

# Westword

## playlist

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### Tantric Sax

Jazz saxophonist Mark Fox was never really an inside player. Rather, he came in from the far outside, immersed in the music of avant-garde jazz innovators like Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders and David S. Ware before ever checking out Charlie Parker. The album that set Fox down that path was John Coltrane's final studio album, *Expression*, which he heard as a teenager, three decades ago.

these guys is where I learned more about the music," Fox says. "The biggest gift Archie Shepp ever gave me, other than showing me how to live life, was instilling the importance of having a unique, distinguishable sound."

On Fox's debut album, *Three Octaves From the Sun*, the saxophonist clearly has a muscular, distinctive sound, something he's been working on the last few years after taking a decade-long hiatus from playing. He was thirty years old, with a two-year-old son, and he was living in Paris, where he had moved because he had a fantasy about being

or...like having to work to the bone to get something done, or to go beyond yourself and what you know your limits are. All of those things come into play in terms of what comes through the music."

That also comes through on *Three Octaves From the Sun*, an album of mostly original compositions that includes two nods to Coltrane, on "One for J.C." and "Coltrane Recollections." As Fox writes in the liner notes, "A hybrid of post-bop, progressive, transcendental and African jazz fusion, the music is reminiscent of the late '60s and '70s era, yet freshly modern and universally accessible."

Fox, who also plays ngoni (Malian harp) on the album, is joined by some particularly capable musicians, including pianist Stu MacAski, bassist Kim Stone, drummer Tom Tilton, singer Yolanda Bush, percussionist Jimmy Hopps (who was Rahsaan Roland Kirk's longtime drummer), New York-based percussionist Daniel Moreno and singer Awa Sangho, who was part of the legendary West African female vocal group Les Go de Koteba.

The inspiration for the album's title, Fox says, came about when Fox and Tilton were hanging out after a recording session and Tilton said, "Yeah,

man, we set up this foundation, and then you come in blowing three octaves above the sun."

Fox's dynamic, powerful performance on tenor and soprano sax is everywhere on *Three Octaves From the Sun*, with the rest of the band delving into some transcendental jazz. The way Fox sees it, he just tries to get out of the way and let the spirit do its thing. He says music is where he gets most connected with a "higher power, or whatever you want to call that. God and spirit, holy presence of the moment. Those moments of bliss happen when I'm playing. The out-of-body experience. Time stops. Everything stops, and it's only the moment, the eternal moment of now. I think it carries through the music. I don't know how the little coming of 'transcendental jazz' came through us at some point, but I love it."

When he was younger, he adds, playing music was about what a badass he could be, and it was all very self-centered and ego-driven. These days, it's not about any of that.

"It's actually about the listener and making a difference and putting a smile on their face and transforming their day in the moment of the music," he says.

— JON SOLOMON



COURTESY OF MARK FOX

Saxophonist Mark Fox returned to music after a decade-long hiatus.

"There was something about the combination of the intensity, the power and spiritual nature of it, combined with the technical mastery and the sound that was being generated," Fox says. "It was extremely jarring and [the sound of] peace all in one."

Fox, who spent the latter part of his childhood in Denver, started playing professionally while still in high school, then spent two semesters at Berklee College of Music before transferring to the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where avant-garde heavies Archie Shepp, Yusef Lateef and Marion Brown were teaching at the time.

"When I found out that Yusef, Archie and Marion were all at U-Mass, that was all it took — especially to get access to Yusef and Archie, primarily," Fox says.

While Fox says he never took private lessons from Shepp, they did spend many hours at Fox's house, where Shepp might get on the piano and Fox would play sax.

"Breaking bread and hanging out with

an expat jazz musician. He booked a gig at a Parisian jazz club, but after paying all the sidemen, paying for a rehearsal space and a babysitter for his son, Fox and his then-wife walked home with the equivalent of \$40 between them.

"I was thinking, 'I can't put together a life like this,'" he says. "It was one of those harsh wake-up calls. I made the conscious point to put [the saxophone] down."

When Fox did eventually pick the sax up again a couple of years ago, he had gotten sober and says he'd grown considerably without even having the horn in his mouth.

"It's clearly an expression of life experience more than it is technical," Fox

says. "I have a son. Two divorces. I've been through some addiction and recovery issues. [There's] been massive spiritual growth and emotional growth. And all of that gets reflected and comes through music. It's not like some young kid who's never really dealt with love or heartbreak or life trauma

#### The Mark Fox Quartet CD Release

7 and 9 p.m., Thursday,  
June 30, Dazzle Restaurant  
& Lounge, 930 Lincoln  
Street, 303-839-5100,  
\$8-\$12.