreographed by former American Ballet Theatre principal ballerina and ballet mistress Susan Jaffe. In 2016 she released *Asymptote*, which features Kenny Wollesen, David Binney, John Escreet, Zack Lober, and *erhu* virtuoso Andy Lin.

**Yacine Boulares** is a French-Tunisian saxophonist, clarinetist, and composer based in New York. In 2009 he was granted a Fulbright Scholarship to study jazz and contemporary music at The New School, where he met and played with artists such as Chris Cheek, Donny McCaslin, and Reggie Workman. In 2014 he was invited to perform and arrange on Plácido Domingo's album *Encanto Del Mar*. Today, in addition to his current project with cellist Vincent Segal and drummer Nasheet Waits, he is also creator of the band AJOYO, which combines African tradition, jazz, and soul.

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