

Biography - Chris Speed

Chris Speed is a tenor saxophonist, clarinetist and composer, whose work ranges widely, from a jazz base out through various forms of folk, classical and rock music. Affiliated with a bewildering variety of ensembles, he has been a prominent and influential voice in jazz and improvised music for three decades.

Born in 1967, Speed grew up in the Seattle area where he met future colleagues Jim Black and Andrew D'Angelo, all of whom ended up in Boston in the late 80's where they formed **Human Feel** with guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel. (Scatter 1992, Welcome to Malpesta 1994, Speak To It 1996, Galore 2007, Party Favor EP 2016 and Gold 2019). After studies at New England Conservatory followed by a stint with the Artie Shaw Band (led by Dick Johnson), Speed moved to New York City where he started working with Tim Berne and his band **Bloodcount**. (Unwound 1996, Discretion 1997, Saturation Point 1997, The Seconds 2006).

Speed's fascination with the mysterious rhythms, melodies and old-worldness of folk music from the Balkans led to the formation of **Pachora** (Black, guitarist Brad Shepik and bassist Skuli Sverrisson), an ensemble that evolved from playing East European folk music covers regularly at the Knitting Factory to touring critically acclaimed original music throughout North America and Europe. (Pachora 1997, Unn 1999, Ast 2000 and Astereotypical 2003). Chris' passion for folk music is also documented with the brass band Slavic Soul Party (In Makedonija 2002 Knitting Factory Records).

Yeah NO, Speed's band with Black/Sverrisson and Cuong Vu (trumpet) initially convened in the mid 90s as an experiment in decoding and scoring out group improvisations, which inspired an unusual book of music that also fused elements of jazz, rock, eastern folk and weird minimalism. Thriving in NYC in the late 90s, they also toured the States and Europe and made four recordings (Yeah NO 1997, Deviantics 1998, Emit 2000, Swell Henry 2004).

The Clarinets, an ongoing collaboration with Oscar Noriega and Anthony Burr, explores the possibilities of the clarinet (multi-pitch tones, timbre deviation) in the context of group improvisation. This group blurs the boundary between composed chamber music and experimental improvisation and creates an acoustic ambient music of unusual grace and beauty. They have three recordings, The Clarinets (2006 featured on NPR's Fresh Air), Keep On Going Like This (2012) and No Pressure (2019).

Endangered Blood (Jim Black, Trevor Dunn Oscar Noriega, Speed) was formed in 2008 to play benefit concerts for saxophonist Andrew D'Angelo, who'd been diagnosed with a brain tumor. (D'Angelo eventually made a full recovery). Their music draws from the members' diverse backgrounds and influences, combining post-bop, 20th-century chromaticism, traditional New Orleans funeral marches, avant-garde jazz and post-punk to create a sort of mad-scientist concoction. Its compositions are cerebral, but they're also gritty and full of energy. (Endangered Blood 2010, Work Your Magic 2013, Don't Freak Out 2018, plus an appearance on NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts in 2012).

With the formation of the **Chris Speed Trio** in 2014 with drummer Dave King (The Bad Plus) and bassist Chris Tordini, Speed has put an inimitable stamp on the classic sax-bass-drums format. This is a group returning from other explorations to work deep within the jazz tradition,

bringing everything else they've learned back in. Most compelling about this music is the incorporation of early jazz styles in a way that is direct and deeply felt. The music is joyful and generous and Speed has an uncanny knack for coming up with tunes that can create a whole world of emotions and formal possibilities behind an often catchy melodic surface. (Really OK 2014, Platinum On Tap 2017, Respect For Your Toughness 2019).

Broken Shadows (Tim Berne, Reid Anderson, Dave King, Speed) is a quartet of kindred spirits communing over shared loves and common inspirations; banded together to reinterpret the timeless sounds conjured by great artists from the rural South and heartland of the country, primarily Ornette Coleman and Julius Hemphill. The way saxophonists Berne and Speed perform this music with the bass-and-drum team of Anderson and King has a rocking, roughhewn harmonic convergence wholly in keeping with the source materials, even as their improvisations have a searching, burning modernism of their own. (Broken Shadows 2019 re-released on [Intakt](#)).

In August of 2021, Speed, along with guitarist Ben Monder, joined **The Bad Plus** (with Reid Anderson and Dave King). New record out in Fall 2022.

In 2006 Speed created Skirl Records, a label dedicated to Brooklyn based creative music, now with over 50 releases. “As a document of the fertile Brooklyn scene, Skirl has few equals, skirting the boundaries between jazz, rock, electronic, classical and improvised music.” AllAboutJazz