



CYNTHIA HILTS

Biography

What's in a name? Quite a bit when it comes to the handle of composer and pianist **Cynthia Hilts**'s intriguing octet, **Lyric Fury**. As the name suggests, her writing is defined by powerful contrasts. She likes to build from long, meditative passages to explosive endings. The tried and true technique of tension (and more tension) and release seldom yields more satisfaction or surprise.

But as witness the brisk, striking originals on **Lyric Fury**, Hilts's captivating new album, her orchestrations can go in different directions (and different keys) in the same moment, within the same beat or phrase. Imagine, if you will, a peaceful waltz through the meadow and a frantic run through a thunderstorm happening at the same time. Her music can fill the senses even as it swings like crazy.

Together for several years, **Lyric Fury** boasts a lineup of top-drawer players with highly distinctive "A" games of their own. They include trumpet great and onetime Mingusite **Jack Walrath**, saxophonists **Lisa Parrott** and **Lily White** (who co-produced the album with Hilts), trombonist **Deborah Weisz**, cellist **Marika Hughes**, bassist **Ratzo Harris**, and drummer **Scott Neumann**.

"When I first put the band together, I didn't know most of the musicians," confesses Hilts. "But I got really good at cold calling—hey, how would you like to work in a band that sounds like a celestial collision of Mingus and Debussy?"

Over time, the members of **Lyric Fury** not only bought into Hilts's demanding avant-meets-mainstream strategies, they found ways to enhance them. "My pieces are difficult, even the stuff I think is easy," said Hilts, "and I can get a little tyrannical in getting people to do what I want." But in the best sense, these musicians gave as good as they got.

As reflected by the infectious opening track of **Lyric Fury**, "**Those Basinites**," the Tucson native can write from the ground up. Inspired not by Count Basie but the quirky residents of Basin, Montana, where Hilts did several residencies, the tune started with what she called a "nice noodley line" in a slow 5/4 with swinging sixteenth notes. It took on a funky quality through the addition of a bass line that, she wrote in a lively but short-lived blog, "turned out to be so chunkily engaging that it was almost a forest unto itself" and ended up being re-fashioned into a more approachable, medium-tempo piece in which "the beat is about a heartbeat long rather than a long, slow breath."

But much of Hilts's music, for which she writes her own poetic lyrics, responds to situations and events. "**Previously a Thing**," a brash invocation that turns Horace Silver-style hard bop on its ear (dig White's passionate tenor solo), was written after a breakup. The free-gliding "**Blues for the Bronchs**," featuring out-of-sorts voicings and a ripping, hard-edged solo by Walrath, was inspired by an unshakable case of bronchitis.

A seasoned peace activist, Hilts composed the album's most lyrical and deeply affecting work, "**Peace Now**," following the outbreak of the Iraq War. Her vocal—part scat, part chant, part heartfelt plea—is framed by the dark tones of Parrott's baritone and Hughes's cello and carried by bright rhythms. "**Teacher**," with its delicate piano introduction and South African lilt, is a prayer for a spiritual leader.

"I wrote 'Teacher' really quickly, it just poured out," Hilts says. "It was so organically correct, I couldn't tell in the beginning if it was a tune or not. The South African feel, which was inspired by Abdullah Ibrahim, came later. This turned out to be the 'pop hit' of *Lyric Fury*."

Born in Tucson on November 14, 1958, **Cynthia Hilts** grew up in a musical family. Her father, a doctor, played boogie-woogie piano. Her mother, an activist and volunteer teacher, played classical music and was a Broadway aficionado who directed community musicals. One of Cynthia's sisters was on track to become a symphonic bassist but became a doctor like her old man instead.

"When I was first learning to speak, I actually sang everything," says Hilts, the youngest of five children. She started playing music at the age of two, studied classical from the age of five, and began composing at 12. She was active in the school choir, both singing and accompanying, and gradually took up a full range of styles including folk, rock, blues, and show tunes. Though she was already an avid jazz listener, playing jazz piano caught up with her later.

Hilts graduated from high school at 16. One of her first extended gigs was performing for a year's time with the clean-cut feel-good troupe **Up with People**. "It was a good experience for me," she says. "I learned how to be a professional working with them."

She went on to study jazz composition and arranging at Boston's Berklee College of Music. Her favorite teacher there was the late trumpeter and big band leader **Herb Pomeroy**, who also taught the likes of Gary Burton, Gary McFarland, and Toshiko Akiyoshi. "I was so excited to be there," she says. "I had all of this harmonic stuff in my ears, and they had names for all of it. One thing that classical teachers don't emphasize is the use of your ears. I found out I had a ton of info just from listening. And Herb taught harmonic subtleties with great precision and humor, for instance in his class 'Writing in the Style of Duke Ellington.'"

Hilts, who lives in Brooklyn, moved to New York City in the early '90s. After appearing on a free jazz album, *Invite the Unexpected*, with Mike Ellis, George Garzone, Graham Haynes, and Cecil McBee, she wrote and recorded her first album, *Stars Down to the Ground*, in Montana, Walrath's native soil. Featuring local players, the 2000 release was commissioned by the Montana Artists Refuge—"the first time I'd been treated as a royal composer," Hilt jokes.

Recorded in Brooklyn, her self-produced second album, *Second Story Breeze* (2008), showcased her distinctive singing, soulful postbop piano playing, and sometimes daring arranging in a heady trio setting featuring bassist Ron McClure and drummer Jeff Williams. Among its three non-originals is an expansive reading of "Love for Sale."

The same year, Hilts released an album of an entirely different sort, and under a different name: *Any Child Who Dreams*, a piano and voice album by the singer-songwriter **Cincha**. ("I discovered many listeners like jazz, or singer-songwriters, but not both.") Her songs in this vein, she says, constitute "one of the large bodies of music in my life I decided to keep separate from each other." Singing of large bodies: "I dream myself half-empty / Half-empty in a pale green-glass sea / I dream myself refreshed / Floating, divided, partial / Half-empty in a pale green-glass sea."

Hilts downplays her skills as a vocalist. “I have a soft voice,” she says. “And I don’t have great vocal technique.” But the warmth of her singing draws you in and her clipped phrasing has a great way of drawing energy from the tangled backdrops. One other thing: “I can sing my ass off,” she laughs.

After her time at Berklee, Hilts gained valuable experience in such places as San Francisco, Florida, Sweden, and France. She has performed in a variety of settings, including reggae and calypso bands (hear the reggae-fied “**Jam & Toast**” on the new album). She has contributed to film documentaries and has served as musical director for theater productions. She’s also an active visual artist.

She’s most at home, however, in **Lyric Fury**—the name of which she came to her without any brainstorming or fanfare. “I had an idea for a dream band, for which I wrote a bunch of music. I came up with a name that was appropriate.”

Forming the octet proved a dream achievement in many ways. “I have always been a loner,” Hilts says. “I didn’t understand the value of community. But I certainly do now, having benefited so much from the openness and contributions of these musicians. When I bring in a new piece, they understand not to try and do something new with it right away, even in cases where I haven’t written something right. They sublimate their individuality for a moment or two.

“That isn’t to say they won’t challenge me. Jack is such an iconoclast, he’ll say stuff directly, which I find totally refreshing. And during performances of the music, they’re always coming up with surprises. Like Ranzo will take solos that have me wondering what the hell he’s doing at the time, loving it when I listen back, and Lisa, that brash Australian, will find a way to put her own textures on top.

“But it all works out in the end. The group only expands my version of what the music should be, of who I am musically as a person. It’s a real labor of love.”

As excited as jazz fans will be to have this terrific sampling of **Cynthia Hilts**’s and **Lyric Fury**’s artistry, it’s natural to wonder why a band that has been around for several years took so long to document itself on record. Asked that question, Hilts laughs and sighs. “I guess I’m one of those people who is better at doing art than business,” she says. “Really, the reason this music got recorded was a friend of mine said she was going to feel really bad if I died before we captured it in the studio.”

Here’s hoping that friend, not to mention Hilts’s steadily growing number of admirers in the consumer world, apply the pressure to get a sequel to **Lyric Fury** recorded, and soon. •

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(Blond Coyote Records)

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