

Music with a Capital "M"

# An Interview With Ethan Iverson of the Bad Plus

BY [A NOAH HARRISON](#)

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**THE BAD PLUS** MAY BE KNOWN FOR THEIR REVISIONIST COVERS OF POP SONGS, BUT PIANIST ETHAN IVERSON PROUDLY REFLECTS ON JAZZ'S PAST AND SHARES HIS HOPES AND FEARS ABOUT ITS FUTURE.

PHOTO: JOSH GOLEMAN

The Bad Plus may not always play by the rules, but that doesn't mean they haven't come up with their own rules.

The limber, Minneapolis-born trio of bassist, drummer, and pianist have played on the same stage for 15 years, and while they've undeniably grown as instrumentalists, many things have remained constant. Since their inception, Ethan, drummer Dave King, and bassist Reid Anderson have tackled an eclectic mix of cover songs and original compositions.

Their fascination with pop by way of jazz all started at an early gig when, for lack of a set's worth original material, they intuitively opted to play, not standards, but rather '90s anthem "Smells Like Teen Spirit". Though as Ethan stresses, capturing the spirit of the original piece is hardly their main concern. The Bad Plus' focus is to deconstruct and reassemble familiar musical artifacts from their own perspective. So don't mistake them for no house band.

In the past, they've taken on Bowie, Blondie, Radiohead, Rush, and... Igor Stravinsky? In 2014, [we spoke with the band](#) about their complete overhaul of the revolutionary and riot-inciting, *Rite of Spring*, one of their most ambitious projects to date. Most recently, the Bad Plus recorded *It's Hard*, an album exclusively of covers, featuring reworked classics by Prince and Ornette Coleman, among others.

Understandably, Ethan speaks with great poise about the band he calls home. When I asked how Dave approached the drum part in the ordinarily drum-less *Rite of Spring*, he answered: "Well, he's a genius that applied everything he knew about music to figure out what would work." And about his bassist: "I think pretty soon you'll be seeing some brilliant Reid Anderson albums of his own electronic music."

The three have many decades of combined experience in improvisational, rock, electronic, and classical circuits and have collaborated with numerous luminaries. They approach each project with respect, proving masters of domains both somber and frantic, refusing to stay in their seats. Yet despite the intricate and restive arrangements, it remain one of the more palatable jazz groups I've ever heard. Far from esoteric, as avant-garde jazz tends to be, the Bad Plus aims for clarity. "I don't think obviousness is unhip," Ethan says. "If you listen to what we're doing with the songs on *It's Hard*, there shouldn't be any doubt about why we're doing the songs or why we're playing them the way we are."

When I spoke with Ethan, the Bad Plus was halfway through a six-show series at New York's Blue Note Jazz Club. He spoke with composure, because with more than a dozen

Bad Plus records under his belt, six consecutive shows probably isn't such a big deal. Heck, they've survived digitization of the industry, the Sony rootkit scandal, and an age in which jazz might as well be pronounced dead. Still, they've emerged as creative and badass as ever. In answer to what's next for the band, Ethan replied: "I know what the next thing is going to be, but I don't know if I'm allowed to announce it yet. Let's just keep the focus on this record." He laughed, "Christ man, we already did a whole record of covers for us to talk about."

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**Your group is known for its creative interpretations of popular songs, and while you've produced plenty of original material over the years, your upcoming album, *It's Hard*, contains only cover songs. I'm curious, have you guys just run out of ideas? You can tell me if you have.**

*[laughing]* Now that's just not true.

**I'll have to take your word for it. I will say that, to me, these songs don't sound worlds apart from the songs you were playing on your early records. What would you say differentiates this record from previous ones?**

We've been playing our instruments longer, so we're better instrumentalists. Things get refined in terms of the band language. I was very happy with the piano on this recording. It was a really great Steinway. I went to the Steinway factory in Queens to pick out a piano, and after I picked it out, they told me it was the one Evgeny Kissin likes, who's arguably one of the top half-dozen classical pianists in the whole world. So that made me feel good.

**Would you say there's a unifying theme to your choice of covers on these albums?**

No. But there has to be a good reason for us to do the song. Jazz musicians have taken popular music of the day for their own purposes forever. That's what Louis Armstrong did in the '30s. That's what Miles Davis did in the '50s. Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" is a perfect example. Before that, classical pianists would improvise on a theme from an opera.

Theme and variation is a mainstay of European classical music, so this can be seen in that context. I would say that there must be something about our arrangements on each of these songs that we feel gives it a reason to live. They're obviously not straight interpretations. I wouldn't go so far as to say there's a political reason for every interpretation, but at the very least, there's some kind of theatrical reason or emotional reason.

### **Do you guys all propose songs to cover?**

In this case, most of the suggestions came from Reid and Dave because they know much more about pop music than I do.

**I'm going to name a few songs you've covered, and could you tell me their significance to you at the time you decided to take them on? I'll start with "Smells Like Teen Spirit".**

Well that's an iconic song, and it fits very easily into being played in a simple, direct, jazzy way. At an early gig, we didn't have enough original music to play a whole set, and in jazz, you obviously play some standards. And I think Reid or Dave said, "Instead of standards, let's play 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'. That's easy enough to do." So we did it, and that was that. I remember on our first recording, I listened to the original quite a bit, and I was struck that there was some kind of lonely sound there, so I tried to play in some kind of lonely fashion.

**What about Blondie's "Heart of Glass"?**

In that case, it was the distinctive melody and that great hook with the odd bar, 7/4 action. We really put it through the filter of free jazz, something avant-garde. We deconstruct it and then hammer home the 7/4 hook at the end. In the original, you blink and you'll miss that moment, but it becomes very obvious in our version.

**Would you say you get a sort of deviant pleasure from taking these straightforward songs and twisting them, a sort of subversive quality to it?**

Subversive and definitely surreal, absolutely. But this is very much in the tradition of Thelonious Monk, who is one my big heroes and a hero of Reid and Dave too. Monk was a master of taking old songs and making them surreal or giving them complex emotions. We hope to see ourselves in that tradition.

**And I wanted to ask about two songs from *It's Hard*: "Staring at the Sun" by TV on the Radio.**

Well Reid and Dave listened to that album, [*Desperate Youth, Blood Thirsty Babes*], incessantly when it came out. They loved that song. For me, I was like, "What can I do with this?" So at the beginning of the piece, I try to play like I'm in a Japanese garden or something kind of exotic. In a way, that's a more straightforward interpretation as well. At the end, the original arrangement is quoted by Reid and Dave.

**And finally, Prince's "The Beautiful Ones". Had he died at the time you'd chosen that song?**

No, we had no idea. We just laid the song down, and he died about two weeks later.

**Did it take on any sort of extra significance at that point?**

Well, I'm sort of happy we did it before he died because there's a lightness to our interpretation that would have been hard to have after he died.

**As long as you've been the Bad Plus, you've been the trio of Ethan, Reid, and Dave. What about the specific interplay of piano, bass, and percussion do you think works so well?**

It is a classic instrumentation. The holy trinity of music is melody, harmony, and rhythm. All three instruments do those roles. The drums can be melodic and harmonic as well as rhythmic. Of course the piano is a percussion instrument, and the bass does all three all the time. So there's some way it just meets in the middle that makes sense to us and has made sense for a lot of great jazz over the years.

**You three all seem to have very different personalities, which I'm sure is part of why you have such a distinct sound. Dave seems to be very outspoken; Reid seems more contemplative. How would you describe your roles outside the studio or the stage?**

I think I'm the most interested in jazz history, and I blog about it furiously. Those guys like jazz history, but they don't do that kind of thing. In terms of my role outside of the band—I write about music, myself. I think in some ways, the three of us are pretty similar compared to the rest of the population. *[laughing]* We're different, but when you look at everybody and then you look at the three of us, there must be something really unified.

**Although your lineup is sacred, you've worked with a lot of different folks over the years. I wanted to ask: who's been the biggest challenge as a collaborator, and who was the most fun as collaborator?**

Well, [2014's] *The Rite of Spring* was a big project. There were videographers involved, and the music is very hard. Although there wasn't a fourth musician on stage, it was a commissioned work with a big video element, so there were more moving parts and a greater responsibility get it all right on that first night. That was the biggest challenge. That was stressful. Everyone had to nail their parts exactly. Essentially we played a 40-minute, composed classical piece and couldn't make any mistakes. That's not true in jazz.

**And the most fun?**

They've all been great. For me, working with Joshua Redman [on 2015] was such a blast, on tour with him, getting to hear him play every night. I learned a lot from Josh.

**So Dave King has worked with a number of groups in the jazz and rock worlds, you've played with Buffalo Collision and Billy Hart among others. What makes the Bad Plus unique in your particular approach to music?**

One thing we stand for is clarity. We want the message to be clear. Not all jazz is concerned with that. But a lot of the jazz I love is like that: Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington, and so forth. I don't think obviousness is unhip. One thing I really like about The Bad Plus is you can't miss what we're doing. If you listen to what we're doing with the songs on *It's Hard*, there shouldn't be any doubt about why we're doing the songs or why we're playing them the way we are.

**You were signed to Sony Music very early in your career, and you're still with them. I guess you can't say anything too critical, but how has your relationship been working with such a major label?**

Yeah, we recorded three albums for Sony, then they dropped us, and then we had various other labels there for a minute, and now we're back. The whole time, before and now, I've had nothing critical to say. The big disaster, which was not anyone on our team's fault—for our third album, [2005's] *Suspicious Activity*, they put this rootkit on there, this malware on the CD that was a backdoor into hacking the machine. So that was a huge drag. But it's not like anybody we worked with at Sony had anything to do with that. They were all cool with us the whole time. But that's the classic story of the major screwing it up, not understanding what their power was. That definitely helped us getting dropped from the label.

The whole thing was heading into such a spin at that moment. When we put out [2003's] [\*These Are the Vistas\*](#), the record industry was still pretty viable. But it wasn't viable a few years after that, and this rootkit thing was their attempt to fight it. In the wake of all that, a lot of artists got dropped, including us.

But back to our relationship with Sony: frankly, we do most of the stuff ourselves. Dave is our art director. It's his photos and art packages that he puts together. We record it ourselves in Brooklyn. There's not a producer from Sony complaining or even encouraging us. We just hand in a final product. We're lucky to have that relationship still.

**As we've discussed, a major part of your musical identity is transforming well-known songs. What do you do to capture spirit of the original to make sure there's still something to hold onto?**

Depends on the song, but keeping the spirit of the original is not too important. Sometimes we want to just throw that out completely. I remember when we did "Comfortably Numb" with Wendy Lewis, which is an iconic song about drugs. She told me she wanted to sing it like a warning. I thought that was a good thing. Like, "Yeah, this isn't in celebration of post-'60s drug culture." This is like, "Hey, wait a minute: this is a problem."

On our new record, there's a Cyndi Lauper ballad, "Time After Time", which is a very complex rhythmic situation. There's a lot of time involved. It's almost a kind of pun. In that case, we're going up against Miles Davis, who played a cover version of time after time, which I personally don't think is very good. But there's room in that song to find another sort of beauty in it, and that's what we tried to do.

**Have you ever gotten a response from the artist, positive or negative, about a cover?**

Geezer Butler said our version of "Iron Man" was the best Black Sabbath cover. That was a great moment. He even came to a gig.

## **How much does improvisation factor into the composition?**

There's always improvisation, but less and less over the years. We've gotten more and more specific about what we do, more arranged. If you're playing an original piano, bass, and drums trio, you can play a whole gig without a single arrangement. It can be very casual, and it can be very, very great. Keith Jarrett's trio with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette only does covers, music of *The Great American Songbook*, and there's absolutely no arrangement.

They made a fetish, an absolute fetish of improvising as much as possible. They never had a single rehearsal. They never talked about a single thing. He would just start the song and they'd go. That is the complete antithesis of The Bad Plus. We have an opinion about the song that conclude together. There are aspects of The Bad Plus, frankly, that are much like a conventional rock trio in how tightly arranged it is. Although there are some jazz groups as tightly arranged, for example, Ahmed Jamal.

## **What's the breakdown of who composes your original pieces?**

It's not remarkably uneven. Reid's such a great composer of these original melodies, so there's more of Reid's music on the records for sure. I compose, and I like what I write, but it's nice to be in a band with Reid and Dave who are great composers so I don't have to write everything. That's a real luxury. Some jazz composers put out record after record where they've written every single thing, and frankly, not every piece is equally great.

## **I have to say, "Anthem for the Earnest" is one of my favorite songs, period.**

Oh, great! Yeah, that's Dave's song. That's a good example of—I just played what Dave showed me. I put a few little bobbles in there for the piano part, but really, that's his piano part, and I just played it.

**I also saw you play *The Rite of Spring* at Big Ears 2015, and you were phenomenal. I'm curious, what was your relationship with the piece before you began?**

Thank you! Beautiful. I'm a big Stravinsky fan, and in my 20s, I went through his work. I have scores to most of it and recordings of everything. *The Rite of Spring* wasn't my favorite Stravinsky piece, although it was his most famous. In fact, I remember seeing a double bill of Gergiev conducting at Avery Fisher Hall of *Oedipus Rex* and *The Rite of Spring*, and I remember really feeling *Oedipus Rex* was the greater work. However, working on *The Rite of Spring* showed me that it's lived up to the hype. I always knew it was great, but now I can see that it absolutely is a masterpiece.

**What did you do to make the piece your own?**

There are certain rhythmic things we do that we sort of regard as Bad Plus folklore. The really distinctive element is the drumming because there are no drums in the original. Not the piano part. I play Stravinsky's piano part.

**You guys are obviously not jazz purists, in that you bring a lot of influences, from classical to prog rock. In one interview, Dave said you felt comfortable assuming these influences because you've inhabited the roles, as classical musicians and prog rockers. Can you speak to that?**

It's true that the band got off the ground when we were all in our thirties and had all done a lot of different gigs. I, myself, had always wanted to be a jazz player, but in my 20s, I didn't support myself as a jazz musician. I played for tango music; I played for modern dance. Reid is the only one of us who has a degree in classical music. He went to one of the greatest conservatories, called the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he played with orchestras and some of the world's greatest classical musicians. Dave has been in rock bands and has also played with indie classical-type musicians, Bang on a Can and that type

of music. We've all played straight-ahead jazz, too, and I guess we must feel we can own whatever we're sourcing.

But I think what it really means for me, at the end of the day, is that we're interested in making music with a capital "M", stuff that takes it all seriously. When you mentioned jazz purists, that person may be only interested in making jazz with a capital "J", not music with a capital "M". The thing that can be confounding sometimes with The Bad Plus is that we don't need to deal just with jazz, and sometimes other things are much more important than jazz.

**Are there any artists you would consider your contemporaries?**

There are dozens of them. I'm a really big fan of Jason Moran, Tarus Mateen, and Nasheet Waits. I really like Craig Taborn. Guillermo Klein is fantastic. His new album is *incredible*. I'm going to be writing about it on my blog this week. It's called *Los Guachos V*. It's amazing. Brad Mehldau is a big influence. Dozens and dozens of people are doing great work. I'm lucky enough to play with Ben Street and Mark Turner in the Billy Hart Quartet. Billy is an old master. There's something different about him than the rest of us because he's an actual jazz master.

**This may be a silly question, but how would you, if forced to do so, characterize the direction of jazz today?**

I don't know. When you're in it, it's hard to understand the big picture. I don't think it's doing so well, frankly. I don't feel like there's a lot of heat and energy around jazz, and I think most of the really good jazz musicians are dead or old. One reason I moved to New York in 1991 was to be around the great jazz musicians, of which there are less and less.

**When you find yourself in a conversation, and someone says, you know, "jazz is dying" or "jazz is dead", what do you say to that?**

I'm not gonna disagree. I'm not gonna stand up and say it's as great as it's ever been. I don't think that's true. However, I think those of us in music should love jazz and respect jazz and look inside ourselves and say, "How can we make the music of the future?" And maybe that music of the future isn't just jazz, or if it is, maybe it's going to be something that has the place that classical has now. Classical music has been dead for a couple of centuries, but it still goes on. That's probably jazz's situation, too. It's dead, but it's alive.

**So how *can* you make the music of the future?**

I do it every day with The Bad Plus. What are you talking about?

<http://www.popmatters.com/feature/music-with-a-capital-m-a-chat-with-ethan-iverson-of-the-bad-plus/P1/>