

Elan Mehler, pianist

All photos by Anna Yatskevich

# Frank Kimbrough tribute recording session

Welcome to the new year and the next adventure in our *Session Log* series! We had so much fun last year with the *AngelHeaded Hipster* story that we are continuing the series. This year we will focus on a different session every month, documenting studio sessions that were special, remarkable, or unique in some way.

One of the most meaningful recording sessions I participated in last year paid tribute to the great Frank Kimbrough, a celebrated pianist, composer, and educator who died of a heart attack at age 64 on December 30th, 2020. Frank was a teacher at Julliard since 2008, played in the Maria Schneider Jazz Orchestra since 1993, appeared on over 100 albums as a session player, and recorded 16 albums under his own name. The one-year anniversary of his death was just a few days ago, and it seems appropriate to me that this first *Session Log* article be about this.

## A musical memorial

I first met Frank in 2015 when I recorded his album *Meantime*, released by the wonderful and exclusive French/American vinyl-only bi-monthly subscription-based jazz label Newvelle Records (I've since recorded and mixed over 30 albums for the label). Kimbrough was a teacher, mentor, and friend of the label's co-founder and producer, Elan Mehler. As such, Elan took it upon himself to organize a tribute with the musicians, collaborators, and students closest to Frank. Elan's efforts turned into an epic three-day tracking session in which we recorded 61 of Frank's original compositions with 67 musicians.

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the sessions were postponed to May. Just as the world was reawakening, the studio became a revolving door

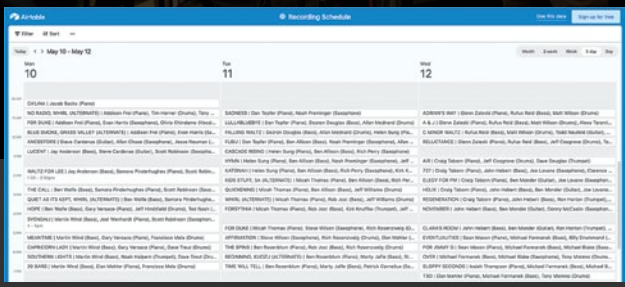


Elan Mehler, producer

Riley Mulherkar, Allan Chase, Ryan Keberle, and Scott Robinson on four ribbon mics in a straight row



Newvelle Recording Schedule Airtable



#1

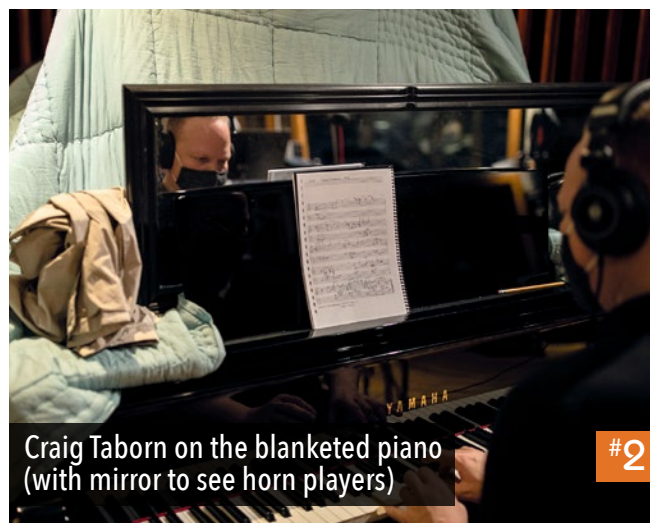
to some fantastic New York jazz musicians, who humbly came to pay their respects to Frank. It was beautiful to see people reconvene in a space, shake hands, hug, talk and cry as they remembered their friend.

It was impossible to have 70 people there to record all at once, so Elan devised a plan to stagger the musicians over the three days—repertoire, personnel, and tracking order were all worked out in advance. From solo piano pieces to octets featuring drums, piano, bass, four horns, and either guitar or vocals, Elan did a masterful job at scheduling the artists so there would be minimal overlap. Like at parties where everyone congregates in the kitchen, on this occasion everyone was gathering in the hallways, lounge, and kitchenette of EastSide Sound. Elan called in the players like patients at a clinic. The plan worked without a hitch, and everything went according to his master schedule. [\[see pic 1\]](#) Once in the live room, the musicians went over the chosen tune and recorded a take or two, rarely three. Most of the tracks on the album are actually first takes, highlighting how important it was for me to be ready for anything with a fixed but versatile setup; preparation is everything, and this time was no different.

With zero downtime between the different ensembles, I had to make sure everything was set up and ready for people to walk up to an instrument or mic and play, without having to re-adjust anything beyond perhaps changing mic stand heights, and it also meant minimal preamp tweaking.

## Line of sight

Communication and sightlines were crucial, as many of these people had never played together or rehearsed the songs as a



Craig Taborn on the blanketed piano (with mirror to see horn players)

#2

group. I had the piano turned towards the drums and the bass, and I used a mirror placed on top of the piano, between the music stand and the lid [\[see pic 2\]](#) to help the horn players see the piano player and vice versa; this worked great for cues. This trick also comes in handy when there are people in different iso booths and different corners of a room, so I always keep a large mirror around.

## Isolation and transitions

I placed the drums, upright bass, guitars and vocals in iso booths. The easiest way to achieve smooth and seamless transitions from one ensemble to the next was to set up four ribbon mics in a straight row in the live room for the horns [\[see pic 3\]](#) and then drape heavy shipping blankets over the piano as it was also in the live room. The blankets on the piano drastically reduced the amount of horn bleed into the piano's condenser mics (two Ehrlund EHR-M condensers through





#4

Donny McCaslin, Joe Lovano on the Coles, HUM RCA ribbon mics

## Bass

With this set of revolving bass players, I decided to simplify my usual upright bass recording approach (see the October 2021 *Session Log*). I marked the floor with an X and simply used a Neumann KM184 and a Braingasm Ferro, placed almost concentrically and pointing at the bridge. Both mics went through Vintech X73 preamps.

## Mixing and release

The last piece of the puzzle—I had to mix 61 songs in just 4-5 days because we had a deadline to make the album come out on a specific date—no easy task!

Newvelle's business model is centered around vinyl, but obviously, it would have been impossible to release 61 songs on vinyl, so they made the songs available as a digital download on Bandcamp and streamable on high-quality streaming services like Qobuz.

To see more session pics and go over the complete notes, credits, and lineups, just head to the label's website:

[newvelle-records.com/collections/shop-newvelle/products/kimbrough](http://newvelle-records.com/collections/shop-newvelle/products/kimbrough)

We'll see you next month! ➡

API 512c preamps). The reason why I set the ribbons up in a straight row (rather than a semicircle) is because I wanted every mic to be in the 90-degree-off-axis nook of the figure-8 polar pattern that ribbon mics are known for, therefore reducing the amount of bleed of each horn into the adjacent horn mic. My ribbon selections for the day were an RCA KU-3A (primarily for soprano sax), two HUM Audio Devices ARM-1S active ribbons (on altos, sopranos, and trombones), and a Coles 4038 (mostly on trumpets).

Anytime there was a piece with just two horn players (such as when Donny McCaslin played with Joe Lovano), I would swivel the mics closer together so that I could capture each horn with two different ribbon mics [see pic 4] and have different flavors of sounds to choose from and blend in the mix.

## Drums

I set up a versatile drum kit that every jazz drummer loves: a vintage Rogers with coated heads along with five cymbal stands. I placed the microphones so that the drummers could easily position the toms to their liking as well as swap snare drums and cymbals and still be on mic. I used a set of Latch Lake Music micKing stands, which allowed me to mic up an entire drum set with just two stands on the floor. These stands are amazing at solving floor real estate problems, leaving space for the drummers to set up and move cymbal stands around. Everyone played the same kick and toms, and every time we had a new drummer, I would double-check that the mic positions were still good. My mic selections were a LEWITT DTP 640 REX dual element (dynamic and condenser) on kick, Shure SM57 dynamic mics on snare top and bottom, a Microtech Gefell M940 condenser on the high-hat, two Sennheiser MD 421 dynamic mics on toms, and two AKG C414 condensers as overheads. Everything went through Harrison Lineage and Sym Proceed preamps.

*Marc Urselli is a Grammy-winning engineer working out of New York City and London. Read about his current projects and past successes at [www.marcurselli.com](http://www.marcurselli.com)*



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